

THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION IN IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH AT HEIS: A CASE OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan is an independent, autonomous, and constitutionally established institution of primary funding, overseeing, regulating, and accrediting the higher education efforts in Pakistan. In October 2017, HEC Pakistan attained the age of 15 years. During this period the HEC through its innovative efforts has completely transformed the landscape of higher education in the country and has tremendously enhanced the international linkages with counter parts. Manifold increase in funding provided by the Government of Pakistan, since 2002, led to the introduction of new programs, increased enrolment, strengthened research activities in addition to the establishment of new universities. HEC carries out quality control of all HEIs, through its Quality Assurance Agency and Quality Enhancement Cells, established at the universities all over the country. The author, in his paper will cover the Quality Revolution initiated by HEC in Pakistan over the last 14 years using innovative techniques, implementing good practices and improving the international image. This has resulted in international research collaborations, student exchanges, knowledge sharing and transferability of degrees.

Introduction

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan was established in 2002 under the Presidential Order (Ordinance 2002) as a powerful national body, on higher education, to be headed by a person with the status of a Federal Minister. This arrangement gives a lot of freedom and initiative to the chairperson. The initiatives of the Higher Education Commission during the last 14 years have produced magnificent results. The changes are observed at all the universities and degree awarding institutions in Pakistan. The universities have rapidly morphed into their new role as producers of knowledge and research that led to innovation & entrepreneurship, created jobs and became the prime builders of a knowledge economy.

The HEC continues to amaze the world with its achievements despite being only 14 years young. It has continued to focus on faculty development, quality education, technology refiners, research and innovation, which are key winning formulae in creating a knowledge economy.

The rapid progress made by Pakistan in higher education was greatly appreciated by the world community. Other bordering countries are now in the process of following Pakistan's footsteps. The university grant commissions are being closed down and new organizations in line with HEC are being established.

The key successes achieved by HEC are the result of a very intimate financial support from the Government of Pakistan, dedication and innovative philosophy used by HEC team. So much has been achieved in so little time that the World Bank in its comprehensive report on higher education termed it as a "Silent Revolution".

Quality Revolution

A multi-prong approach to improve the quality of teaching and research has been introduced in the higher education system of Pakistan after the establishment of HEC. Pre HEC era, there was no formal system of Quality Assurance as a central body or within the university at a smaller scale. HEC, therefore, in year 2004 established Quality Assurance Committee, comprising of eminent scholars, policymakers and selected Vice Chancellors. This committee issues policy guidelines on quality issues.

Accreditation Councils

In pre HEC era, the majority of Professional Degree Programs were accredited by the councils established by the government legislation. These councils are empowered to have their own accredi-

tation rules and regulations for recognitions of degrees, registration and licensing their respective professions. Since, HEC is also entrusted by law to work for the improvement and promotion of higher education, research and development, the collaboration was necessary to avoid any conflict situations on the assigned jurisdictions between the HEC and Councils. It was mutually agreed that the framing of policies and academic standards is to be regulated by HEC and the guidelines of good practices (INQAAHE, 2005) in their modified form (Batool & Qureshi) would be given due consideration by the councils. At present, there are 15 professional councils in the country.

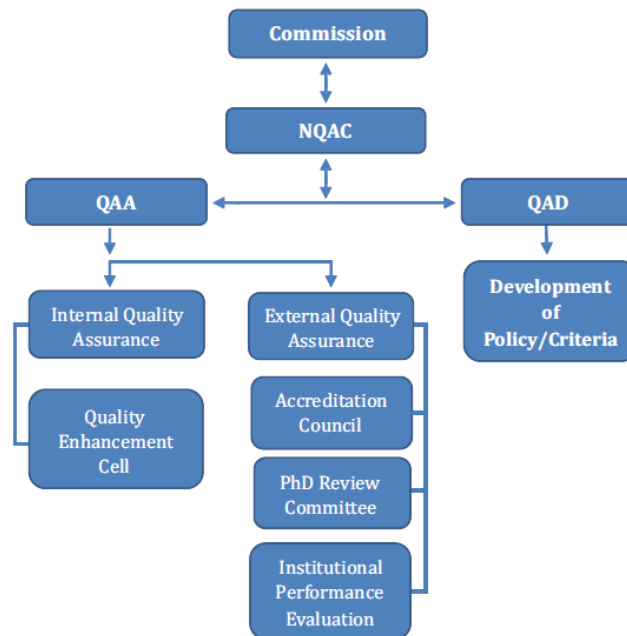


Figure-1: Quality Assurance

HEC in External Quality Assurance Role

External Quality Assurance, in Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan is managed by HEC and by Professional Accreditation Councils. HEC as a first step has established Quality Enhancement Cells at 174 public and private sector universities, in the country. These units play the role of Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) bodies and fulfill the instructions of HEC, issued on quality matters. The initial funding to establish Quality Enhancement Cells was provided by HEC and later on this expenditure has been made part of the recurring budget of the HEIs.

HEC does not only promote the establishment of IQA but also encourages them, by way of making the platform to share good practices among the HEIs. HEC also supports HEIs by giving them financial incentives to organize seminars, conferences, workshops, symposia, exhibition etc., especially on IQA. In addition, travel/research grants are also made available to faculty members and bright students of HEIs. All this helps develop quality culture.

The students of today are global citizens. Therefore, it becomes obligatory for HEIs to educate them according to international standards to increase transnational interaction, import and export of education, recognition and portability of degrees. Keeping this aspect in mind and achieving the quality in higher education, HEC in Pakistan, pays more and more attention to the application and adoption of Quality Assurance Mechanisms. Thus, HEC has developed EQA and IQA systems at different levels, keeping in view the international requirements. The relation between EQA and IQA is defined as under:

- EQA and IQA are complementary to each other
- EQA issues directives and guidelines to be implemented by IQA
- EQA monitors implementation of the issued directives and guidelines
- EQA provides Financial Support to HEIs

The objectives of external evaluation to be conducted by EQA are to identify strengths and weaknesses of Academic Institutions and programs to ensure quality. Thus, the activity of external eval-

uation is important to academic institutions, students and parents, government and employers. The activity of external evaluation by EQA is done through accreditation, monitoring, institutional performance evaluation (IPE) visits and self-assessment reports. The quality assurance program of HEC has three major components:

- Development of Criteria and Standards for various quality parameters in higher education. In this regard Quality Assurance Committee of HEC, developed criteria and guidelines for:
 - Award of MPhil & PhD degrees
 - Affiliation of Colleges/Institutions
 - Ranking of Universities
 - Rating of Quality Enhancement Cells
 - Guidelines for Self-Assessment of programs at the universities
 - Admission tests (NTS/University tests)
- Capacity Building steps initiated by HEC include:
 - Establishment of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) in public and private sector universities
 - Rating of Quality Enhancement Cells
 - Guidelines for good practices for Accreditation Councils
- Initiation of Self-Assessment Reports in the Universities
- Compulsory membership of Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) and International Network for Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (INQAAHE)

Achievements of HEC

- Increase in HEC budget by 24 times
- Increase in the number of universities from 59 to 177 over 14 year period.
- Increase in university’s student enrolment from 0.27 million to 1.3 million (Year 2016)

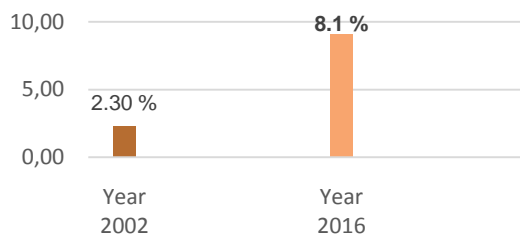


Figure-2: Number of universities in Pakistan

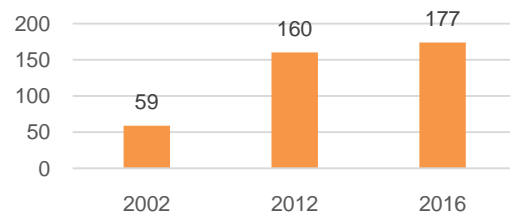


Figure-3: Access to Higher Education (Age 17 to 23 Years)

The access to higher education of the youth, aged 17-23 raised from 2.3% in 2002 to 8.1% in 2016.

- Transparency and merit in distribution of foreign & local scholarships to faculty members & students.

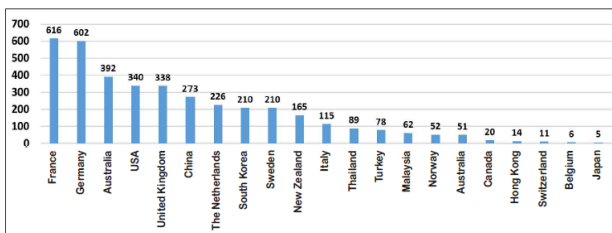


Table-1: Indigenous Scholarships (2004 to 2014)

S. No.	Project Wise (Indigenous)	Total
1	Development S&T Indigenous 300	240
2	Development/Strengthening of Selected Departments of SS&H in Selected Universities	15
3	Indigenous PhD Fellowships 5000 Phase-II	1,000
4	Master Leading to PhD Aghaz-e-Haqooq Balochistan	119
5	Master PhD S&T	168
6	PhD Indigenous 5000 Scholarships	5,000
7	Scholarship PhD SS&H Teaching	101
Grand Total		6,643

Figure-4: HEC Foreign PhD Scholarships (2004 to 2014)

- Distribution of 11,000 scholarships that included 5,000 scholarships for PhD students to pursue degrees at the top universities of the world.
- Increase in PhD production from 256 per year to 1,351 per year (2016).

- Establishment of Quality Enhancement Cells, (174) in numbers.
- Research Publications in Journals with ISI Impact Factor raised from 500 in 2000 to more than 12,500 in 2016.
- Citations (in the science citation index) increased by 1,000% between 2000 to 2016.
- 5 Pakistani Universities were ranked among top 300 universities of the world.

Implementations of Innovation/Good Practices HEC Pakistan in the capacity of EQA took a number of novel steps that made a very positive impact on the quality of education. The details are discussed as follows:

▪ **Tenure Track System (TTS) Appointment:**

To attract the brightest PhD qualified professionals in education and research, a new contractual system of Tenure Track appointments of faculty members was introduced, under which their salaries were raised.

▪ **Eligibility Criteria:** Eligibility criteria for appointment of Associate and Full Professors were toughened so that only those, active in high quality research go up the promotion ladder.

▪ **Research Grant:** Students returning with PhD degrees from abroad were given an opportunity to apply for research grants before their date of return, so that they would be able to settle down with research funds at their disposal, even if they joined a university with little facilities.

▪ **Foreign Faculty:** At a high reward, foreign faculty has been clustered in various institutions to create the critical mass necessary for excellence in research to flourish.

▪ **Revision of Curricula:** All the curricula were revised and modernized in consultation with subject experts and industry. National curriculum committees for each discipline were notified.

▪ **Peer Review:** A system of internal & external peer review was introduced at all the universities that created awareness and the sense of competition.

▪ **Establishment of Quality Enhancement Cells:** In 174 public and private universities, Quality Enhancement Cells have been established, which are acting as IQA, contributing positively towards the ultimate goal of quality enhancement in higher education. Due to the QECs, a quality culture and acceptance for QA model has emerged successfully, at the universities. The QECs are rated by HEC, for their performance on a yearly basis through a well-structured mechanism.

▪ **Learning Innovations Division:** This division in HEC acts as the national hub for the in service, continuous professional development and certification of higher education teaching faculty and management across Pakistan. Its output is around 2,000 plus participants per year.

▪ **Trainings of VCs:** HEC has started a 2 days leadership workshop for all newly appointed VCs to prepare them as effective leaders.

▪ **Criteria for the new Universities:** The criteria for launching of new universities has been enhanced. While, there is a clampdown on substandard HEIs and programs.

▪ **Information Technology:** Due to improvements in IT, a digital library with 25,000 International Journals and 100,000 text books from 220 International Publishers has been established by HEC. All university library staff has an access to this facility.

▪ **Video Conference Facilities:** HEC has developed a modern video conferencing facilities for HEIs across the country. Courses and Training sessions are delivered on a regular basis from imminent scholars. All the students, faculty members and management staff attend these training sessions.

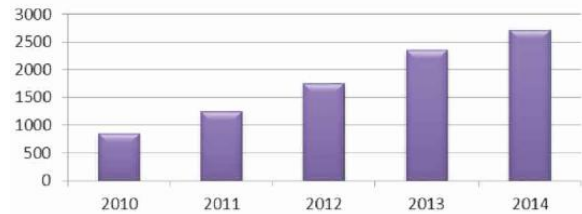


Figure-5: Total Faculty Appointments under TTS

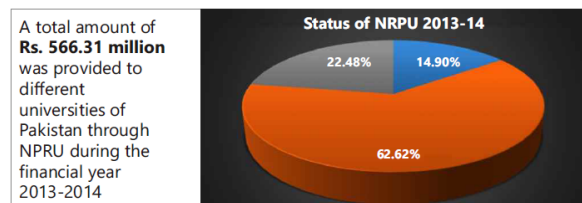


Figure-6: Research Grants provided under NRPUs (2013-14)

- **Ranking of Universities:** HEC carries out ranking of all the public and private sector universities every year. It creates the atmosphere of competition amongst the universities.
- **Faculty Appointment:** The standards for faculty appointment have been made very stringent. Since 2014 all the lecturers are being appointed on the basis of minimum, MS/MPhil degree and all Assistant Professors require a PhD degree for direct employment.
- **ORIC** Office of Research, Innovation and Commercialization (ORIC) has been established at the universities to promote research, startups and bridge the gap between the universities and the industry.
- **Business Incubation Centers:** A lot of stress is being given on HEIs to establish business incubation centers to support researchers/young entrepreneurs/startups, who intend to develop promising early-stage business ventures.
- **Pakistan Education and Research Network (PERN):** PERN is aimed at establishing an integral part of the overall education system of the country and is designed to interlink all the universities of the country.
- **Best University Teacher Award:** In order to motivate faculty members to work harder an incentive of “Best University Teacher Award” one for each university has been introduced by HEC, on a yearly basis. Universities after a thorough working forwards nominations. Final selection is done by HEC.



Figure-7: Collaborative Research Activities of PERN

- **PhD Program Review Committee:** This committee comprises on vice-chancellors and senior professors. They carry out on site visits of the universities to determine the implementation status of MS/MPhil/PhD criteria laid down by HEC.
- **Interim Placement of Fresh PhDs:** Under this program, HEC provides an opportunity to fresh PhD Graduates for one year to start their career as Assistant Professor in public and private sector universities. It is fully funded by HEC.
- **Patents Filling:** HEC is promoting the researchers and inventors to register and commercialize their patents by facilitating the process as well as through offering the incentives.

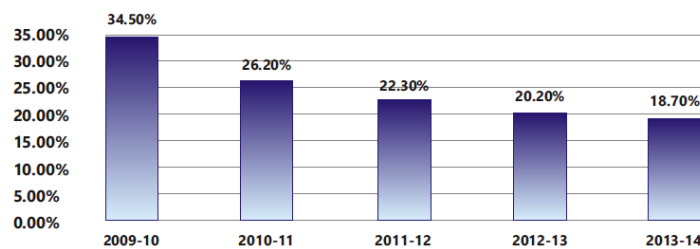


Figure-8: Reduction in unoriginal work over the years

- **Provision of Latest IT Tools:** HEC has facilitated HEIs by providing the latest licensed software from the Microsoft to all public and private universities and degree awarding institutions in the country.
- **Curbing Plagiarism:** HEC has provided plagiarism detections tools (e.g. Turnitin) to all the HEIs of the country to curb the issues of plagiarism. Moreover, Plagiarism and Research Ethics committees have been established at a HEI level on the direction of HEC to monitor ethical issues of the research being carried out at the HEIs of the country. As a result, a reduction in unoriginal work has been observed. iParadigms, LLC published a case study on Pakistan and termed it successful in reducing unoriginal work.

Problems Faced

- HEC being a regulatory body and funds providing agency has the mandate/capacity to implement innovations/good practices in all public and private universities, with active and willing cooperation of HEIs.
- The problems were faced in some cases due to cultural changes, since the system is resistant. For example, the establishment of Quality Enhancement Cells, in public sector universities did face resistance and the response was indifferent. The will power of the implementing agency and QEC staff has worked and QECs are now an integral part of the VC Secretariats at the universities, as a very useful organ, accepted by all the faculties. The QA model is being implemented smoothly. The QECs have succeeded in changing the mind set and in development of quality culture at the universities.

The Impacts of Implementation of Innovative Good Practices

- Formalization of Quality Assurance Mechanisms
- Uniformity of Standards
- International Compatibility
- Regulated Institutions
- Standard Syllabi
- Conscious/Satisfied Faculty
- Empowered/Satisfied Students
- Addition of High Quality Faculty
- Widening of Research Base
- Quality Culture
- Well Trained Faculty & Top Leadership
- Efficient inter-student- faculty connectivity
- Better connectivity between academia and industry
- Positive Competition between HEIs, leading towards improvements
- Wider PhD base available in academia

Conclusions

Higher Education Commission of Pakistan in a very limited time, using innovative techniques, implemented Good Practices with a will to improve the quality of higher education in the country. The willing cooperation of the HEIs acted as a catalyst to complete the process of improvement. All the activities and programs of HEC were regularly subjected to external review by eminent foreign experts. A USAID team of educationists visited Pakistan a number of times and travelled across the country, talking to teachers, students and administrators at the universities and examining the data critically. A USAID report published in 2008 that resulted from the year-long review stated:

“One of the most striking aspects of HEC since its inception is the emphasis on excellence and high quality in every sphere of its activities. Expectations were set high from the outset. Quality goals/targets were set as international standards and expectations. Faculty promotions, publications, PhD dissertations, research grants, and many of the HEC Programs were subject to these standards including evaluation by external peer reviewers. In keeping with its focus on quality, the attitude of the leadership of the HEC was that “Quality is much more important than quantity”.

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