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**Good news for education**

Honest and dynamic leadership is critical for the development of any organization or a country. It has been aptly stated that an “organization without an effective leadership is like a ship sailing in a deep sea without a captain”.

While PM Imran Khan would quite often give the example of countries such as Singapore or Malaysia and how committed leadership in these countries made their respective nations quite prosperous in a few decades, what Premier Khan and his team have achieved so far: let it be decided by the jury (the people) in due course of time.

These days there is hardly any good news about most public-sector organizations and their performance. Particularly, news from public-sector universities depicts a grim picture of the overall situation. Every now and then we hear that some of the oldest and largest state-run universities have no funds to provide pension to their retired employees. These high seats of learning, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, often request the government to give them bailout packages to enable them to provide timely salaries and pensions to its staff and faculty.

Very recently, the University of Peshawar, the oldest and largest state-run institute of higher education in the province, issued a notification informing its employees that the organization was unable to pay full salaries to them due to financial constraints. “It is notified for information of all concerned that due to financial constraints, the university is not able to disburse full salaries to its employees for the month of January 2021. Only basic pay plus personal pay will be disbursed for the same month,” stated the notification.

Unfortunately, the fate of Gomal University in DI Khan, the second largest and oldest institution of the province after University of Peshawar, is also not different concerning financial sustainability and increasing cases of harassment.

And it is not only these old and prestigious seats of learning, but also a number of new universities – particularly those established in the current millennium – have been making headlines on account of mismanagement, cases of harassment, corruption, nepotism and undue political interference.

Among the new universities in KP and elsewhere across the country, some of them are doing very well to provide quality education to students at their doorsteps. Some of the new universities have outperformed many of the oldest and largest universities in the country. For example, it is very heartening to share with readers that among the new universities, the University of Malakand has achieved a number of feats that many of the old and larger seats of learning in the country have not been able to accomplish – despite having relatively more resources and privileged locations.

The University of Malakand was the first public-sector university in the Malakand Division, established in 2001 through a charter issued by then governor Khyber Pakhtunkhwa late Iftikhar Hussain Shah. Credit goes to its first vice-chancellor Professor Dr Jahan Dar Shah who ensured meritocracy as the sole criterion in the appointment of faculty. Luckily, at that time universities were not considered as venues to provide employment opportunities to political cronies as is unfortunately the case these days in most universities and other public-sector organizations.

Today, this institute has made great strides in the field of education and research. Under the very dynamic leadership of the current vice-chancellor, Prof Dr Gul Zaman, the university has made significant progress in several areas. When I rejoined the university in 2018 upon the completion of my post-doctorate from Germany, it was indeed a different place than how I had left it in 2016.

For instance, in order to utilize the resources effectively, the current administration constructed 35 shops attached to the university. Similarly, 75 houses which were out of use (inherited in a very dilapidated condition from FDC), were renovated and handed over to employees. This is also now a permanent source of revenue for the university and it has facilitated faculty and staff to have residence on campus.

In his tenure, the current vice chancellor completed a number of projects. In a short span of three years, a seven-kilometer boundary wall, a girls’ hostel for 200 female students and a boys’ hostel of the same capacity have been built. In addition, a new staff hostel, academic block, examination center and various other facilities have been established. The vice chancellor has also taken tangible steps for the establishment of the women sub-campus. PC-I of the project with estimated cost of 1497.35 million has been approved by the HEC recently. Establishment of the women’s sub-campus of the University of Malakand was a long-felt need.

Professor Dr Gul Zaman is not only a brilliant researcher having obtained the Research Productivity Award three times from the Pakistan Council of Science & Technology (PCST) and a recipient of the HEC Best University Teacher’s Award in 2011, he also has the ability to lead from the front to encourage and promote quality research. To this end, for establishing lasting academic and institutional linkages, the vice-chancellor has signed numerous MoUs and agreements with national and international organizations aimed at promoting mutual collaboration in education and research.

While located in a somewhat far-off area and less privileged locality, University of Malakand has excelled in national and international ranking, which is evidence that hard work, commitment and dedication certainly bring dividends. The university secured second position in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 12th in Pakistan and 483rd in the world, as the World’s Most Sustainable University as per the 2020 UI Green Metric World University Rankings.

Similarly, according to QS University Ranking, it was first in KP, 17th in Pakistan and 351-400th in Asia. In addition, as per the Times Higher Education Impact Ranking 2020 (UK), the University of Malakand got first position in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, fifth position in Pakistan (General Category Universities), ninth position in Pakistan (Specialized plus General Category universities) as well as the 401-600 position in the World.

During my regular interactions with colleagues from other universities across the country, they say when they hear of ‘Malakand’, it brings to mind the image of Talibanization, militancy and backwardness. There is no doubt that the wave of Talibanization and the subsequent militancy crisis had dealt a severe blow to the overall law and order situation of the area and it particularly terribly affected the education sector.

While the crisis of militancy affected every segment of society and every sector of the economy, educational institutions were the primary targets of those dark and evil forces. In a post-conflict survey conducted by the government with the support of aid agencies, it was found that the Taliban had destroyed or damaged a total of 664 in the five districts of the Malakand Division. While normalcy has been restored long ago in the region, with the completion of Swat Expressway, the distance between Malakand and downtown areas has considerably reduced. Even before the completion of the Swat Expressway, over 30 percent of the students studying in the University of Malakand were from other districts.

Now that almost every district has its own university, it is really a proud moment for those associated with this institute that it is the number one choice and priority of students to get admission here.

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