

# The decimation of higher education | The Express Tribune

*Abbas Moosvi February 23, 2023*

The higher education landscape in Pakistan is dominated by a pathological politics of patronage the writer is a research fellow at the pakistan institute of development economics he tweets abbasmoosvi

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Approximately 25 million people in Pakistan currently fall in the 18-23 age bracket, considered the 'university-going' period. Of this, a mere 2 million are enrolled in higher education institutes: a meagre 8%. This is one of the lowest in the world, suggesting that the sector is simply inaccessible to most. Amongst the youth that is somehow able to make it to university and successfully graduate, a whopping 1 in 3 are currently unemployed. What explains this crisis?

Student unions have been banned in Pakistan since 1984, leading to a systematic exclusion of the youth from decision-making processes within the university. Degrees that carry value are a by-product of high quality education, in turn the result of bottom-up pressure from the central stakeholders in the academy — students and alumni — who actually possess refined information about the kind of amendments/upgradations that are needed to their programmes, campus facilities, extra-curricular activities and more. In the absence of a democratic approach based on complex system dynamics that can ensure platforms/mechanisms that students can seamlessly tap into to signal preferences to authorities, learning outcomes are bound to remain dismal.

The higher education landscape in Pakistan is thus dominated by a pathological politics of patronage. Particularly in the public sector, a scramble for resources from opportunistic players seeking to line their pockets at the expense of the taxpayer is observed — and even appointments for Vice Chancellors are contingent upon the extent to which one is embedded in the right networks. This results in universities being run as personal fiefdoms rather than with the primary intent of delivering a high quality public good that can create positive ripple effects in society.

A primary consequence of this outdated, top-down, colonial style of governance within higher education is the quality of teaching — which has failed to keep up with the demands of the modern, technologically advanced global economy. Indeed, one of the frequent complaints employers tend to

have is that applicants lack both the technical and interpersonal skills to thrive in the job market. In order to address this, a tedious process of retraining them has to be undertaken for bringing them up to speed. Around the world, technical expertise is generally fostered via investment in faculty, while ‘soft skills’ are instilled through engagement in extra-curricular activities — both of which are largely trivialised in Pakistan.

On the other hand, the research arena has also been crowded out by international financial institutions and multilateral donor agencies, which strategically gobble up all budding academics — either by directly hiring them or by hiring their organisations as subcontracting firms — subverting their activities to imperial agendas. Knowledge production is thus reduced to a means for manufacturing consent for certain policy directions, regardless of how beneficial they may be to Pakistan’s actual socioeconomic and geostrategic interests.

The political economy of the higher education landscape has meant a persistent obsession with brick and mortar, whereby new universities are mindlessly inaugurated every few months, strict control over events/engagements, expanding ratios of administrative staff to faculty, and increasing levels of surveillance on students. An overarching securitisation of campuses is observed, with CCTV cameras installed in recreational/residential areas, barbed wires deployed along territorial boundaries, armed guards on constant patrol duty, certain kinds of voices mysteriously going missing, and an overall culture of fear and intimidation. It is almost as if these are no longer spaces for cultural/ideational/intellectual vibrancy, but re-education camps to produce passivity and obedience.

Higher education serves as a critical cornerstone of any civilised society, helping propel it forward by empowering its youth. India realised this fairly rapidly after the independence — and enjoys the fruits of its vast IIT network today, which fuels its massive IT-based exports to the global economy.

Pakistan has a long way to go in terms of catching up — something that will remain impossible without a radical departure from status quo.

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