

Correspondence

Pakistan: restore autonomy to Higher Education Commission

The Pakistani government has cut the contract of the chair of the country's autonomous Higher Education Commission (HEC) from four to two years. Because the chair of the funding and regulatory body – Tariq Banuri, an economist at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City – had already served two years, his appointment was effectively terminated. This unexplained 'sacking' is widely seen by researchers, the public and educationists as an attack on the sector's independence.

These moves fly in the face of the government's policy of fostering meritocracy and transparency in public-sector organizations. Key to that is independence in regulatory policymaking for universities, given their pivotal role in developing a knowledge-based economy, and their international visibility (P. S. Aithal and S. Aithal *Int. J. Appl. Eng. Mgmt Lett.* 3(2), 36–52; 2019).

Prime Minister Imran Khan, a long-standing champion of universities and research, has urged members of the Pakistani diaspora to contribute their research skills to nation-building. Unless HEC autonomy is restored, the nation will become less attractive to Pakistani scientists working abroad and to international researchers, along with the funding that they bring.

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Pakistan: anger mounts over threat to higher education

On 8 April, the Pakistani government passed an ordinance – without any justifiable reason – that will lead to the country's Higher Education Commission (HEC) losing its independence. More than 2,200 academics have now signed a petition calling for action against such political interference (go.nature.com/2rnf4v), which could endanger the future of higher education in Pakistan.

The HEC was established in 2002 as an independent agency to revamp the country's higher education, initially backed by generous funding that has since dwindled. It has been the butt of criticism over the years (*Nature* 467, 378–379; 2010; *Nature* 560, 419; 2018). The commission's success should instead be gauged by its role in promoting a culture of responsible research and education in Pakistan and beyond.

The nation must fiercely protect the autonomy and funding of the HEC, subject to accountability. Experts in science, academic policy and governance can help to rigorously review its policies, programmes and progress every year.

Pakistan's future is interwoven with fair and independent higher education and science. It could learn from the investment and progress in research made by its neighbours in China and India (*Nature* 590, 184; 2021). The government will need to upgrade its scientific infrastructure and enterprise to broaden its development and make it sustainable.

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China's wildlife protection: add annual reviews and oversight

Now that China has finally updated its List of Wildlife under Special State Protection, a more nimble and responsive approach is needed to aid conservation. The list should be reviewed every year, as well as subjected to the planned five-yearly updates. Species can quickly become endangered in times of rapid development.

The latest additions are the first in more than 30 years (see go.nature.com/2q7sfga). During that time, China has changed profoundly, but the list of protected species has not kept pace. This lag has been disastrous for some animals that were not given the protection they needed.

At least 33 species became extinct in China and many more are critically endangered (Y. Xie & W. Sung *Integr. Zool.* 2, 26–35; 2007; Z. Jiang *et al. Biodivers. Sci.* 24, 500–551; 2016).

An independent government committee should be created to oversee amendments. When making decisions, it could refer to appendices of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the 'red lists' of threatened species curated by the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). These steps would build on the more forceful approach to managing wildlife that China has taken since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Peru scandal: gaps in oversight of COVID vaccine trial

We wish to clarify points in your report on Peruvian COVID vaccine trials that could reflect negatively on Cayetano Heredia University in Lima (UPCH) (*Nature* 592, 174–175; 2021).

The UPCH conducts hundreds of studies every year and is committed to high-quality, ethical research. However, its Sinopharm trial diverged from global standards by including an off-trial vaccine lot "to protect the research-team and trial-related personnel". This unusual provision was negotiated between governments in the context of countries ordering millions of doses of vaccines that are still not available.

Following international recommendations (see go.nature.com/3tcavhu), the Peruvian government's National Institute of Health (INS) appointed a national research-ethics committee to provide prompt review and oversight of COVID vaccine trials. This meant that the study protocol was not reviewed or approved by the UPCH's research-ethics committee.

The protocol was approved by the INS and the national ethics committee. These bodies organized oversight visits during the trial, but did not ascertain whether or how the extra vaccines were used. Had this happened, the whole process could have been called into question.

The UPCH has started a high-level investigation and appointed a new principal investigator for the study. It will ensure that such scenarios cannot reoccur.

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