

Is Higher Education in Pakistan Moving in the *Right* Direction?

Understanding the Deteriorating Academic Standards, and the Role of Universities in Potential Youth Radicalization

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International Standing of Pakistani Universities

The recently released Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Rankings 2018 includes six universities from Pakistan in the Top 1000 list. However, according to the Times Higher Education (THE) Rankings 2018, the number of Pakistani universities featured has declined. While last year seven universities made it to the list of Top 1000 universities, this year the number fell to four. With Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad being ranked in the 401-500 list, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology and the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) made it to the 601-800 group. Moreover, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad ranked in the 801-1000 group.

However, the remaining three universities from last year's ranking failed to retain their spot in the Top 1000 list. These include Bahauddin Zakariya University (Multan), University of Karachi, and University of Lahore. Out of these three universities, two are situated in the province of Punjab. This fall in the rankings is concerning and more so because neighboring countries are much ahead with 30 institutions of India and 60 institutions of China featuring in the Top 1000 list. This indicates that the competitiveness level amongst the universities is higher in these countries, which in turn ensures that the educational standards are maintained. Unfortunately for Pakistan, this has not been possible which is apparent from

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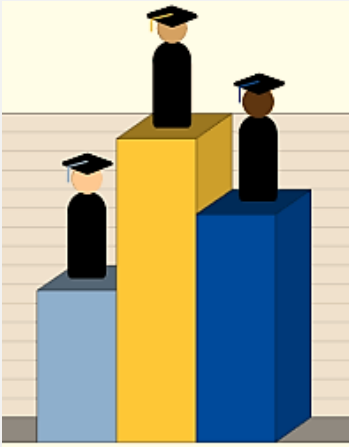
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Picture Source: <https://www.library.illinois.edu>

the fact that only four universities made it to the Top 1000 list. Given these rankings, it is now important that factors be identified and analyzed.

It is understood that the rankings take into account various performance indicators. Some of which are: teaching, research, interaction with business, and international outlook. With Pakistani universities being evaluated against these criteria, it is then safe to assume that there is much to be desired in terms of

the level of research being conducted, its relevance, global competitiveness, skill levels and the career prospects of the newly graduated students.

It is important to remember that rankings cannot (and should not) be used as an independent tool for evaluation of universities. Nonetheless, these rankings are indicative of the performance of universities in certain aspects and hence can be used to identify areas for improvement.

This year, only four universities from Pakistan have made it to the Top 1000 list of The Times Higher Education (THE) Rankings

THE Rankings 2018

→ 401-500

Quaid-i-Azam University
Islamabad

→ 601-800

COMSATS Institute of
Information Technology
Punjab

National University of Sciences
and Technology
Islamabad

→ 801-1000

University of Agriculture,
Faisalabad
Punjab

Source: THE website

Inside the Higher Educational Institutes: What is going on?

Presently, as per the Higher Education Commission (HEC), around 186 universities/degree awarding institutions are operating in the country¹. With majority being public institutions, the rankings place a huge question mark on the quality of these educational institutes. Huge sprawling campuses, relatively lower tuition fees, greater accessibility to the brightest students, and generous financial aid/grants from the governments are characteristics of mass public universities. If indeed these institutions are filled with talented students and adequate resources, why is it that these universities have still failed to compete with other international universities?

❖ HEC Policies, PhDs and the On-going Research

Over the years, HEC has consistently been offering international scholarships for PhD. Through this, it aims to provide the country with the necessary human capital that will in turn educate the youth. While the country does require the services of these intellectuals, in reality the foreign returned PhDs have so far been unable to make any drastic changes in the education system of Pakistan. One of the possible reasons for this is that during their time abroad, the PhD candidates get accustomed to the ways and research environment there. However, when they return and join a public (or private) university as an Assistant Professor, it



Picture Source: <http://seriousstartups.com>

becomes difficult for them to kick start the research activities primarily because these universities are unable to provide a similar environment. Moreover, with limited PhD faculty, most of the teaching workload falls on these new hires, which shifts their focus from research. Along with other administrative duties, the primary task of the professor, i.e. to conduct research, is therefore not carried out properly.

Nonetheless those who are *supposedly* active in the research arena are not exactly serving the educational institute either. While they may indeed be doing research, how innovative are their endeavors? Has there been a surge in patents (especially in the field of science and technology)? For instance, according to the US Trade Patent Trademark Office (USTPO), the number of

international patents of Pakistani origin were 16 in the year 2015. Compared to India's 3,415 and China's 9,004 in the same year, clearly Pakistan is way behind². Apart from this, it needs to be noted as to how many articles are being published in top international journals by the faculty? What are the citation statistics? How many research and travel grants have been won by the faculty of these universities? All these factors play a key role in the universities' rankings and with Pakistan falling short on most accounts, its' place in the current rankings should not come as a surprise.

While it is true that the quality of research still needs improvement, the researchers cannot be blamed entirely. This is because universities are also responsible for providing their faculty and researchers with adequate resources. These include



Picture Credit: Microsoft Word

Factors Causing a Decline in Academic Standards

- Most universities have been unable to provide a learning and research environment to the students and the PhD faculty
- Foreign returned PhDs have a hard time adjusting to the academic setting of local universities
- HEC's policies with regards to research, promotion and incentives have been ineffective
- Academia is more focused on quantity than quality due to these policies
- Publishing of paper has indeed increased
- However, the quality and relevance of the published material is doubtful
- Lack of innovative research being conducted
- No significant increase in patents, nor any breakthrough in the field of sciences

Maintaining Balance between Research and Teaching

- Universities need to provide adequate resources to its researchers (these include providing research assistants and/or teaching assistants) which will eventually result in quality research
- The policies of HEC with regards to incentive system, promotion and research have had conflicting implications
- More needs to be done by relevant authorities to ensure that the teaching and research aspects of a university simultaneously flourish

providing them grants to initiate their research projects, allowing them to hire research assistants/associates and (or) teaching assistants etc. Some private sector universities are facilitating their staff by giving generous start-up funds to newly hired PhD faculty, hiring teaching assistants to lessen the teaching workload. But more universities need to follow suit. As these factors also substantially impact the level and type of research being conducted in Pakistani universities.

The policies of HEC with regards to incentive system, promotion and research have had conflicting implications. For instance, with promotion linked to the number of research papers produced, on one hand this has resulted in increased research while at the same time, this has also caused the quality of research to be adversely affected³. As quantity is being given precedence over quality, researchers are busy writing multiple papers and publishing it in local (and/or low ranked international) journals. Most of these papers are based on a similar theme and with a slight manipulation in the data, methodology and replication, the papers are easy to publish. Thus one can easily imagine the quality of research being produced in the country. Despite these conditions, there are a few academicians who are working on unique and practical research ideas. They are also able to win hefty funding from national and international agencies, such as Department for International Development (DFID), United Nations (UN), etc. However, these efforts are minute in the overall scheme of things. It is important to note here that this culture is more prevalent in the private universities. But since majority universities in the country are part of the public sector, quality research is not really evident.

❖ Quality of Learning and Examination Standards

The main purpose of an educational institute is to impart knowledge. The rankings imply that the standards of teaching are also not at par with the higher education institutes worldwide. That is, the curriculum and way of teaching is not equipping the students with the skills necessary to compete both academically and professionally. As per HEC, more than 3, 000 PhDs (that availed HEC's overseas scholarship) are currently serving the country in different capacities. And it aims to furnish around 40,000 more by the year 2025 (in line with HEC vision 2025). On the surface, this news is heartening and promises to cater to the needs of higher education. However, the rankings state otherwise. If there is indeed more expert teaching staff (those having completed MS/M.Phil or PhD) available now than, say a decade ago, then why are the number of Pakistani universities featured in the rankings so few? One explanation for this is linked to the above-mentioned HEC policies. Since number of research papers is the criteria for career growth, teachers are not putting in much efforts to offer interesting classes to their students. That is, as there is no additional incentive to be a *good teacher*, the faculty would rather spend their time doing research. This is especially true for those

private and public sector universities where there is no concept of teacher/course evaluation at the end of academic session. With students giving feedback on the course effectiveness and the instructor (teacher) itself, the university will be able to correctly assess the quality of education being offered.

Additionally, the syllabus and examination system in majority universities has been the same over the years, with little or no change. Lecture based classes, rote learning and straightforward exams are still part of the education system. With increasing advances in various subjects, modern teaching methods need to be adopted. That is, focus on interactive classroom sessions, use digital platforms to disseminate knowledge and make education accessible.

❖ Universities and the Administration Woes

Apart from these factors, there are administrative issues that are not allowing the universities to function efficiently. For instance, as of September 2017, a number of public sector universities in Punjab are still without permanent vice chancellors (VCs). Temporary administration (such as acting VC/additional charge) means that long-term policies with regards to academic direction and streamlining of the administrative processes cannot be formulated. With issues in implementation, it can then be understood that universities (especially those in Punjab), will never be able to function properly unless and until there is someone to lead it. This issue can be partly attributed to the 18th Amendment (2010) and the subsequent devolution process. With provinces having the authority to make its policies, the Punjab Higher Education Commission (PHEC) was established in 2015. Albeit relatively new, the PHEC has taken initiatives which include offering international travel grants, scholarships etc. However, there is a slight discord between PHEC and the HEC which has created confusion with respect to the distribution of the functional roles and authority amongst the two institutions. Dispelling this confusion is imperative to improving the overall standards of the universities.



Academic and Administrative Issues in Universities

- Outdated curriculum taught
- Rote based learning and examination system
- Teaching methods have not evolved
- Most classes are lecture based instead of interactive and participatory
- Too much interference in running of universities (especially those in the public sector)
- Roles of HEC and PHEC need to be clearly defined so that universities can operate smoothly

Are Universities Providing an Open and Socially Secure Environment?

Over the years, there has been increased criticism regarding the on-campus environment provided by most of the universities.

❖ Academic Stress, Peer Pressure and Freedom of Speech

More specifically, extreme stress, lack of counselling, huge distance between teachers and students, restricted academic freedom are all contributing to the standards of these universities. It then comes as no surprise that given there is little or no room for debate on various socio-economic issues, the environment of the universities is stifling. Is this the case for majority of the universities in Pakistan,



Picture Source: Google Images

Higher Education and Economic Opportunities

For most, the ultimate aim of acquiring higher education is to attain a respectable livelihood and improve their living standards. Given the turbulent economy, and the law and order situation of Pakistan, employment opportunities have been drastically reduced.

With unfavorable job market, the newly graduates are unable to find appropriate jobs. Having invested both time and money in attaining a degree, lack of opportunities are forcing the youth to direct their disappointment and anger towards the authorities and policymakers.

Perhaps one can then safely state that the current economic affairs of the country are also playing a significant role in radicalizing the youth.

and in particular Punjab? There have been instances whereby students have resorted to substance use due to academic and peer pressure.

❖ Lack of Tolerance and Respect for Differing Viewpoints

In other cases, student groups have been embroiled in clashes over religious, ethnic, and political beliefs.

For example, recently a public university in Punjab came under the spotlight when activists disrupted an on-going activity on the university premises, injuring a handful of students in the process. Who gave these individuals the liberty to impose their ideologies? Clearly, the universities are failing to curb such misdemeanors.

An alternative consequence of this is the extremely negative effect such environments are having on the current as well as the graduating students. A recent example of this is the attack on a political leader in Sindh, by an ex-student of a renowned public university of the province. The fact that an educated individual would resort to such an extremist activity is concerning. Are the universities not vigilant enough?

❖ Intrinsic Socio-Economic Factors Influencing Students' Actions

Apart from the shortcomings of the universities (with respect to the quality of education, environment, preparing for a successful career etc.), there are obviously other factors that influence the students' actions. These include the nature of their household, up-bringing, financial condition, the kind of company that they keep themselves in etc. All of these play a huge role in shaping up the personality of the student, and most importantly in developing the mindset.

With set ideas on religion, morality, justice, these individuals become less tolerant towards differing opinions and hence are propelled into taking extreme positions and measures in such sensitive matters. But does this mean that universities must not be blamed? Of course not. Universities need to create such an environment on their campuses wherein tolerance is promoted.

As students come from various socio-economic backgrounds, the university should be a place where everyone is treated equal and on merit. However this is not always the case. How many times has one heard that a certain student was able to get admission into a university using his family influence even though he was not eligible? Hence possibly taking away an opportunity from another deserving student. These instances are still prevalent in the society and have long-lasting implications, with the students' feeling deprived and demoralized.



❖ Faculty and on-campus Mentors: Do they influence the environment?

In fact, this is just not limited to the students, faculty members are also victims of the unjust university policies. As explained earlier, when quantity (and not quality) is rewarded, a feeling of resentment is bound to set in. Hard-working teachers are being overlooked in matters of promotion, research grants etc., possibly due to internal politics or plain favoritism. Such blatant misuse of authority is likely to give a negative signal and create divisions within the institution. With Teachers pitted against one another, students are almost always affected. Thus, influencing the overall environment of the campus.

Apart from this, it has been observed that some of the faculty members are usually more politically and/or religiously inclined. Since they are in direct contact with the young impressionable minds, they intentionally or unintentionally influence the youth.

Additionally, there is other staff working on-campus in different capacities. For example, many universities have counsellors available that help students in balancing work and life. These mentors play a huge role in influencing the minds of these young individuals. Thus making it crucial that counsellors do not have any political or religious affiliation or hard stance on sensitive issues.

❖ Revisiting Universities' Role in Youth Development

This section intended to understand the role of universities in potentially radicalizing the youth. It is important to note that radicalization here does not necessarily mean religious extremism. Instead, this word implies as to how the campus environment and university policies (activities) can deliberately or unknowingly influence the behavior (action) of the students. Which in turn *may* result in extreme actions, be it due to social, economic, religious or political factor. As various issues, regarding on-campus environment, have been discussed above. Hence, it is becoming increasingly important for universities to take notice and review their academic and administrative policies so that at least these esteemed institutions do not become breeding grounds for extremism.

Key points for Policymaking

- Universities have not been able to inculcate tolerance and acceptance in its community
- For this purpose, it is important that universities arrange seminars and encourage debate both inside and outside classrooms
- Do not allow outright display of political activities and support on campus
- Ensure that the policies are merit-based
- Revisit the curriculum and teaching approach adopted
- Make it less rigid and more interactive and participatory

Key take-outs for Punjab

- Punjab needs to be proactive
- Make universities more diverse by introducing new programs and promoting subjects such as liberal arts (such as anthropology), physical education etc.
- Direct universities to focus on the personal development of students as well so that universities do not become mere tuition centers



Punjab Economic Research Institute (PERI), Planning and Development Department, Government of the Punjab

About PERI

The Punjab Economic Research Institute is a statutory body attached with Planning and Development Board, Government of the Punjab, with a mandate to carry out socio-economic research on issues of provincial and national importance and to support planning and development work of Punjab Government. It is the oldest economic research institution in the country. The Institute was reorganized by the Punjab Government in 1975 in order to reactivate the Board of Economic Inquiry which had an unbroken record of economic research going back to 1919. The Institute became a statutory body in November 1980.

Vision

A dynamic and vibrant research institute that provides analytical inputs for the formulation of forward looking provincial development strategies, and also undertakes high quality, evidence based research to broadly improve public policy making in the province.

Mission

To be Punjab's leading provider of socio-economic insight on evidence based research by adopting proactive and new ideas orientation to assist in policy formulation.

Our Strategic Focus

Research and Consultancy: Present neutral, independent and objective analyses and solutions to major policy issues; and undertake research projects and consultancy work.

Think Tank: Contribute to debate on public policy issues and undertake a strong advocacy role on issues of vital significance; and through intense study and interaction, provide strategic analysis and policy prescriptions of the concepts and doctrines in selected areas of public policy.

Education and Learning: Formulate and conduct education and training courses in the field of public policy and leadership; and enhance capacity and competency for public policy development and implementation.

Knowledge Management: Collate, generate, store, exchange and share knowledge, publications, knowledge products, best practices etc.; Facilitate knowledge transfer between research institutes and relevant stakeholders; Produce publications, journals, and analytical notes on public policy.

Conclusion

The main aim of this brief is to explore the possible factors that are integral to the success of a university. More specifically, higher educational institutes play an important role in preparing the youth to become a part of the human capital. Given this responsibility, these institutes must be a place where there is learning in various fields, creative thinking is encouraged, and there are ample opportunities for professional and personal development.

Keeping this in mind, it has been observed that most Pakistani universities are struggling to provide such an environment to its students which is indirectly causing unfavorable socio-economic impact. That is, the energy of youth is not being properly channelized (due to non-challenging curriculum, uninspiring teaching methods, disappointment on the economic situation, and law and order situation of the country) through productive activities. These include engaging them in sports, debates, academic competitions etc. Moreover, the campuses need to be free of political and religious divides. Instead, a culture of tolerance and cooperation needs to be cultivated on campus. Undertaking these actions will not only help in improving the overall environment of the universities but also uplift the academic standards. Consequently, allowing Pakistani universities to compete globally and offer a world-class learning experience to its students.

Endnotes

1. Source (HEC Website): <http://www.hec.gov.pk/english/universities/pages/recognised.aspx>
2. Source (USTPO Website): https://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/ac/ido/oeip/taf/cst_all.htm
3. For example, as per the HEC rules, an Assistant Professor will only be promoted to the position of Associate Professor given he/she has 10 years teaching/research experience and has 10 published research papers in HEC recognized journals. Source: <http://www.hec.gov.pk/english/services/universities/QA/Pages/Faculty-Appointment-Criteria.aspx> (HEC Website)

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