**Who will pay?**

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ARTICLE 25-A says that all fiveto 16-year-olds should have access to free education. This essentially means every child in Pakistan should get 10 years of education irrespective of whether they want it or not, and whether they can af ford it or not.

Article 25-A is in the basic rights section of our Constitution.

Article 25-A was introduced as part of the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010. Since then, successive governments have simply paid it lip service, saying they will implement it in letter and spirit. An estimated 20 million-odd children of schoolgoing age still stay out of schools and away from education.

If we want every child in school, we need to expand our education system substantially and also significantly improve the quality of education being provided. One reason that children drop out is the poor quality of education they receive: many children and their parents do not see the point of beingin schoolif the child learns little or nothing by being there.

But expansion and improvement in quality costs money. Providing high-quality education requires a lot of human and financial resources. Given income distribution in Pakistan, the majority of children come from households that cannot pay for quality education. This is just a fact. The question for society, then, is: do we want to give quality education to all children or not? If the answer is in the affirmative, and if most parents cannot afford a quality education for their children, society has to find a way to pay for it.

Many commentators argue that there is a lot of corruption and wastage in the resources we spend on education. Ergo, if you spend more, more will be wasted. What, then, is the point of arguing for more resources for education? The point about increasing efficiency in current expenditures is well taken. But this point is not specific to education. Do we do a better job in health expenditure or in building roads? Even allowingfor the efficiency argument, the larger point remains: society has to decide (a) if they want to educate every child or not, and (b) if they do, who is going to pay for that education as the majority of parents cannot af ford to pay for decent quality education with their incomes.

When we get to university level, things get a lot more complicated. Currently, less than seven per cent of students who enrol in Grade One end up pursuing undergraduate level studies. There is significant pressure from various sources on the higher education sector to expand access. Students and parents want more space as educational attainment is rightly seen as a means of socioeconomic mobility.

The government wants to increase access, as it is feels our worl(force isn`t educated and trained well enough. Entrepreneurs see demand for higher education as a way of increasing supply in an economically viable manner.

But higher education is not, as of now, a matter of right. Article 25-A does not cover higher education.

But the demand a fair one from young people and students has been for almost universal access and at affordable prices. How do we square the circle on this? Per student, secondary-level education is more expensive to provide than primary-level education.

Higher grades require more subject-specific instruction by subject-specific teachers, as well as laboratories and libraries. In primary school, the same teacher might be able to teach almost all subjects of a particular grade. But at matriculation or Grade 11 level, it is very hard to see language teachers teaching mathematics, physics, chemistry and vice versa. So, the cost of provision for education does go up quite steeply as we move towards higher grades. In addition, if quality of education must also be ensured, the cost escalation is going to be even greater.

University-level education and quality education are going to be quite expensive. Who pays for thiseducation? It is not declared as a `right`. How does society want to treat university education then? We have already said that it is just a fact that the majority of children in Pakistan cannot even afford primaryand secondary-level education. To expect them to pay for university education, at cost, is too much to expect.

But unlike school education, university education is not a right. And it is not considered to be a right in most countries. So, do we restrict access to university education to only those who can afford to pay? But every society, including ours, has goals for equity, equality, merit and socioeconomic mobility. How do we ensure these goals are met if we do not give access to university education to a wider spectrum of students, and how do we do that without breaking the connection between access and ability to pay? These questions have to be addressed. The higher education sector was hurting even before the Covid-19 pandemic. It is hurting a lot more now.

There are universities,especiallyin the publicsector, that do not have resources to even make their salary and pension payments anymore. On the other hand, students` demands for lower fees and broader access also remain, while state funding for higher education is, at best, static. If we do not resolve the issue, everyone will suffer the consequences through deteriorating quality.

The provision of education is expensive. Though we are not doing it, we do have a promise, through Article 25-A, that we will provide education to all children of schoolgoing age. For higher education, it is not even clear what the larger objectives are and what the societal consensus is on who will pay for it and how. This is leading to the ruin of higher education. It is time to have a resolution on this issue. The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.