



THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

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# USAID’s Higher Education System Strengthening Activity

## International Summit on Shaping the Future of Higher Education in Pakistan 10-12 June 2024, Islamabad

**Session 10:** Tuesday, 11 June 2024 (14:30 to 17:00 hrs)

**Topic:** Showcasing HESSA Best Practices: Strengthening the Role of Registrars and Administration in Higher Education

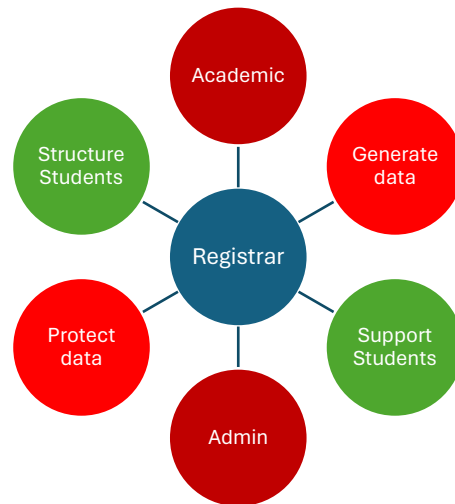
**Speakers (TBC):** Chair: Dr. Amjad Saqib, Founder Akhuwat Foundation  
Panelists:

- Asad Ilyas, Registrar, IBA, Karachi
- Yorid Ahsan Zia, Registrar, University of Peshawar
- Zahid Rauf, Registrar, BUIITEMS, Quetta
- Ashfaq Maitla, Registrar, NUST, Islamabad
- Naseem Akhtar, Registrar, FJWU, Rawalpindi

### Background: Role of the Registrar

The Registrar is one of the most pivotal positions in universities, performing a range of functions, including registering students, tracking academic progress, collecting and maintaining all relevant data, keeping all official transcript records, and verifying and certifying degrees and transcripts (AACRAO 2018). Most of these emanate from the responsibilities explicitly assigned to the registrar under the statutory charters of their institutions (see Table 1 below).

A wide variety of other services are often also assigned to the registrar’s office, including, although not limited to the recording and implementation of university policies and rules and regulations, maintenance of the information system architecture, preparation and dissemination of course catalogues and academic calendars, class scheduling, management and allocation of classrooms and other campus facilities, overseeing legal and statutory responsibilities, governmental relations, communications, and media interaction.



To put it simply, the role of the registrar in a modern university is as the head of a secretariat that supports a fairly unique organizational entity. While there is considerable variation amongst the nature of universities—public or private, competitive or collaborative, traditional or dynamic, flexible or rigid, research or teaching-focused, subject-oriented or comprehensive, etc.—but they tend to share a familial similarity in organizational forms, namely a measure of collegial decision-making structured through semi-autonomous colleges/ faculties/ centers as well as councils/ boards/ committees, with clearly defined TORs and reporting lines (Roy and El Marsafawy 2020). This has created a unique institutional form, combining individual (academic) freedom and institutional autonomy with efficient collective (though often hierarchical) decision-making, and continuous innovation as well as an underlying level of stability and predictability.

Indeed, universities often resemble what in the literature has been called “meta-organizations”, i.e., organizations comprised of other formal and autonomous organizations, such as the UN, WTO, IMF, the World Bank, or the European Union. Such organizations have a long history of separating decision making from implementation, and creating harmony between the “owners” of the institutions and the secretariats.

The multiple responsibilities of the Registrar’s Office (see Table 1 below) can then be summarized simply, namely to act as a secretariat for the decision-making bodies, not to take decisions per se, but to ensure the efficient, rules-based, consistent, transparent, and equitable implementation of decisions made by the formal collective decision-making bodies—syndicates, senates, governing boards, academic boards, selection boards, faculties, departments, centers, and other. This is essential for making this complex system work smoothly.

<b>Table 1: Functions Assigned to HESSA Registrars</b>		
<b>Role</b>	<b>Description of Role in University Charters</b>	<b>Universities</b>
Registry	Maintain a register of graduates. Be the custodian of records.	BUIITEMS, FJWU, KIU, LCWU, MUST, SBKWU
Administrative	Be the administrative head of the University. Supervise the process of appointment/ nomination/ election of members to various bodies in the prescribed manner. Frame rules and regulations and get them approved.	BUIITEMS, KIU, MUST, SBKWU  UET
Secretarial	Act as the Secretary of the Senate, Syndicate, Academic Council, Selection Board and such other authorities, bodies and committees as prescribed	AWKU, BUIITEMS, FJWU, KIU, LCWU, MUST, MUST, NUTECH, SBKWU, UET, UOP, UOS, WUS
Communications	Prepare/ update/ disseminate catalogs, syllabuses, policies and procedures, statutes, regulations and rules. Conduct official correspondence.	AWKU, UET, UOP, UOS, WUS
Legal	Be the custodian of the common seal and such other property of the university as may be prescribed. Enter into agreements, sign documents, affix the common seal, and authenticate records.	AWKU, BUIITEMS, FJWU, KIU, LCWU, MUST, SBKWU, UET, UOP, UOS, WUS

This background helps not only in providing a framework for organizing and enhancing the contributions of Registrars, but also alerts to potential dangers (see Roux and Lecocq 2022), including institutional overreach, conflicts between the secretariat and the substantive stakeholders (in this case, faculty members), and even possible subversion of universities' ultimate desiderata by bureaucratic procedures or bureaucratic intrigue.

#### **Box 1: Capacity Building Needs**

- *Communication*: drafting notes, minutes, emails, email etiquette, seeking approvals.
- *Legal skills*: analysis/ interpretation.
- *Management skills* in finance, planning, administration, HR, and logistics.
- *Diplomatic skills* for interacting with faculty members, coping with external pressures, handling difficult situations.
- *Technological skills* in the use of modern software, including paperless office, LMS, CMS, and digitization of information.

#### **Needs Analysis**

In view of the above background, the first step is to identify the priority areas that could be addressed through a learning atelier. This was undertaken at the first atelier session on 20 June 2023. The participants identified several training needs (Box 1). In addition, they also highlighted some systemic factors responsible for hindering the performance as well as learning potential of registrars. Finally, mention must be made of the impact of suboptimal policies or procedures.

- *Capacity Gaps*: The staff of the Registrar Office needs investment in capacity building in several essential areas. The reasons for the capacity gaps include both the difficulty in attracting appropriate candidates and lack of opportunities for skills enhancement.
- *Job conditions*: The Registrars as well as the staff of the Registrar Office face unattractive service conditions (in comparison with other university employees), which discourage many good candidates. These include comparatively low pay packages, with limited advancement opportunities (typically capped at BPS-19 or BPS-20). The Registrar's position in most public sector universities has a short tenure, typically three years, non-extendable, and with no pay protection. Empirically, this does not appear to be a rational choice. Indeed, representatives of the three HESSA universities with permanent or longer tenures of registrars (i.e., IBA, NUST and UET) evinced the highest job satisfaction and highlighted the efficiency, coordination, on-the-job learning opportunities, adoption of best practices, career planning of younger staff, and above all the ability to introduce and operationalize the required changes in policies, practices, and technological choices.
- *Limited training opportunities*: All participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of training opportunities for registrars and their subordinate staff. Indeed, the consensus was that such opportunities were needed most for registrars because their short tenures did not provide them sufficient opportunities for on-the-job learning, and the large variations in the roles and responsibilities of registrars in different universities did not allow for much cross-institutional learning.
- *Technology*: Registrars of a few universities expressed satisfaction, and even pride, with their success in deploying technological solutions for admissions, registration, data management, learning management, campus management, space allocation, class scheduling, internal communications, office procedures, security protocols, HR, inventory management, smart classrooms, attendance management, alumni engagement, and hostel management. All universities have adopted technological solutions for some of these functionalities but most

expressed residual dissatisfaction both with the excluded areas as well as the quality and reliability of the included ones. Several participants expressed an interest in enhancing the deployment of technological solutions to manage the data, reporting, and workload, increase accuracy and efficiency, and improve internal procedures. Concern was also expressed about the resistance to adoption of advanced technologies from university faculty as well as leadership.

- *Workload:* with one or two honorable exceptions, most participants were of the view that the workload of the registrars was quite extensive and often overwhelming, as it covered administrative, legal, communications-related, and information-related aspects. Apart from the capacity gaps mentioned earlier, the reasons cited were the absence of shared understanding of the standardized job orientation and terms of reference, archaic procedures, inadequate technological support, inadequate staffing, and mismatch of skills. The weak areas mentioned were legal skills, data-related skills, drafting and communication skills, and conflict management skills.
- *Diplomatic Skills:* several participants mentioned that external and internal influences increase the workload for registrars. Internal pressures often emanate from frictions that can emerge from interaction with other stakeholders on campus, especially faculty members, faculty associations, or student groups. External pressures can come from governmental officials and politically influential persons as well as the media.
- *Diagnostic Skills:* As befits a secretariat of a complex organizational entity, the role of the Registrar's Office is to support the university community realize its aspirational goals efficiently, transparently, and equitably. A key element of this work is to develop the diagnostic capacity for identifying inefficiencies, bottlenecks, opacities, and inequities. The main diagnostic key is the frustration experienced by the stakeholder community, i.e., students, faculty members, university leadership, and other university staff.

## Course Objectives

The main objective of the learning atelier is to enable participants to obtain a 360-degrees perspective on the nature of work performed by the Registrar's Office in the best run universities; focus on different components of the work; develop the capacity for a diagnostic analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of their own (or other) functioning offices; and acquire the tools to search for solutions to the challenges they continue to face in their work.

A second objective is to enable participating registrars to share their experiences with their peers, with the support of experts who may be invited to assist, and through this sharing develop a fuller understanding of the challenges as well as the tools needed to address them.

A third objective is to facilitate participating Registrars to prepare a set of reflections of their experiences as well as ways forward. Based on the depth and relevance of this work, it will be explored whether the reflections could be restructured in the form of a training and guidance manual for the junior staff of the Registrar's Offices and future Registrars.

A fourth objective is to develop a training course for Registrar's Offices in other universities, and identify potential trainers and trainers of trainers.

A final objective is to create an initial network of university registrars on the lines of AACRAO, to set the standards for the major responsibilities of Registrar's Offices, provide guidance on data collection, and undertake policy research and advocacy.

### Learning Objectives

At the end of the learning atelier, the participants will be able to:

- Obtain a 360-degrees perspective on the nature of work performed by the Registrar's Office in the best run universities.
- Divide the work of the Registrar's Offices into a finite number of manageable components that could be assigned to sub-units within the office.
- Undertake a diagnostic analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of functioning Registrar's Offices, including their own.
- Identify the menu of feasible options for addressing challenges faced by functioning Registrar's Offices.

### Action Objectives

The ultimate focus of a learning atelier is on "action objectives", i.e., actions that can be undertaken on the basis of the experience in the atelier. These can be divided between university-level objectives and joint objectives. The former will take the form of (a) diagnostic or analytical reports, (b) proposals to amend relevant policies, procedures, or practices, or (c) proposals to initiate new programs (e.g., capacity building) or new infrastructure (e.g., technology software or hardware).

The joint objectives, on the other hand, are actions that could be undertaken by the participants collectively. A prime example is the development of a set of products that could share this experience with others. These include a set of reflections on the experience, translation of the reflections into material that could be used by others for guidance or advice, e.g., a training manual, the development of a detailed training course that could be offered by the participants to their own junior staff or to the staff of the Registrar Offices of other universities upon request, and the formation of a formal association or network of Registrars.

### A Final Note

Besides the benefit of the co-creation of solutions, participants should be aware that, based on their contributions, they could benefit in other ways from the atelier, e.g.:

- Based on the quality and volume of their contributions, selected participants will be recognized as co-authors of any publications that come out of the atelier, in particular, the envisaged Registrar's Manual and affiliated publications.
- Based on the quality and volume of their contributions, selected participants will be recognized as potential train-the-trainers for courses to be offered to other universities.
- Based on the quality and volume of their contributions, selected participants will be recognized as founding members of the Registrar's Association to be established on the basis of these discussions.

## SELECTED READINGS

AACRAO (2018) Registrar's Basic Guide. AACRAO (referred to as *AA2018*)

Jay, Antony (1976) How to Run a Meeting. HBR March 1976

Roux, Benoît, and Xavier Lecocq (2022) A Necessary Evil: The Role of the Secretariat in Effective Meta-Organizations. Lessons from the Multilevel Study of a Business Cooperative, *M@n@gement* 2022/2 (Vol. 25), pp. 60-76

Roy, Rumpa, and Hesham El Marsafawy (2020) Organizational Structure for 21st Century Higher Education Institutions: Meeting Expectations and Crossing Challenges. Conference Paper, *Research Gate*, April 2020.  
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340685039>.

Van der Steen, Martijn, Mark van Twist, and Paul Frissen (2017) Learning from experience: From case-based teaching to experience-based learning, *Teaching Public Administration*, 2017, vol. 35(1): 195-12