**In support of a tiered university system**

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The seeds of California’s public university system – as it is today – were sowed in 1960, with the California Master Plan. The plan aimed to combine exceptional quality and broad access to post-secondary education.

Like Pakistan today, prior to that its colleges and universities were operating in isolation and in competition with each other. The plan introduced a framework that created a three-tier system in which institutions at different tier-levels were given different responsibilities.

Initially at least, according to the plan, the top one-eighth of high school graduates would be guaranteed a place at a campus of the University of California (UC) system. The top one-third would be able to enter the California State University (CalState) system. Community colleges would serve all other students.

Only schools in the UC system were given the mission to conduct research and run master’s and doctoral programmes. Schools in the CalState system could offer master’s programmes but would award doctorates jointly with the UC. Community college graduates enrolled in associate bachelor’s programmes would have the opportunity to transfer to a CalState or UC school to continue their journey towards a four-year bachelor’s programme if they qualified.

As a result, for the last few decades, the State of California has been home to arguably one of if not the best public university system not just in the US but the world. California’s economy, the world’s fifth largest and home to Silicon Valley, SIlicon Beach and San Diego tech scenes and many of the world’s best universities, is a testament to its Master Plan’s success.

Meanwhile, here at home in a major city, University ‘A’ has managed to recruit (and hold on) to faculty members trained at some of the world’s best universities. Anytime there is a call for proposals, agencies issuing the call have to find creative ways to maintain a facade of fairness, lest University A and others like it vacuum them all up. Its graduates are so sought after that many employers have written or unwritten rules to only hire from University A and a few others like it. Over the years, its graduates have developed an alumni network that spans the globe, which means that in anywhere between zero and five years after graduation they can find themselves working anywhere in the world, if they so choose. Their reputations have allowed them to build pipelines to grad schools of some of the better universities in the world, because its faculty’s names appear in research papers published in respected conferences and journals of their areas.

In another corner of the country, University ‘Z’ is dealing with its own challenges. It is struggling to find enough qualified faculty members that are willing to relocate to a rural area of the country. It is trying to get its master’s and PhD programmes off the ground but is challenged by the small trickle of graduate students. Faculty members can put graduate students to work, to publish, and to produce research papers which are the academic currency that enables faculty to get promoted. Both University A and University Z have their own, albeit different, challenges.

As of a few years ago, both had been given the same targets, were asked to deliver on the same KPIs and were evaluated by the same yardstick. Does that make sense?

In 2017, the HEC developed an aspirational, forward-looking plan called HEC Vision 2025. Among its many elements was the introduction of a classification framework for post-secondary institutes into three tiers, namely Tier-I, Tier-II and Tier-III.

Tier-I institutes, also called research universities, are the highest seat of learning and are to attract the country’s best and brightest faculty and students. They have been given a mission that resembles that of UCs under the California Master Plan – “to be global centers of transdisciplinary scholarship and collaborative discovery of basic and applied knowledge to develop solutions to real life challenges.” In this way, Tier-I universities serve as centers to build critical masses of excellence.

Tier-II universities address the access question of higher education, by providing “qualified masses in diverse disciplines and professions to prepare creative, competent and credentialed specialists to meet the multiple service needs of society”.

Tier-III comprises affiliate colleges connected to Tier-I or Tier-II universities and offer two-year post-secondary programs, now called associate bachelor’s programmes.

The original plan was that these Tier-I universities were supposed to number around 30, about 15 percent of the 200 universities across Pakistan. Obviously, given the differences between missions of institutes belonging to different tiers, those in Tier-I can expect to receive more resources (per student) than those in Tier-II and Tier-III.

It is also important to understand that this tiered framework is not a ranking, it is a classification based on differences of purpose. Being in Tier-I does not make a university inherently ‘better’ than all universities in Tier-II and Tier-III – it just means it is pursuing different goals.

When it came time to classify institutes, the HEC took a liberal approach and let university leaders decide for themselves which tier they would like their respective institute to fit into. The HEC also developed a basic, clerical, qualifying criteria for tier membership, which proved to be so lenient that most institutes could justify belonging to Tier-I. This approach of letting each institute decide for itself where it fit in could only work if each was willing to make an honest and realistic self-assessment.

In effect, it took little more than making a declaration to belong in one tier or another. Whether it was a misunderstanding of the tier classification as a meta-ranking or a fear of seeing budgets curtailed, most universities rushed to declare themselves Tier-I universities.

In the absence of more concrete prerequisites, such as input / resource allocation and output / deliverable commitments (whose definition is a challenge in itself), becoming a Tier-I institution takes little more than wishing so.

Grouping universities by tiers will put an end to forcing all colleges and universities to fit into the mould of research universities. Not every student that goes to college wants to earn a PhD (or an MA / MS even) and a career in research. We tried that, and the result has been PhD-mill programmes across the country. Forcing universities to do research, spending on labs, equipment and other resources can lead to financial waste and even mismanagement. It means using student focused metrics, rather than research related productivity metrics, for (faculty at) colleges and universities. Last week I had a detailed op-ed in these pages (‘Transparency that matters’, The News, September 19) that talks extensively about what those metrics should be.

When universities with necessary talent, both among faculty and students, capable of conducting research are tasked with the generation of knowledge, resource allocation can be targeted where it will do the most good, instead of thinly sprinkling them across all universities to ensure a measure of ‘fairness’. Tasking only the subset of universities that have the necessary critical mass of research talent means the long-standing issue of promotion criteria can be resolved, by creating a promotion criterion for Tier-I institutions doing teaching and research different from Tier-II and Tier-III institutions that are focused solely on teaching.

In the long run, this arrangement will allow adding new institutions at whatever tier level the economy demands. HEC Vision 2025 had the right idea by creating a tiered framework for higher education institutions, but it needs refinement for effective implementation. Measures taken to resolve faculty issues, quality issues, financial management issues address symptoms of this deeper problem but have limited effect on longstanding problems