**Strategic education vision needed**

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When even the most developed nations have proved not immune to the socio-economic and political fallout wrought by Covid-19 — what can we say about Third World countries? For here, most decision-making remains largely politics-oriented as opposed to focusing on public facilitation and basic rights. Sadly, Pakistan is no exception. The economy has been left in a shambles and other important sectors remain severely impacted. All because the pandemic diverted all resources to healthcare and healthcare alone. Never mind that education continues to be one of the most neglected areas in the country.

The budget (FY 2019-2020) saw just 2.3 percent of GDP allocated to education; making it the lowest in the region. Last year, UNICEF estimated that some 22.8 million children between the age of 5-16 years were out of school here in Pakistan; or 44 percent of the population. The only country doing worse is Nigeria. Certainly, the pandemic must have exacerbated the situation. Nearly 10.7 million boys and 8.6 million girls are enrolled at the primary level and this drops to 3.6 million boys and 2.8 million girls at the lower secondary level. Covid has put more children on the streets as families suffer from a dire lack of financial support.

Higher education has also suffered. As per data available on the Higher Education Committee’s (HEC) website: the annual number of graduates totals 228,617. This underscores the enormous gap between the demand for degrees and those earned. Elsewhere, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) protests have been taking place against university reforms, including salary cuts. Of course, the mismanagement of resources at public universities is an open secret whether in terms of human or material resources, or else when it comes to utilities. At such a sensitive juncture where the state is looking forward to returning students to classrooms — the protests are alarming. Ultimately, it will be the students who suffer the most as they grapple with virtual versus physical exams, or even the potential cancellation of all exams.

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The closure of educational institutions proved disastrous as learning processes were disrupted. Indeed, we already know that knowledge retention and critical thinking is severely impaired if adequate teaching doesn’t continue. Online learning, even for a country with such a vast number of children already out of school, is difficult. Private educational institutions have done better and the main parental concern focusing on the charging of tuition fees as if during non-pandemic days. A colleague shared that he had to pay a semester fee of Rs 55,000 to a public university where occasional or else no classes were held before being topped off with an online exam. Unfortunately, no contingency plan or education reforms were taken into consideration during the past year-and-a-half. Currently, there is a standoff between students, who want exams to be cancelled, and an Education ministry that insists that this cannot happen at any cost.

A nation and generation trained in imposed discipline rather than self-discipline is suddenly expected to vigilant during online classes. Whereas childhood has, from time immemorial, been about mice dancing and playing whenever the cat is away. Thus, virtual teachers can hardly ascertain just how much students are absorbing. A holistic approach is therefore required across-the-board. For the education crisis must be seen as being on a par with the healthcare emergency. Disrupted internet access in far-flung areas must be tackled. Assessment and exam methodologies need to be redefined, especially at public sector universities where traditional teaching and learning have been pushed to the wayside.

Online classes require innovation and maximum resources Let’s think beyond celebrations in the face of possible promotion without exams or cancellation of exams. It’s high time that additional resource allocations are directed towards education. After all, we don’t know how long this pandemic will last or if, God forbid, something even worse replaces Covid. The time for proper forward planning is now. Pakistan’s education sector needs strategic vision.

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