

HIGHER EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

PROFESSOR IFTIKHAR AHMED¹

Higher education is not tailored to the low-heel expectations of the intellectual plebians and pedestrians who are more concerned with stuffing their breadbaskets than fine-tuning their sensitivities. Our country is choc-o-bloc with "cramming contraptions" i.e., students who are more obsessed with gurgling out the hashed ideas of others than chiseling something refreshingly innovative from scattered debris and broken stone. They are locked up with the third-rate and scratched-out material which leaves little leeway for high-jump creativity. While mere reproduction is stultifying, creativity is a stretch of lush-green oasis in a dust-dashed, sand-smitten desert. The recent attempt by our government to popularize higher education is a blatant travesty of its soul-stirring purpose. It, in fact, amounts to its trivialization because higher education carries an elitist halo around it. It patronizes and promotes creative minds and not the minds that are choked with half-chewed, plagiarized information.

The indiscriminate charterization of private universities into legalized sanctuaries of superior knowledge is a sacrilege of higher education. Their official recognition as centers of academic excellence is a mockery of the principles which constitute the essence of research and discovery. Most of these universities are located on unpalatable premises and staffed by personnel with little or no experience of quality-oriented teaching or research. The teachers thrive on derivative knowledge and the researchers muck around in sheer eclecticism or mere spurious regeneration. This is indeed heart-wrenching and mind-crunching because higher education does not operate in a vacuum; it is firmly anchored in other levels of education, the primary and the secondary. These two levels furnish the fundamental rungs on which the superstructure of higher education

¹ Professor Iftakhar Ahmed Khan is Professor of English at Faculty of Commerce, University of Central Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

is based. Without this anchor, the top crust sounds hollow like the tinkly promises of third-world dictators and undemocratically elected public representatives. Therefore, in order to streamline higher education, it is vital to streamline primary and secondary levels of education. To spring higher education upon incompetent products of a moth-eaten, cockroach-infested system of education is to propel a vehicle in reverse gear without any palpable hope of putting it on the track of progress and development.

The present system of education is regarded by most of us as the legacy of the colonial past and is, therefore, ferociously condemned and lambasted. But before discarding it as a piece of burnt-out toast we need to realize that, out of this legacy, we have retained only the undesirable aspects which have been thoroughly exploited to promote the interests of the "neo-colonialists" that came to rule the roost in our country. The positive element of the colonial system, that is, a rigorous system of education and the consequent higher standards at the time of independence have either been completely brushed aside or pushed to the back burner. We would have helped the nation immeasurably if we had not only preserved the positive element of the colonial past but also squeezed maximum leverage out of it. These positive aspects, no matter where they accrue from, must be considered dispassionately.

The quality of any system can be easily tabulated by the quality of its products. This is not to debunk the quality of our present students but to place the system in a befitting perspective. It is an un-shuttered secret that the quality of pre-partition students was incomparably greater than that of the present generation. Those students were definitely knowledgeable and conducted themselves like truly educated people. The present breed of students looks as blank as the bank account of a pauper who simply switches off their minds when any intellectual discussion breaks out. For them it is no less than a cholera epidemic and they try to twirl out of it as glibly as possible. They are not knowledge pickers, they are only note stackers. They have piles and heaps of information in photo-stat reproductions but they have scant time to digest and understand the contents of this junk store. They behave like eunuchs at the gate of a harem; they are interested only in degrees printed on crinkly paper and not the essence of those degrees. These degrees are useful for 'stature-soaked' jobs to build palaces of plush and

pelf for their children. An education system which preened itself upon the accumulation of knowledge has been reduced to the level of a street-dog or a mongrel. When knowledge is devalued to such an extent, the planners and the educationists are supposed to drown themselves in a spot of water. But they are drained of all sense of self-respect which confirms a Shakes-pearian remark "shame, where is thy blush"? Shame, like conscience, honesty and integrity is dressed down to a purely cosmetic affair.

Our education system needs to be regalvanized. The process, however, should start, not at the crest, but at the trough. It means we should set the ball of dynamic transformation rolling at the primary level. The primary education, as everyone knows, is walking on wobbly crutches. It is in a state of complete disjointedness. Hamlet says time is out of joint, the sensitive and perceptive citizens of this jalopy of a country say 'education is out of joint'. The joints have to be set and recast at the initial level because this is where the disjuncture is most prominent. We condemn the colonial heritage because it catered to the needs of superior beings but we have made it even worse. We have shunted the poor people out of the rat race. They are resigned to their squinched fate as they can't even dream about super education. They can hardly afford ordinary education for their sprigs because the fees and other educational accessories have soared far beyond their emaciated reach. Some of the poor people, who like to keep up with the Joneses, are in a catch-22 situation. They are neither accommodated by the affluent class nor do they find it easier to adjust to the community they are so keen to snap their ties with. The screech of he hour is to introduce pragmatism and consistency in our primary, secondary and higher secondary education. While we grumble about inadequate investment in primary education, we have hopelessly fumbled to zero in on the facilities that already exist. We believe in the maxim that grass is always greener on the other side. Educationists of integrity and acumen may be motivated, both financially and otherwise, to frame a policy that is in synchronization with the demands of higher education. This will ensure an unchecked flow and continuity at all levels of education. In addition, the policy should not be allowed to collapse at the level of implementation as has been the fate of all policies. The present government, punch-packed and "fist-festooned" as it is, should slither out of its shell or cocoon and practically overview the new policy. This will

root higher education in sound moorings and resolve the chronic and festering riddle of primary education.

People in a moribund state of mind are continually cackling that education should be linked with jobs. Their cackle turns into a cacophony as they seem to completely ignore ground realities. The creation of jobs is not directly hitched with education; it is only directly hooked up with economy. And the state of our economy reminds one of a planning that has gone completely haywire. It is a sad reflection on the competence and farsightedness of our planners and economist that , even after the lapse of more that half a century, our country is floundering like a blind man in a dark alley or like a hardboiled boozer staggering through the street.

This makes the job of the educationist double-edged. He should not only spell out the goals and imperatives of education but also pressurize the rulers to concentrate on the economic development of the country. Things as they stand at present paint an extremely bleak and unflattering picture. Though the rulers do not tire of clacking out the rapid strides thy have made in developing the country economically, the facts contradict their overloaded statement. The rapidly shooting rate of inflation and the proliferating garbage "plateau" of the filings of humanity is a resounding slap on the piggish red faces of the rulers. It is high time they marched out of the cloud cuckoo land and harnessed economic development to the multiplication of jobs to provide a breath of fresh air to the common man who is groaning under the jack boot of poverty and frustration. The high school education in rural areas can, however, be made job-oriented by annexing it to the agricultural development requirement of the country. Since our country is predominantly agricultural with inexhaustible human resources, the rulers should be quick on the uptake to utilize these resources. They should not tarry like the early planners who miserably failed to capitalize on these sources. On the contrary, they cast them away as totally worthless.

In order to give a real spurt to the sagging nation, we should not treat higher education like hot muffins. No foolproof recipe can guarantee its quality. It eludes all attempts to quantify or computerize it as its essential worth resides in a kind of endemic

curiosity to unravel the intricacies of the universe or to understand in more expressive terms its mystique and mystery. This sense of curiosity is branded by consistent impalpability coupled with a feeling of restless urgency. Therefore to trust private universities with such sensitive issues is an unblinking mockery of the purpose of education. It is as obvious as a believer's conscience that a large number of these universities are managed by people with an over-spilling shopkeeper mentality; people who are motivated by a Mephistophelean urge to stash away wealth and property rather than dish out knowledge. Besides, they are not only financially fixated; they are also morally asphyxiated. They have turned universities into circus shows where the entire focus is on spectacular display rather than rigorous research. Exceptions are there but they only prove the rule. Since higher education is 'super elitist', it should be reserved only for institutions which do not play to the gallery to titillate the undiscerning audience but strive to preserve and perpetuate its irrepressible spirit and élan. This is the only way to guard it against bumbling mediocrity.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Ameen, Kanwal Dr., (2007) "Issues of Quality Assurance (QA) in LIS Higher Education in Pakistan", WLIC
- Higher Education in Pakistan – Towards a Reform Agenda", A contribution to the task force on improvement of Higher Education in Pakistan, Boston Group.
- Secretary of State for Education and Skills by Command of Her Majesty, "The future of higher education", January 2003
- Ziring, Lawrence, "Dilemmas of Higher Education in Pakistan: A Political Perspective", Asian Affairs: An American Review, 5, 5, 307-24