

Policy Note on HEC Equivalence Standard

The Competition Commission of Pakistan (the "Commission") took notice of concerns raised with regard to a standard of equivalence and degree recognition (the "Equivalence Standard" or "ES") introduced by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan ("HEC") in Qualification Framework and Revised Roadmap for Business Education- 2012. The Equivalence Standard applies **retrospectively** and renders the master's degrees earned prior to introduction of the Equivalence Standard inferior to those earned after the introduction of ES, thereby negatively discriminating the holders of prior degrees in terms of higher education and employment opportunities.

Background

The HEC introduced a standard of four-year bachelor's program, as opposed to the previous two years program, along with the equivalence criteria for degree programs. Following is the HEC's qualification framework¹ showing the number of years of education required for a specific award type:

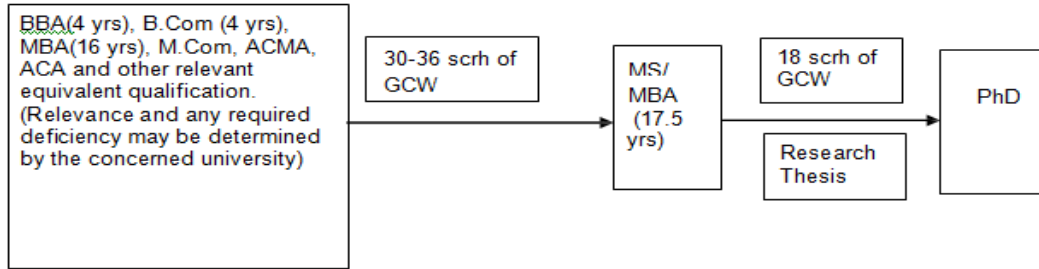
	Years	Levels	Award Type	Award Example
Higher Education Levels	21	8	Doctoral	PhD
	20			
	19	7	Masters	M.Phil./MS/MBA, M.Sc. (Eng.), M.E, MArch etc
	18			
	16	6	Bachelor	BS, B.E, B.Arch., BSc (Eng.), BSc (Agri), MA/MSc (16 year), LLB, B.Com (Hons, MBBS, DVM, PharmD, etc
	15			
14	5	Associate Ordinary Bachelor	BA/BSc (Pass), ADE, Associate Degrees etc	
13				

Pakistan Qualification Framework

Under the above framework, a master's degree (MA, MSc, MBA etc.) completed in 16 years prior to introduction of the Equivalence Standard is treated as equal to a bachelor's degree. With regard to business education, this situation is more elaborately shown under the roadmap designed by the HEC for business education in Pakistan.² The relevant extract of the said roadmap is reproduced below for reference:

¹ <http://www.hec.gov.pk/InsideHEC/Divisions/QALI/QADivision/Documents/PQF%20.pdf>

² <http://www.hec.gov.pk/InsideHEC/Divisions/AECA/CurriculumRevision/Documents/RoadmapBusinessEducation.pdf>, and also see <http://www.nbec.org.pk/index.php/roadmap>



Roadmap for Business Education

The roadmap clearly shows that an MBA attained after 16 years of education is equivalent to a BBA or B.Com. culminating in 16 years of education. Though the Qualification Framework and Roadmap for Business Education has set a standard for future students, they, perhaps inadvertently, have not created any exception for master's degrees (MA, MSc, MBAs etc.) attained prior to introduction of Equivalence Standard, thereby rendering the degrees earned prior to ES sub-standard. A person who has completed his/her master degree in sixteen years in an era prior to the introduction of Equivalence Standard finds that his/her professional master's degree is now equal to a bachelor's degree.

Issue/Discussion

The Equivalence Standard raises a serious competition concern by discriminating against those who earned their master's degrees (MA, MSc, MBA etc.) prior to ES and essentially putting them at a competitive disadvantage in terms of employment and higher education vis-à-vis those who earned their degrees after the introduction of ES.

Some of the legal/competition concerns posed are discussed below:

1. Retroactivity

By failing to create exception for degrees conferred prior to the introduction of Equivalence Standard, the HEC has applied the same retroactively against the principles of natural justice. Consider, for example, the case of legal education in Pakistan, where the requirement of a 2 years LL.B changed to a 3 years LL.B; thus, making the completion of LL.B degree requiring 17 years of schooling instead of 16 years. Despite addition of a year in the terminal degree, the old LL.B is considered equivalent to the one that is earned in line with the current standard. While the current standard has been mandatory since its introduction it has had no retrospective effect thereby ruling out any possibility of discrimination.

2. Discrimination

The Equivalence Standard discriminates old master degree as it effectively renders an old MA, MSc, MBA etc degree inferior despite the fact that the additional years of schooling are not enhanced in these programs unlike LL.B program but still nonetheless render previous master's degree substandard . If we take the example of a business school rated by the HEC as the 'premier business school' in the country, it can be safely presumed about it that the quality and standard of education imparted in the MBA program before and after the introduction of Equivalence Standard remained the same, since the time required to complete a MBA degree remained two years.

However, effectively its old MBA degree is rendered inferior by virtue of being declared equivalent to a BBA or B Com degree under the HEC Roadmap for Business Education.

3. Entry Barrier

In order to compete, it is essential that one is able to enter a market. An old MBA being inferior to new MBA cannot apply for a job where the eligibility criteria is set as per HEC standard i.e. 18 years MBA. Thus the Equivalence Standard makes it difficult for old MBAs to enter the employment market of management sciences and has the effect of reducing or restricting competition in the said market. Similarly, to seek higher education an old MBA has to repeat the same terminal degree in order to meet the HEC's equivalence criteria.

4. Unfair Conditions

It needs to be noted that a profound goal of a four year bachelor program offered worldwide is to provide an opportunity to students to broaden their horizon by learning a variety of subjects in various disciplines. A specialist program such as MBA prepares people to serve as business specialists in various sectors of economy. Therefore, the objectives associated with respect to a 4 year bachelor program and a specialist program are disparate and cannot substitute each other in any way. After attaining a Master's degree, whether we talk about old MBAs or the new ones, their ability to perform in a higher education program or the job field remains undistinguished as far as their preparation or training is concerned. The Equivalence Standard of HEC does not differentiate old and new MBA based on the curriculum or teaching methodology but instead on the number of years.

The Commission acknowledges that the initiative taken by HEC to introduce the 4 year bachelor program was in order to make the Pakistani degrees compatible with the foreign ones. However, the new standard should not negatively affect the degree holders who earned their degrees in accordance with the standard prevalent at the time of their schooling.

Recommendation

In the light of foregoing, it is recommended that HEC may revise its Equivalence Standard to create an exception for those who attained their master's degrees in 16 years in a period prior to the standard of four-year bachelor program introduced by the HEC in Pakistan as was the case in Bachelor's of Law degree, to create a level playing field among all the master's degree holders.

Islamabad, the 29th of May, 2014.