

Rethink the university

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University students walk in this image. — AFP/File

The concept of a university in Pakistan has long been misunderstood and misapplied, reduced to a model that prioritises physical expansion and quantity over quality.

Across the country, university leadership tends to equate success with more academic departments, larger student intakes, and grander physical infrastructure. Yet, despite this expansion, public-sector universities remain trapped in a perpetual financial crisis, struggling to

meet their basic operational expenses. This situation reflects not only an economic inefficiency but also a broader misunderstanding of the purpose and role of a university.

In Pakistan, the university model is often about 'bricks and mortar' rather than the intellectual and innovative pursuits that define world-class institutions. Top management seems to believe that adding buildings, departments, and students is synonymous with institutional success.

The fundamental question, however, is whether these additions translate into intellectual growth, research excellence, and societal progress. Unfortunately, the answer is often no. Our universities have become degree mills, churning out graduates who are ill-equipped to think critically, innovate, or contribute meaningfully to society.

At the heart of this issue lies a glaring misallocation of resources. Public-sector universities, with their limited budgets, prioritise infrastructure over faculty development and intellectual enrichment. They could aptly be called 'professor-less universities', as the bulk of their funding is spent maintaining physical structures rather than investing in the human capital needed to drive academic excellence. Faculty members, who should be the cornerstone of any university, are often underfunded, under-trained, and sidelined in the decision-making process.

Even more troubling is the imbalance between faculty and supporting staff in Pakistani universities. When compared to neighbouring countries, Pakistan has an alarmingly high ratio of non-academic to academic staff. This bureaucratic bloat adds significant costs while contributing little to the university's intellectual output. Rather than focusing on nurturing a vibrant academic culture, universities are bogged down by excessive administrative overheads.

The current university model in Pakistan seems primarily designed to distribute degrees rather than provide a meaningful education. Students

often leave these institutions with diplomas in hand but without the critical thinking, creativity, or problem-solving skills needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

The global benchmark for universities is institutions like Stanford, where innovation, intellectual rigor, and societal impact are key metrics of success. In stark contrast, Pakistani universities lack the 'thinking component' that distinguishes great academic institutions.

This culture of intellectual stagnation is pervasive. Faculty rarely engage in critical thinking or cutting-edge research, and students are rarely encouraged to question, explore, or innovate. This lack of a thinking culture stifles innovation and growth, both within universities and in society at large. How can a nation progress when its centers of learning are devoid of critical thought?

The relevance of universities globally is already under scrutiny in the era of artificial intelligence (AI) and rapid technological advancement. As the nature of work evolves, traditional degree programs are becoming less relevant, with employers increasingly valuing skills, creativity, and adaptability over academic credentials. In this context, Pakistani universities risk becoming even more obsolete if they do not adapt.

To remain relevant, universities in Pakistan must embrace this global shift and align their curricula, teaching methods, and institutional objectives with the demands of the modern world. This requires a fundamental rethinking of what a university is and what it should aim to achieve.

At its core, a university should be a hub for knowledge creation, critical thinking, and innovation. It should foster an environment where students and faculty are encouraged to question assumptions, explore new ideas, and contribute meaningfully to society. To achieve this, Pakistan's university model must undergo a complete transformation:

Universities must prioritise intellectual pursuits over physical expansion. This means creating an academic culture that values critical thinking, creativity, and research. Faculty should be empowered to pursue innovative research and engage students in meaningful intellectual discussions. Students, in turn, should be encouraged to question, explore, and think independently.

Faculty is the backbone of any university. Investing in their training, research opportunities, and professional growth is essential. Universities should allocate significant resources to attract, retain, and develop talented faculty members who can inspire students and drive academic excellence.

The excessive administrative overhead in Pakistani universities must be addressed. By streamlining operations and reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies, universities can redirect resources toward academic priorities. A leaner administrative structure would also help create a more dynamic and responsive academic environment.

The curriculum in Pakistani universities needs a complete overhaul. It should be designed to equip students with the skills, knowledge, and adaptability needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Emphasis should be placed on interdisciplinary learning, problem-solving, and hands-on experiences.

The transformation of universities cannot be dictated solely by top management or external stakeholders. Faculty members must play a central role in this process. Universities should foster a culture of open debate and collaboration among faculty to develop a shared vision for the future.

The transformation of universities in Pakistan requires a collective effort. Policymakers, university leaders, faculty, students, and society at large must engage in a broader debate about the purpose and role of higher

education. This debate should not be confined to boardrooms or policy documents; it must permeate the academic community and the public sphere.

At the same time, action is needed. Universities must begin implementing reforms that align with their core mission of creating a thinking society. This requires courage, vision, and a willingness to challenge the status quo. It also requires adequate funding and a commitment to prioritising intellectual enrichment over physical expansion.

The current university model in Pakistan is unsustainable and ineffective. It fails to prepare students for the challenges of the modern world, stifles innovation, and drains resources without delivering meaningful outcomes.

To address these issues, Pakistan must reimagine its universities as centers of thought, creativity, and innovation. This requires a fundamental shift in priorities, from infrastructure and bureaucracy to faculty and intellectual pursuits.

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