**University reforms in Pakistan**

[Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/syed-hussain-shaheed-soherwordi/)

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Everyone talks about change in education system but no one is ready to lead from the front. Higher education is the backbone of any country. More and more funds are directed towards higher education institutions for quality teaching and pragmatic research. In fact this becomes the identity of a country’s scientific and progressive culture. In case of Pakistan, situation is just otherwise. State run universities are barred of adequate funding. Teachers are lesser than needed and research support is almost non-existent. This has affected quality of PhD scholars in Pakistan who are ready to teach and research with their extremely limited academic skills.

In order to ‘break the wheel’, making momentous changes in the education system, particularly the university system, is the need of the time. Plagued by afflictions of plagiarism, nepotism, ethnic strife, mismanagement, and financial corruption, Pakistani universities are a breeding ground for these ailments. They are not only afflicted by these issues but are also perpetuating this condition by not treating it and producing generations of teachers and students with the same plight. To free the Pakistani education system of the constraints that hold it back from development, it is necessary to cut off the weeds by the roots. Although, steps have been taken to curtail corruption, they are not effective due to their superficial nature. The roots of the problem(s) lay in ‘centralization’. There are limitations placed on the liberty of policymaking by the university administration itself, for the university. These limitations are a result of the overindulgence of the Higher Education Commission (HEC). The HEC has had a drive to increase university rankings by enhancing research output numerically. This invites a predicament of compromise on quality research published by Pakistani universities. Decentralization of power, therefore, is indispensable for enhancing research output both qualitatively as well as qualitatively. The goals of research have also been compromised as the HEC has followed a linear pathway from research to commercialization, innovation and economic development. In this context they have focused more on what works for a specific ecosystem and overlooked the ‘why’ behind what works. Each Pakistani university, possessing exposure to on-ground realities is well equipped to cater to the demands of research in its own ecosystem. Therefore, professors could be the one drafting the policies instead of a board of HEC members making decisions based on analytical and quantitative tools of analysis rather than quality and on ground realities. The aforementioned systemic reform is proposed for redrafting the blueprints of academia in Pakistani universities in the future. However, there is a need to escape the trap of mediocrity that the current system of education has fallen into. This can be accomplished by introducing complementary training programs in universities across the country. For short term recovery and to sustain the economic futures of graduates, universities must complement degrees with skills-based short courses. These courses must employ state-of-the-art software and teaching methods in close coordination with local and multinational bodies for optimal results.

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On stratification basis, public versus private universities’ funding provide a vacuum that can be filled with another reform. That stratification harbors the reality that public sector universities are not run by students’ fees. Conversely, private sector universities are run by students’ fees. It is, in fact, the government funding that sustains public universities, and that too, a major chunk of it. This renders public universities to adapt the image and perform the functions of, the ‘Centers of Excellence’ for research work as well as teaching standards. This ideal fate of public sector universities is tarnished by fund cuts. These fund cuts are directly proportional to teaching quality viz. the lower the funds, the poorer the teaching quality. Finance is a key motivator for an employee. Teachers in public sector universities remain demotivated. Those teachers then opt for private sector universities solely for surety of finance, leaving a dent in teaching quality that is very difficult to reverse.

In the West (European and American models), state universities are rendered the ‘Centers of Excellence’ in terms of efficacy of research. Extensive and successful research had been carried out on development of vaccines for polio, chicken pox etc. Dolly the sheep, the first mammal cloned from an adult somatic cell, using the process of nuclear transfer in Edinburgh University, Scotland. The development of a vaccine for COVID-19 is underway in those ‘centers’. The situation in Pakistan in comparison, is grim. One of the top Universities of Pakistan was so proud of producing sanitizer which could have been produced by any child watching YouTube lesson in this regard (what a joke). Research in Pakistani universities is assigned a miniscule budget that disincentivizes the whole process. Where research is financed by governments of those countries, in Pakistan it is in the hands of private organizations and on individuals themselves.

To build a standard and to maintain it, it is imperative to maintain the factors that reinforce said standard. In universities, those factors are held to be teachers. In order to maintain the level of teaching, maintaining a permanent faculty is indispensable. One major drawback of Pakistani public universities is the vacancy of budget-allocated seats (against the posts; lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor and professor). This, coupled with the influx of BS and evening shifts’ students in hundreds per department, has created a disadvantageous proportion. Only a handful of teachers are employed and accounted for the handling, grooming and maintaining of hundreds of students. This disequilibrium results in disincentivized teachers as well as demotivated students. Therefore, it is pertinent to the functioning of the university as a “seat of knowledge” to fill the vacancies and avoid ad hoc-ism. The ad hoc/visiting staff employed, take their work for granted due to lack of ownership and belonging. Permanent faculty is in a stronger position to enjoy both powers. Ad hoc-ism is therefore, detrimental to these institutions.

For the universities to be able to propose reform and to implement it, they need to be independent in their decision-making. Public sector universities in Pakistan have assumed the role of semi-autonomous/autonomous institutions. There are two components of autonomy that underlie pushing forth of these reforms: administrative autonomy and financial autonomy. Both intrinsically entwined, provide the base for reforms, growth and development of educational institutions. Administrative autonomy is further comprised of organizational, policy, academic, staffing and interventional autonomies. Hitherto, public sector universities in Pakistan are pressurized to mold into the administrative and financial outline chalked out for them by the HEC, the provincial and the federal governments. Along with those pressures, there are numerous pressure groups operating within the universities that act as constraints. Despite the oppressive forces, the universities must have the semi-autonomous status preserved and the forces against, deterred.

*(Author is the Chairman of the Department of International Relations at the University of Peshawar. He may be reached at Shaheed@uop.edu.pk)*