

## University hires

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**ANY university teaching economics would feel lucky to have, on its faculty, renowned economists like some of our former finance ministers, advisors, heads of the Planning Commission and governors of the State Bank — all holding PhD degrees in economics. Being intimately involved with economic policymaking at the highest level, and enjoying the reputation of being good teachers, they can blend theory and practice.**

Unfortunately, public universities cannot hire as professors some of these top-notch professionals-cum-academicians. Reason: they do not fulfill the Higher Education Commission's criterion of the research publications required of a professor — 15 papers in journals enjoying

impact factor. (The impact factor is based on the number of times the articles published in a journal are cited. The higher the impact factor, the more prestigious the journal is considered.)

The ineligibility of these men of high calibre should provide food for thought, if not outright jitters, to the HEC as to the appropriateness of the criterion. Dr Nadeemul Haque had written earlier that Ronald Coase, a Nobel laureate in economics who had only around a dozen publications to his name, may not have qualified for professorship in Pakistan.

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### **Issues peculiar to Pakistan do not find a place in impact factor journals.**

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Private universities, not being obliged to follow the HEC's impact-factor criterion, hire the best of former policymakers- cum-academics. Public universities, barring some exceptions, have to make do with mediocre teachers. The losers are the students.

The obsession with impact factor causes various problems. Out of the top 10 economic journals, five each are published in the US and Europe. The topics covered in the latest issues of these journals include patents, gender, happiness, risk preference, racism, environment, stock market, mortgages, run on banks, financial contagion, corporate governance, and labour supply in the US and Europe.

The inference is obvious: the world's best research journals prefer research on issues that either have a global appeal or those that concern the West more. Issues peculiar to Pakistan do not find a place in these journals. Worse, not enough Pakistan-based impact factor journals are likely to come up soon given the number of researchers that we have and the low interest of the world in issues of interest to us.

Naturally enough, university teachers, eager to publish in impact factor journals, will focus upon research issues of interest to the West at the expense of, for example, the economic opportunities thrown up by the China-Pakistan

Economic Corridor. Why would a journal published in the US be interested in this topic?

The HEC has prescribed a uniform number of publications as the eligibility criterion for university teachers, irrespective whether the applicant's field is natural science or social science. The uniformity ignores that the time and effort involved in undertaking research and publishing is different for different fields. For example, a study based on mixing different chemicals in a laboratory might take less time relative to one based on household data aimed at finding the determinants of foreign remittances or poverty. In the latter case, just gathering the data may at times take years.

A scientist working in the natural sciences has a much greater chance of publishing in impact factor journals. To understand, assume that a Pakistani scientist discovered that the average temperature of the human body is 98.6 Fahrenheit or that mixing hydrogen and oxygen in specific ratios produces water. These findings would hold in Pakistan as well as in the US: therefore the journals published in the West would be inclined to publish. However, a paper arguing that the unemployed of Kohat, but not Kashmore, are willing to take up jobs in Dubai may not even have national appeal, let alone global readership — but the finding would certainly have policy implications for Pakistan.

Whatever criterion we use to determine the research calibre of an applicant, the aforementioned examples suggest that subject peculiarities need to be accounted for while fixing the kind and minimum number of publications required of a teacher. The question is, how to come up with a number for different fields. And the bigger question is, if impact factor criterion is done away with, by what should it be replaced? The cliché doing the rounds is: impact rather than impact factor. The question remains, how to measure impact?

Digressing a bit, the authorities have a misconception that like the bureaucracy, universities too need an organisational pyramid — more assistant professors and fewer professors. Students and hence the nation stand to gain if we were to invert the pyramid — have more professors and less assistant professors. But then, as we engage professors in administrative tasks and endless meetings, the professors do need a helper to ghost-perform

some of their tasks. The foreign universities pick the ablest of their students as aides. Why don't we?

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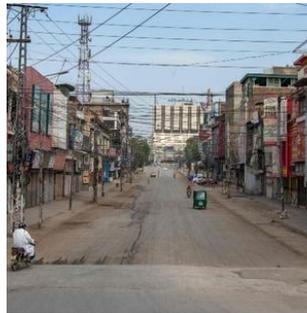
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