

## Overseas trained Pakistanis returning home

By Atle Hetland

Pakistan has tens of thousands of students abroad. Most of them go independently, and some of them hold foreign passports. Since the Higher Education Commission (HEC) was established in 2002, a scholarship programme was set up to give opportunities for university teachers and others to complete an advanced degree and become top experts in their professions.

About five thousand scholarship holders have benefitted from the HEC programme; much of the funding originates from USA. Most of the scholarship holders went abroad, but some also carried out their research at local universities.

It is often a worry that overseas students do not return home upon completion of their studies, especially if they go to English-speaking countries. Hence, HEC has encouraged students to go to other countries, too, such as France and Germany, where the education quality is excellent. And candidates are required to serve at home at least for five years.

“When overseas trained Pakistanis return home, it is essential that they are welcomed back, and even given some special help so that they can fast get back into the system at home”, says a returnee.

“I have just returned from Norway with a Ph.D degree in business and economics, which took me seven years, and I have taken up a post as assistant professor at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Islamabad”, says Imtiaz Badshah, who hails from Lukki Marwala in KPK.

“First I studied in Bergen and then I went up to Nordland University, north of the Arctic Circle, a fishing, administration and education town with a new university. It is a beautiful coastal city, and they even have a couple of weeks of midnight sun in summer, and total darkness and northern lights (‘aurora borealis’) lighting up the dark sky in winter”, he says.

“My wife Sajida is still there with our two-year old daughter. Sajida is working on her Master’s degree in social work, with focus on comparative perspectives and gender issues in local communities, and she will complete later this year. I will go to visit my wife and daughter as soon as the summer vacation starts”, says Imtiaz Badsah.

“I am glad to be back in my home country, yet there are both ‘pull’ factors and ‘push’ factors”, he says. “We haven’t quite decided if we will stay on in Norway, if we get the opportunity, or if we will establish ourselves in Pakistan.”

“In any case, since I went on HEC funding, I have to work in Pakistan for five years first”, Imtiaz says.

“For me, too, it is a bit the same as it is for Imtiaz”, says Dr. Feriyal Amal Aslam, who returned in July 2012 after having obtained her Ph.D. from California in USA. She has recently become head of development studies at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) in Islamabad.

“But my husband, who is Indonesian and received his Ph.D. from Hawaii in USA where we met, has been given a top university post at home in urban and regional planning.”

“For the time being, we live in two countries. It will probably always be a mixture of Pakistan and Indonesia for us”, she says and adds that there is also strength in that, but not always quite practical.

Dr. Feriyal just came back from the airport, with her husband, who has come for a short stay with his wife. “Next time, it will be my turn to Indonesia to stay with him”, she says.

“We just came back from Cuba with our degrees as medical doctors”, say dr. Mudassir Kamal from KP and dr. Jamal Nasir from Jhelum.

“The first batch of 300 has returned, and the larger batch of about 600 will come in March next year. It was a special programme set up after the earthquake in 2005 when a large number of Cuban doctors came to Pakistan to help, and they realized that there were long-term needs for medical personnel in Kashmir and elsewhere in the country”, the fresh doctors explain.

“It took us seven years to complete. First, we spent one year learning Spanish, then five years of medical studies, and then one year practice under guidance, or ‘house job’, as it is called. At the end, we sat for our final exam. Many Pakistani students achieved top results. HEC Director Tahir Abbas Said knows that because he came to Cuba to attend our graduation festivities at Vila Clara University.”

“Now, we are back and ready to serve at home”, say Mudassir and Jamal.

“We signed an agreement with HEC committing ourselves to work at home at least for five years. But, strangely, our degree has not yet been recognized in Pakistan, and we cannot take jobs as doctors. If it is not sorted out quickly, many may be forced to take jobs in other fields than those they were trained for, or seek employment abroad in countries where the degree is recognized, such as Germany, Spain, South Africa and most countries in the Middle East and Latin America. In both cases, it would be a loss to Pakistan and discouraging for the candidates”, the doctors say.

“We hope that HEC, the Ministry of Health and the Medical and Dental Commission can all sit together and get the matter solved speedily”, the eager doctors-in-waiting say, and they add that they are proud of their Cuban degrees, which place special emphasis of integrated community health. “Cuba has one of the world’s best health systems in spite of being a relatively poor country. There are so many things we in Pakistan can learn from how they provide free, systematic health services to all”, the doctors say.

“We wish to work in Pakistan and we want to keep in contact with the Cuban universities and hospitals where we studied. If we need to take a course over a few months about the Pakistani health system and sit for an exam at home, we should do that. Actually, we would like to do it, and it would be good for all foreign students to get updated on professional issues in Pakistan upon return home. But we are in a hurry, because we want to get to work as doctors”, dr. Mudassir and dr. Jamal say.

“Besides, we need to earn money, too. “After seven years as students in Cuba we haven’t returned with earthly riches, only knowledge, skills and enthusiasm”, they say.

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**Photo attached**

Photo caption:

1. Dr. Mudassir Kamal and Dr. Jamal Nasir are two of the 900 Pakistanis who went to Cuba for medical training in 2007 and 2008. 300 just returned and the rest will come in March next year.

(-Photo by the writer)