

## **Quality in Higher Education: Issues and Current Practices**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to look into some of higher education commission's initiatives for improving the quality of higher education. The study addresses a) Higher education commission (HEC) initiatives to improve research and development in the universities b) the implications of these initiatives on human resource development, and c) the major successes and failures as a result of these initiatives. Narrative data were collected through observation and documents analysis. The result of HEC's impetus is that the universities are streamlining their mission and objectives to excel in the field of research. The university teachers are gradually realizing the significance of research in their academic and professional success. Research and Development (R&D) culture is growing through research and publications, organization of conferences, seminars and workshops in the universities.

**Key Words:** Higher Education, Research and Development

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### **Introduction**

This study aims to focus on Higher Education Commission (HEC) initiatives towards Research and Development (R&D), and their implications on Human Resource Development (HRD) and quality assurance in the universities. Lemaitre (2008) says that quality improvement recognizes that the responsibility of quality lies within the higher education institutions; it also focuses on their ability to develop and apply effective policies and mechanism for self-regulation, and the continued advancement towards quality. Quality is not any single thing but an aura, an atmosphere and an over powering feeling that the institution is doing everything with excellence (Rauf, 2004).

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Today, more than ever before in human history the wealth or poverty of nations depends on the quality of higher education. Quality of higher education has become a benchmark for the success of a nation. Those countries that have realized its importance, and are taking adequate measures to enhance the standard of higher education, are counted in the best ranking education. HEC has been putting its possible efforts into practice to ensure the standard of education but the major obstacles are lack of committed faculty and R&D culture. Mohanthy (2000) envisages that quality of higher education depends upon R&D culture and motivated faculty to conduct research in order to upgrade their knowledge. Husain (2007) comments that research is a serious business and a university teacher is supposed to produce quality research in addition to his teaching assignments.

HEC is trying hard to streamline the universities to adopt quality assurance mechanism to improve the quality of their teaching and research. An instrumental approach has been suggested by HEC to enhance the quality of higher education which begins by establishing a mission, followed by the functions that have to be carried out to achieve the mission and the objectives. A quality management system is then recommended to ensure the quality of the programmes. Lastly, an internal system is proposed to assess the effectiveness of the management system. Best practice also requires that the implementation of the quality assurance programmes preceded by a strong commitment on the part of the university leaders and managers to quality advancement (Tovey, 1992). An important reason is that it will improve the quality and relevance of their graduates and research programs and thus enable universities to play a more effective role in the economy of the country.

The study aimed to look into:

- a) HEC initiatives to enhance R&D in the universities,
- b) Implications of these initiatives on human resource development, and
- c) Major successes and failures in the result of these initiatives.

### **Historical Perspectives**

HEC has established quality assurance agency to safeguard public interest by enforcing sound standards in higher education and encouraging continuous improvement by reviewing and developing higher education benchmarks and quality criteria. Rahman (2007) says that HEC lays a particular focus on the institution of quality enhancement, assurance, accreditation, mechanisms and universities across the country sustainable improvement in the delivery of higher education requires the development of a mechanism for continuous self-monitoring and improvement of the system.

The quality assurance initiatives improve the quality and relevance of the graduates and research programs, and thus enable universities to play a more effective role in the economy. The basis for this belief is in the finding that education contributes to economic growth in a number of ways (Asian Development Bank, 1989; Denison, 1967; Psacharopoulos, 1988; Schultz, 1961). First, it improves generally the quality of labour by imparting skills and work knowledge. Second, it increases labour mobility and therefore promotes the division of labour. Third, it improves management skills which lead to more efficient location of resources. Fourth, it removes many of the social and institutional barriers to economic growth. Finally, it encourages entrepreneurship by promoting individual responsibility, organizational ability, moderate risk-taking, and long-term planning.

The generation of new knowledge and efficient dissemination of existing knowledge is a key responsibility of institutions of higher learning (Siddiqui, 2007). Over 30% of the growth in per capital income may be attributed to technological innovation. Most of the technological advances in the second half of the 20 century including new bio-technological industries, telecommunications, information technological, and advanced materials (such as semi-conductors, fibre optics, etc.) have their origins in university research (University of President's Council, 2001). The present study aims to explore current practices of HEC to improve R & D culture, and their implications on HRD. The study also draws on major successes and failures in the result of these initiatives. The study addresses these questions based on the following research framework.

### **Research procedure**

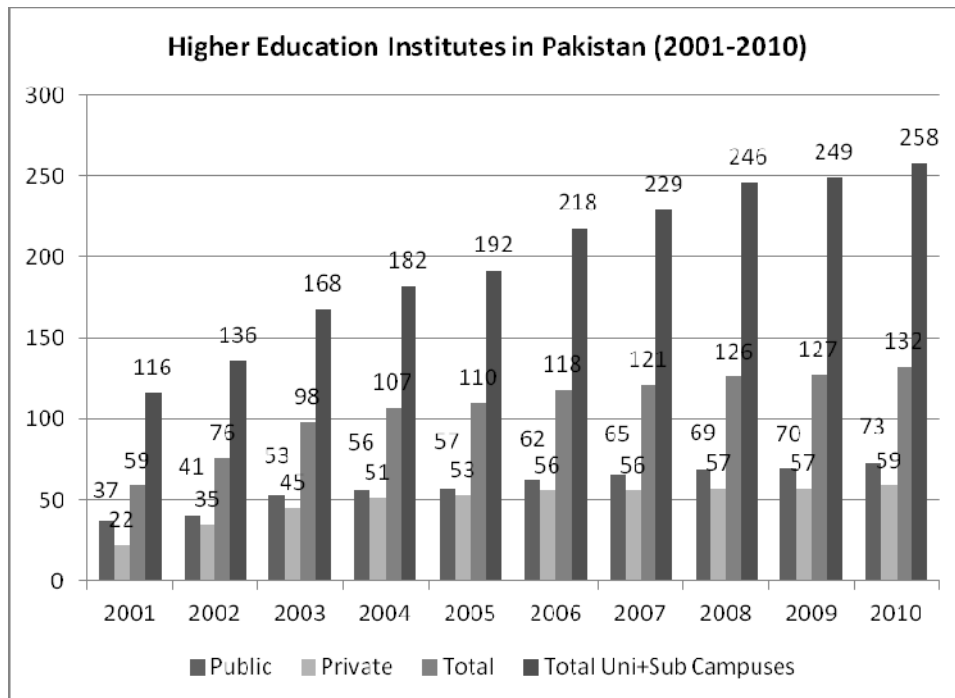
Qualitative and quantitative methods were applied for data analysis. The data were elicited and observed through reports, documents and articles. For this purpose, Pakistan Council for Science and Technology and HEC resources were taken into account to address the aspects mentioned above.

### **Result and data analysis**

Since its inception in September 2002, HEC has been trying to transfer Pakistan from plantation economy to knowledge economy. It has reached in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Germany, Italy, Austria and China to setup 9 Engineering and Science and Technology universities. This programme may have a significant impact on the future development of Pakistan especially in the industrial sector.

As it is indicated in figure 1 that growth of universities increased steadily after 2002, however, nearly equal proportion was found between private and public

sector universities expansion till 2006. But it seemed considerable growth in the expansion of public sector universities from 2007 to 2010. On the other hand, there had been a slight increase in the number of private sector universities since 2007. Total number of higher education institutes dramatically increased in the past few years. This ever increases in the growth of higher education institutions in Pakistan provided opportunities to millions of students to seek higher education.

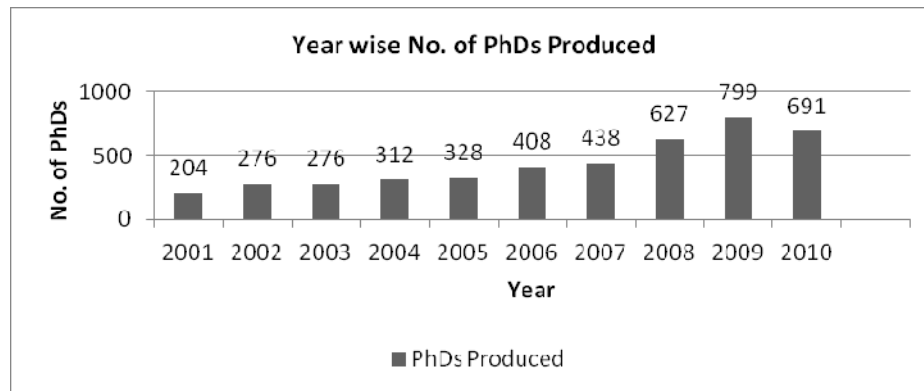


Source: HEC's Website

Figure 1

When HEC was formed only about 2.5% of students had access to higher education. This was improved by 5.1% towards the end of 2010. The biggest and more difficult problem to solve was that of quality of higher education, which was linked directly with the quality of higher qualified faculty in universities. Out of some 2, 0000 faculty members, only about 4,500 had PhD degrees thus about 77% of our faculty was less qualified. The HEC had allocated most of its funding for awarding scholarships to the brightest students for foreign and indigenous PhD programs. Thus some 2500 scholars were studying abroad, and about 5000 scholarships were offered to scholars for studying within Pakistan at the PhD level by the end of 2010. Because of these efforts, as shown in figure 2 below 3,879 PhDs added to the existing pool of

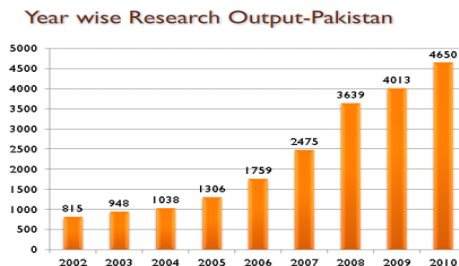
PhD faculty from 2003 to 2010. But the issue of quality in higher education is still hanging in imbalance. The empirical findings show that quality is not a number phenomenon rather it springs up from the contributions of these scholars in R&D and teaching-learning process.



Source: HEC's Website

Figure 2

The figure 3 shows that the contribution in research is boosted up by the Pakistani researchers in the years 2006-2010. This enhancement in the research output is very encouraging. Although HEC has done a great job to reform R&D by allocating millions of rupees yet there is need to motivate the faculty to contribute into research more.

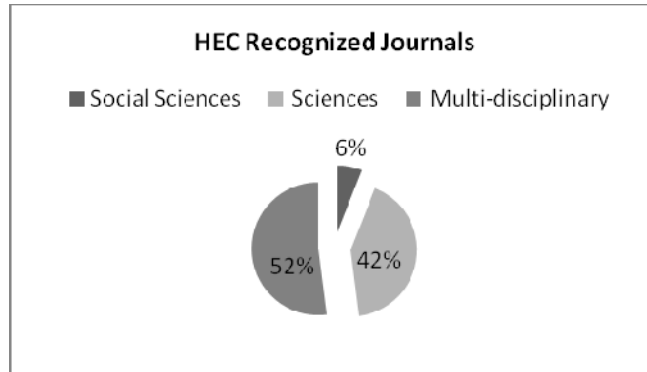


Source: HEC's Website

Figure 3

Among other initiatives, the HEC encouraged universities in the public and private sector to publish research journals. These journals were ranked as Y, X, and W categories according to quality criteria set by the HEC. The figure 4 below shows the statistics of journals in sciences, social sciences, and multi-disciplinary. The

figure shows a dismal situation in social sciences, however, there is reasonable number of journals available in sciences.



Source: HEC's Website      Figure 4

### Discussion

The HEC claims quality at the top of its agenda. Key components of quality assurance program are development of effective system of quality assurance and enhancement in the universities, development of minimum quality criteria, development of the guidelines and processes of quality assurance, building capacity of the practitioners and institutional assessment. But quality of higher education in Pakistan falls short of international standards. It is evident from the fact that there are only 3 universities among 151 which are indexed in the top ranked 600 universities of the world. According to Times, the UK higher education ranking, 2009; the University of Karachi achieved a world rank of 223<sup>rd</sup> in some disciplines, the Quaid-e-Azam University was ranked 270<sup>th</sup> in the Natural Sciences, the National University of Science and Technology, Islamabad was ranked 350<sup>th</sup> in the overall world university ranking.

Moreover, plight of higher education can be assessed from another fact that around 0.5 million students apply for study visa to seek higher education in UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand every year. Their increasing interest in foreign education is primarily due to dearth of quality human and material resources and fewer job opportunities guaranteed with local education. This reflects their disappointment on system of higher education in Pakistan. Success of higher education can be measured through the frequency of job placement of the graduates. Quite ironically; even MBBS qualified applied for the position of junior clerk position fell vacant at Lahore High Court recently. Moreover, PhDs are reduced to

money churning machines than quality researchers. Although the HEC has done a great job to reform R&D by allocating millions of rupees yet there is need to motivate the faculty to contribute into research. These concerns are linked to systems and procedures, human and financial resources, research facilities, accountability, and quality assurance among others in Pakistan.

The HEC has been putting its best possible efforts to ensure the required standard of education in the country. It has been trying hard to streamline the universities to adopt quality assurance mechanism to improve the quality of their teaching and research. As a consequence our universities are coming up in the ranking index of international bodies. The HEC produced more PhD scholars in eight years, which we did not witness in the last 56 years. However, initiatives are required to strength it by keeping it protected from evils designs. The state ought to support and encourage the HEC to bring indigenous universities at par with international universities. This initiative will not only diminish brain drain but also to attract foreign students for further education here. The HEC is ultimate solution for the good health of our universities. Even international organizations (UNESCO, USAID, World Bank and so on) have acknowledged the reforms the HEC has been introducing in the universities.

Dr. Saeeda Shah, Senior Lecturer, School of Education University of Leicester – UK highlights in an international conference that people educated from Pakistani institutions engage actively in knowledge creation and knowledge acceleration in developed countries and economies but higher education institutions in Pakistan have yet not been successful in becoming hubs of knowledge. This shows that indeed the potential is there but sincere commitment on the part of state holders is very much needed to attract these experts back to homeland.

Quality in higher education is pivotal for the progress of a country because it provides input to the industry. Health of the industry is directly proportion to human resources. Since human resources are trained in higher education institutions therefore it is inevitable to improve the standard of higher education.

## **Conclusion**

Spending huge revenue for education may give a nudge to universities but reinforcement of quality criteria is crucial to improve the standard of education. The HEC has been taking initiatives on different fronts to cure some of the chronic problems since its inception. But close observance of quality criteria implementation

will bring more fruitful results. It means the HEC requires to work as co-partner with the higher education institutions in Pakistan. The state ought to support and encourage the HEC to bring indigenous universities at par with international universities.

A dynamic world-class research culture is vital for the acquisition of knowledge and health of the universities. It is also crucial to the economic growth and social cohesion. The HEC and the universities in Pakistan can play a vital role in the development of Pakistan. The universities should encourage and provide opportunities to participate in some healthy academic activities e.g. national and international conferences, publications in national and international journals. The faculty contribution to the respective field should be evaluated and rewarded with annual increment. The universities and the concerned organizations need to create a congenial and supportive working environment and to develop a vision to boost up the quality.

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