

# When higher education goes low

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Pakistan has seen a considerable drive to develop its higher education system, with a notable concentration on creating universities around the country. Most recently, the National Assembly passed 24 bills to establish new universities, 16 of which were introduced by members in the same session.

While we might debate the motives behind this surge, it is critical to analyze the ramifications of such an intense concentration on university growth and whether it solves the broader difficulties of the nation's education system.

Pakistan's emphasis on higher education, particularly universities, stems from a number of factors. The first is to make higher education more accessible. The development of new institutions is considered a method to solve the issue of access while also meeting the growing demand for higher education.

Second, increasing university education is regarded as critical for building a pool of specialized experts. Third, the establishment of universities is viewed as a means of fostering research and innovation, supporting scientific breakthroughs, and so on to solve global concerns.

While the establishment of universities is unquestionably a significant step forward in the advancement of education, it is critical to recognize the potential implications of focusing solely on this aspect: First, directing considerable resources towards universities may distract attention and financing away from basic and secondary education, which provides a solid foundation for learning.

Neglecting early schooling might exacerbate the system's current gaps and injustices. By the age of 18, children in Pakistan can expect to have completed 9.4 years of pre-primary, primary and secondary school. However, when adjusted for learning quality, it is only 5.1 years: a learning gap of 4.3 years demonstrating the school system's poor quality.

The second concern concerning the quality vs quantity tradeoff is that the rapid expansion of the number of universities raises questions about the quality of education provided. Providing high quality education necessitates suitable facilities, qualified faculty, and a focus on research and development, all of which should be prioritized.

A Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) analysis on the current state of affairs in the education sector reveals that universities around the world are about professors involved in research. However, in Pakistan, universities are commonly regarded as simply brick-and-mortar structures

devoid of skilled teachers and unique ideas. The survey points to an astonishingly low number of professors in Pakistan's universities.

In Sindh, the average number of social sciences professors per university is 3.6, whereas in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, it is 0.33. In other fields, Sindh has an average of 18.37 professors per university, while Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) has a shockingly low average of 1.5. Professors in social sciences and other fields account for 0.54 per cent and 5.30 per cent of overall faculty size respectively.

In comparison to institutions in the US and the UK, Pakistan's universities lack a necessary number of academics. For example, Yale University has approximately 18.62 per cent of professors in social sciences and 33.85 per cent of professors in other disciplines, whereas Harvard and Stanford have approximately 45.75 per cent and 54.15 per cent of professors in all disciplines respectively.

Third, the university-centric approach may result in an excess of graduates in some professions while the demand for qualified workers in others remains unfulfilled. This mismatch between acquired skills and job-market demands could stymie economic progress.

Pakistan ranks 63rd out of 163 nations on the World Bank's University-Industry Linkages Index. Pakistan is much further behind India (26th) and Sri Lanka (53rd). As a result, graduate unemployment in Pakistan is highly concerning. Similarly, other surveys estimate that over 31 per cent of educated youth are unemployed, with females accounting for 51 per cent. However, when we break down the unemployment rate into sub-disciplines, the picture becomes even bleaker. Engineer unemployment has risen from 11 per cent to 23.5 percent in just two years, more than double.

A similar condition has been noticed among persons who have completed degrees in computer science and agriculture. Furthermore, graduates in medical sciences have the lowest unemployment rate when compared to graduates in other disciplines; nonetheless, the jobless rate in the medical discipline has climbed by 68 per cent in just two years.

Pakistan's education systems need a more complete and balanced strategy that tackles the entire spectrum of learning: First, prioritize quality over quantity. Instead of focusing on the number of universities, greater emphasis should be placed on guaranteeing the quality of education provided. Improving current institutions' capabilities, investing in faculty development, and encouraging research-based teaching can all help raise the overall standard of education.

Second, improving K12 education is critical in laying a solid foundation for children. Allocating resources to improve primary and secondary education will pay dividends in the long run, resulting in a more skilled and educated pool of students for higher education.

Finally, increasing technical and vocational education helps bridge the gap between formal education and the job market by providing individuals with practical skills that are in demand across industries.

Pakistan can empower its citizens, stimulate creativity and pave the road for a prosperous and progressive future by cultivating a diverse learning environment.

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