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## **REFORMS IN EDUCATION BY HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION IN PAKISTAN: AN OVERVIEW**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Higher Education Commission (HEC) was established in September 2002, transforming old University Grants Commission (UGC). The main purpose of setting up the commission has been stated as to improve the system of higher education in general and to “facilitate the development of the universities of Pakistan to be world class centers of education, research and development” in particular. The commission, after its establishment has introduced different educational policies and various reforms for this purpose. The most important of these reforms is the programme of faculty development by awarding thousands of scholarships for producing Ph.Ds both within the country and from abroad, promotion of a research culture in the institutions of higher learning, establishment of Pakistan Education and Research Network (PERN) and a Digital Library programme etc. However, these educational reforms, still in the early phase of their implementation, have been criticized and dubbed as too ambitious, too revolutionary rather than evolutionary, un-realistic and un-attainable which may prove to be disastrous instead of being fruitful. The paper is an attempt of analyzing HEC educational reforms in the light of the study of related and relevant literature and interviews conducted with the faculty members both in public and in private sector. The paper also suggests some recommendations for smooth implementation of the reforms and programmes of HEC.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### The problem

One of the major reforms of the present government in the field of higher education is the establishment of Higher Education Commission (HEC) in place of University Grants Commission (UGC), which was established in 1974 under the impact of the Education Policy of 1972-80. UGC stands abolished now. HEC came into existence in September 2002 through an ordinance known as "*HIGHER EDUCATION ORDINANCE 2002*"

The main purpose of setting up this commission is to "facilitate the development of the universities of Pakistan to be world class centers of education, research and development". This is a high powered commission, the mandate of which is to "encompass all degree granting universities and institutions, public and private, including degree granting colleges and support the attainment of quality education in these institutions by facilitating and coordinating self assessment of academic programmes and their external review by national and international experts. The HEC also supervises the planning, development, and accreditation of public and private sector institutions of higher education".

The ultimate mission of the HEC is "to assist in the building of a modern, progressive and tolerant society that values the dignity of labour, craftsmanship, the spirit of enquiry, critical and independent thought and public duty. Its goal is to mobilize financial, technical, human and social resources for enhancing the quality of educational institutions and for facilitating the reform process initiated within these institutions."

Since its establishment, over the last more than two years, the HEC has introduced a number of reforms, initiatives and programmes for the improvement of higher education; some of which have already started functioning, while some others are to be initiated in due course of time. These programmes, particularly, include the Faculty development by awarding a large number of scholarships within the country as well as abroad, training of the faculty through in-service courses, hiring foreign

faculty programme and introduction of tenure track system promotion and encouragement of a research culture by allowing grants to the institutions as well as to the individuals in all areas of knowledge, revision and updating of curricula, establishing Pakistan Education Research Network (PERN), the Digital Library programme offering free nation wide access to some 30000 international journals including 12600 full text journals. (Current issue + back volumes)

However, in spite of all these reforms, the educational policies of the HEC have been criticized and looked upon with suspicion and doubt. These have been dubbed as un-realistic, premature, un-attainable, too revolutionary rather than evolutionary and too ambitious which may prove to be disastrous instead of being fruitful. The public sector particularly complains of certain provisions of the so called university ordinance which is aimed at the complete overhauling of the structure of the syndicate, senate and other statutory bodies of the universities as well as a new proposed and a bit humiliating procedure for the appointment of the vice chancellors. The private sector complains of the discrimination, mismanagement and favouritism on the part of the HEC and their non-involvement in policy-making decisions.

### **Objectives of the study**

This study was therefore designed to

- review the educational reforms of the commission.
- determine the impact of these reforms on higher education in particular and on the national system of education in general.
- to suggest recommendations for the improvement.

### **Significance of the study**

The study is timely because the reforms of the HEC are still in early stage of implementation and any logical suggestion could still improve the quality and credibility of the reforms. The study is particularly helpful to:

- understand the functions and mission of the HEC, which has recently been established, and as such is a new establishment.
- understand the educational reforms, schemes and plans of the HEC introduced so far.
- understand the impact of these reforms.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The data for this study were collected from the website of the HEC, newspapers, newsletter of the HEC and other related documents and interviews conducted with the faculty members both in public and in private sector.

### **HEC educational reforms**

Higher Education Commission (HEC) is nearly seven years old. Within this short span of time HEC has introduced a number of reforms. All of these have recently been introduced, while probably, some others are in the process or in the very early phase of implementation. As a matter of fact, it is very difficult at this stage to make a detailed or summative evaluation of these reforms because education is a slow and almost imperceptible process and it will take some time to say something finally about their effectiveness. Any tangible impact of these policies has not yet started coming up or neither any significant change has yet taken place in our system of education. However, a critical analysis is possible keeping in view the criticism and general apprehensions of the people about these policies.

Likewise, over the past fifty years, Pakistan has continuously strived hard for the betterment and improvement of its system of education inherited from British rule. A plethora of educational policies and plans have been formulated, a number of agencies both official and non-official had been at work in their own way to the task of educational reconstruction; many educational controversies had been raised, some of them still remained un-resolved; many plans of actions have been proposed and probably some of them are still in action. In spite of all this, our educational system, instead of improving, has continued going, to say the least, from bad to worse. The deteriorating

educational standards, poor academic results, lack of quality in instructional programmes, increasing mal-practices in examinations, a mushroom growth of many private and fake educational institutions particularly at the higher education level, growing lawlessness, violence, indiscipline on the campuses and all such other evils in our educational institutions are a clear verdict to the fact, as admitted in an official educational plan that "Pakistan, as a nation is at risk, is at the brink of complete educational chaos and disaster".

A study of the educational developments in Pakistan reveals the fact that our performance, as a nation, has been much better in the formation of education policies rather than their proper implementation. We have made excellent educational policies with wonderful ideas and with best intentions but on the practical side, "the case of Pakistan is a glaring example that good intentions do not necessarily mean good actions and that there is a yawning gap between theory and practice". It is really very painful to note that none of our education policies in the past was fully implemented or was implemented with ill planning and mal-administration. Consequently, we could not bring desirable and positive changes in our educational system. To quote from the report of ICG, published in October this year which concludes with a bleak note on our educational system that

"Fifty seven years after independence, Pakistan lacks in equitable education system and the literacy rate is one of the lowest in the world. Despite an assortment of declared strategies for providing education and removing inequalities, Pakistan's education indicators remain deplorable, including low public spending, literacy and enrolment levels, high drop-out levels, acute regional and gender disparities, and budgetary inequalities."

### **Package of reforms**

The package of reforms or as the HEC names it as "FUTURE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES" for the development and improvement of higher education is directed in the following five areas:

- (1) **Faculty development**
  - i. Indigenous scholarship programme
  - ii. Pakistan Organization for collaborative Research
  - iii. Faculty Training
  - iv. Foreign Ph.Ds scholarship programme
  - v. Tenure Track system
- (2) **Higher education infrastructure development**
  - i. Pakistan Education and Research Network (PERN)
  - ii. Digital Library Programme
  - iii. Centralized Instrumentation Facilities
  - iv. Curriculum
  - v. HEC Support
- (3) **Focus area support**
  - i. Engineering Sciences
  - ii. Pharmaceuticals
  - iii. Bio-technology
  - iv. Information Technology
  - v. Social Sciences / Economics / Management
  - vi. Agricultural Sciences
  - vii. Health Sciences
- (4) **Industrial linkage**
  - i. Technology Parks
  - ii. Venture Capital Fund
- (5) **Higher education sector reform**
  - i. Governance and Management
  - ii. Alumni Support Office
  - iii. Career Counselling
  - iv. Information Management System

Out of this package of reforms, some have already been introduced; a few are in very early phase of implementation, while others are expected to be introduced in due course of time. The most important and a far-reaching reform is the faculty

development programme on which the HEC has paid much emphasis.

### **Faculty development**

According to the HEC, faculty development is the most important problem of higher education. Pakistani public sector universities are particularly weak in this area. Only 19% of the existing faculty members (2549 out of total of 13446) hold Ph.D degree, which is universally regarded as an essential pre-requisite to imparting quality education. Following programmes have been introduced for the faculty development.

- i. Indigenous Scholarship Programme
- ii. Hiring Foreign Faculty Programme (short term ranging from 1-3 months to long term ranging 1-5 years)
- iii. Reclamation of talented Pakistanis working abroad for promotion of Teaching and Research in professional Universities. (Reverse Brain Drain)
- iv. Foreign Scholarship Programme including post-doctoral fellowship

Under the Indigenous Ph.D Scholarship Programme 1000 scholarships has been awarded every year. So for 2000 scholarship are awarded in this programme. Thus for the next three years, 3000 such scholarships will be awarded covering all fields including social sciences, economics, finance, science and technology. It is estimated that after 4 years, the programme will be producing 1200-1500 Ph.Ds annually.

Another exciting programme is the hiring of foreign faculty including Pakistanis expatriates as well as other eminent academicians settled in advanced countries. The programme aims to hire 300 foreign faculty members each year for the five years. Thus in a period of five years 1500 foreign faculty members will be hired on a very attractive remuneration and other terms and conditions and fringe benefits. During the last couple of years over 750 such persons have already applied out of which 240 have been selected and working in Pakistani higher institutions.

Foreign Scholarship Programme of the HEC is also a huge programme. There are hundreds of scholarships available under this programme. The selected candidates are sent abroad in different countries of the world including China, France, England, Australia, Japan and other countries.

These programmes of scholarships for the development of faculty have been under much criticism and have been dubbed as too ambitious and unrealistic and unattainable. Particularly, the indigenous scholarships have been much criticized.

Do our universities possess the necessary infrastructure and arrangements for the research studies of such a large number of students? Do we have such a large number of qualified guides and supervisors to supervise their work in addition to their other responsibilities and assignments? How to maintain and assess the quality of their research work? What are the criteria for the selection of indigenous research scholar and their guides and supervisors?

Assuming, for the time being, that this programme of indigenous scholarships will be a success and after six years we will be able to produce 1200-1500 Ph.Ds annually as proposed but where and in which departments will these Ph.Ds be absorbed? Who is going to give them employment appropriate to their higher qualifications? A large number of our educated youth are already unemployed and if these Ph.Ds are also accumulated, will it not escalate the crisis of unemployment in Pakistan? And God forbid, if this programme is a failure for one reason or the other, will it not be a national disaster amounting to billions of rupees? And will it not create an educational mess?

And who will guarantee the return of those Pakistani scholars who have been sent abroad keeping in view past experience where many Pakistanis who were awarded COT or S&T scholarships did not return to their home land after completing their studies? If the majority of these scholars do not return, is it not a national wastage and loss? And above all, is the degree of Ph.D, really a guarantee of quality teaching? Surely not for example, the universities of Karachi, Panjab and Sindh are



three biggest universities of Pakistan in public sector with largest number of students' enrolment. They have many times more Ph.Ds today on their faculty than what they had in sixties, but has it improved in any way their instructional programme or has it been further deteriorated?

The above scholarship programmes of the HEC are still in early stage of their implementation and therefore no final words can be offered about their effectiveness. But as revealed by some faculty members who were interviewed for the purpose of writing this paper, there are many cases of mismanagement, favoritism and nepotism in which the principle of merit was not taken into consideration in the selection of qualified supervisors or the meritorious research scholars for the award of a Ph.Ds scholarship. Likewise, there are also certain apprehensions in the minds of people about the criteria adopted by the HEC in the selection and hiring of foreign faculty.

### **Promotion of research**

The HEC has introduced following schemes for promoting research in the universities.

- i. Research grants to the institutions
- ii. Research grants to the individual researchers.

The limit for the individual grants is from Rs. 2.0 million to 6.0 millions depending upon the nature of research study and the researcher in the fields of science and technology. In addition, a grant up to the tune of Rs. one lack can also be given for the research studies relating to social sciences and humanities.

Promotion of research is an integral part of the academic life of a university. There is no doubt that pace of research is abysmally low in our universities and the policy of the HEC in this regard is very liberal, but the question is what criteria has been adopted to see the quality of research? What is the value and relevance of the research for which funds have been allocated? Who is going to evaluate and monitor the research grants given to the individuals as well as to the institutions?

What is the criterion for the approval of a research proposal?  
What measures are being adopted to check the misappropriation of funds?

### **WHERE IS IMPROVEMENT NEEDED? AT PRIMARY LEVEL OR HIGHER LEVEL**

HEC merely focuses on Higher Education where as our primary sector needs great attention to be improved that is always neglected and it causes the lower literacy rate. From this, every one can make scholarly guess as to which is more important Primary or Higher. This is a question of a long debate. One can give a number of arguments in favor of these stages of education. Primary education, painfully, has remained a neglected sector in our educational system. Our policy makers in education have never given primary education the status it deserves. It has always received low priority in terms of funds allocation in our national budgets.

The reasons for a general neglect of primary education is to be found when one traces out the origin and historical development of primary education in the sub-continent. When the basis of modern system of education was laid in the mid nineteenth century in the sub-continent, a number of educational controversies took place. One of the most important controversies was, whether East India Company educated a class or the masses as a whole. The British rulers based the new system of education on the well know "DOWNWARD FILTRATION THEORY". This theory had three interpretations or forms:

- i. to educate only the upper classes of society with a view to creating a government class consisting of Sardars, Nawabs, Rajas and other aristocratic classes.
- ii. Upper or influential classes of society should be educated first because their culture would later on naturally descend to the lower classes.
- iii. a good education should be given to only few persons and leave it to those persons to educate the masses.

All through the British rule, the educational policies were mainly based on the Downward Filtration theory. Consequently, higher education, caring for and by and large, the privilege of few selected and not the masses, received a high or top priority. It is really unfortunate that this policy of caring higher education much or keeping it at the top, a British legacy, is still prevailing in our country in spite of the fact that we are a free nation since we achieved independence some 57 years back.

It is a universally acknowledged fact that primary education, being the education of the masses, is the base of a national system of education. It is the base that provides foundations to the whole structure of the system of education. Educationally, it is unsound to ignore primary education and concentrate on developing higher education. Unfortunately, in the present state of affairs in Pakistan, primary education, the very base of our national system of education, has been largely ignored by policy makers, by the government and by the society at large.

The importance of primary education has also been recognized in our education policies. For example, the National Education policy, 1980-2010 highlighting the role of primary education in the national development remarked that:

“Primary education, which is the bed rock and foundation of the entire education pyramid, has the highest rate of return as compared to other sectors and levels of education. Research studies undertaken in both developed and developing countries including Pakistan by renowned researchers of the world indicate that rates of return to investment in education are commonly high, especially at the primary level, and argue that investment in education makes a vital contribution to economic development. Both private and social rates of return at primary level are comparatively higher than secondary and tertiary level. The average private rate of return is 29% at primary, 19% at secondary, and 24% at tertiary levels.

Similarly, the social rate of return is 27% at primary, 16% at secondary, and 13% at the tertiary level. The private rate of return is the highest in the developing countries of Asia. Besides, beginning with the marginal social rates of return, the first years of primary schooling, generally yield the highest returns, additional years of education yielding progressively lower rates of return. Comparison and analysis of socio-economic development indicators particularly, amongst the countries of South Asian region, provide convincing evidence to the fact that the primary education and the literacy have deep, direct and determining effects on overall development of the country. Not only in social but also in the economic sector, educationally developed countries of the region such as Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Maldives which have achieved remarkable progress in primary education, have in return secured and sustained very high per capita GNP and vice versa".

Access to higher education is also a big problem. We must expand the access to quality higher education on merit and equitable basis. According to a well calculated estimate, only less than 3% of the age group (17-23) has access to higher education. In order to develop the country to a respectable level, it is envisaged that the participation rate would need to be enhanced to at least 10% of the age group. The HEC plans to enhance this participation rate up to the year 2010. By the year 2010, the nation would have approximately 25 million youth in the age group of 17-23 years. If we take 10% of that population to go for higher education, then the students' intake would be estimated at 20.5 million. The overwhelming majority of such a large number of students would be educated up to intermediate level in the main educational stream i.e. existing primary and secondary schools which at present, seem to be at the lowest ebb of our national system of education, as far as the quality of their instructional

programmes are concerned. As a result, these new entrants in the institutions of higher learning will be misfit. This requires not only an improvement in higher education but also a simultaneous and constant improvement in primary and secondary education so that we prepare quality youth for quality higher education. Therefore for a strong and viable system of higher education we must also make concentrated efforts for primary and secondary education.

If we really want to improve our higher education, we have to first improve our primary education. The argument, that in order to improve primary education it requires still a period of almost fifty years, and therefore higher education cannot be left unimproved for such a long period, is superficial and baseless. The best way is to continue our efforts to improve our education at all levels simultaneously.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Many of the ideas, schemes and policies of the newly constituted Higher Education Commission, are, not new, or innovative. A study of the educational developments in Pakistan reveals the fact that many of these policies and plans have already been formulated and announced in different educational policies. And, as such, the policies of the HEC appear to be the echo of the past re-sounding in a different tone. For example, the policy of Faculty development, the scheme of indigenous scholarships, linkage programme etc, were also strongly recommended in the National Education Policy of 1998-2010. The HEC, has activated the process of their implementation, but in its efforts and approach, has been too hasty and too revolutionary rather than evolutionary. These schemes particularly relating to the faculty development appear to be too ambitious, unrealistic, and therefore, difficult to be accomplished under present circumstances. If not implemented properly, careful planning and proper homework, there is every, likelihood that these policies, instead of being fruitful, may prove to be simply disastrous.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Education is a slow and almost imperceptible process. Our system of education is the legacy of the past and our educational institutions have been nurtured for a long time in the old traditions. It is always very difficult to re-organize a deeply entrenched structure. What is, therefore required to do is that instead of making hasty, ambitious, and short term policies, we should formulate a long term plan for the improvement and reconstruction of over-all system of education including primary, secondary and higher education simultaneously in close relation with each other. This plan should really be a national plan based on our needs and aspirations as a nation in accordance with our changing circumstances. It should remain undisturbed and unchanged even after a change of government. In Pakistan, most often, education policies have been formulated and announced after change in the government. Whenever a new government came into power, a new education policy was formulated suppressing the previous policies, its schemes, plans and proposals, how much useful and valuable they are. Instead, new priorities were determined by every new government. Unfortunately there has been a sort of political instability in the country and no government has remained politically stable enough to execute its educational policies fully and properly. Those in power had little time to concentrate and see that the policies are properly and honestly implemented. Because of this main reason, education in Pakistan has remained comparatively a neglected sector and received little attention and less priority of different government in power.

If we are once able to formulate such a national plan of education, we should make whole hearted, rigorous and concentrated efforts to implement it with full support of all concerned because

“The problems of education in Pakistan are so enormous and the size of the educational operation so huge that complete government commitment and the total national efforts are imperative to achieve the aims of education.

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