# Alternative to new varsity

Ishrat Husain Published March 22, 2025

The writer was dean and director of IBA Karachi (2008-2016).

**IT is indeed a matter of great satisfaction that the government has decided to allocate a sum of £190 million, released by the Supreme Court of Pakistan, for investment in emerging technologies. There is no doubt that Pakistan's economic competitiveness in the future is strongly linked to quality human capital and technological assimilation and adaptation, and not to the elusive search for natural resources — oil, gas, minerals etc.**

China's example illustrates the point amply. Until 2000, America produced more PhDs in STEM subjects than China. By 2017, the two countries were equal. By 2025, China has produced 70,000 PhDs compared to 35,000 by the

US. It is quite well known that 600,000 Chinese students obtained their PhDs and post-doctoral fellowships from top US universities; 70 per cent of them returned home and were funded to set up their own research laboratories under a government-financed scheme. Chinese universities such as Tsinghua and Peking are now rated among the world's best. The team that came up with DeepSeek that has startled the world and shattered the Silicon Valley were all trained in Chinese universities. According to the Australian Policy Research Institute, China leads in 53 out of 64 critical technologies such as supercomputing, AI and machine learning, industrial robotics, biomedicine, etc.

AS reported in the media, this amount of £190m is earmarked for setting up a new university covering 100 acres in Islamabad. Universities are not known for their brick-and-mortar development and expanse but for their contribution to society and the economy. Pakistan, fortunately, has at least a dozen or more leading universities in these fields — GIKI, QAU, Nust, Lums, Pak-Austrian, PIEAS, UET, NED, Sukkur IBA, IBA Karachi, BUITEMS, Quetta, Comsats, FAST, HEJ to name a few. These universities have facilities, faculty and research students who can contribute to the goal specified for the new university. But they are starved of operational funds.

The same is true for our research institutions. I carried out a study of Pakistan's agricultural research institutions for the cabinet and found that while we have highly trained scientists, most of the budgetary allocation was taken up by salaries and allowances, pensions, rents, utilities, etc, with almost nothing left for actual experiments and scaling up.

Instead of setting up a greenfield university from scratch, there is a more cost-effective, firmly anchored and sustainable model to use these funds. This model, based on better resource utilisation, aims to spread the fixed costs of existing universities over larger variable costs through the provision of competitive research grants. The underutilised capacity of these universities due to the paucity of funds can be optimised with quick results; the incremental capital costs would be negligible. Compare this to setting up a brand new university. This would involve huge upfront costs of constructing a campus, recruiting faculty and purchasing, installing and operationalising equipment. This would take at least four to five years.

*Instead of building a new university with £190m, there's the option of revisiting existing campuses.*

In the meanwhile, the nature and texture of technologies, which are undergoing rapid changes, may have altered and we may be stuck with irrelevance as the new university would be behind the curve, with its planning assumptions made in 2025. The existing universities are in a better position to show flexibility to adapt under a dynamic leadership and governance structure. We should not rule out the possibility that the most talented from the present top universities may drift towards the new set-up with higher remuneration and facilities, with matters ending up as a zero sum game for the country as a whole. In that event, the huge cost incurred on the new set-up would have negative social benefits.

An alternative model proposed here is to identify the technologies which Pakistan needs now and in the near future, and in which we are lagging behind our peers that we would like to leapfrog. An endowment fund equivalent to £190m supplemented by development grants amounting to Rs100 billion may be created. The income from this fund along with increased allocation for research & development and pooling existing allocations under R&D to the Higher Education Commission (HEC), the Pakistan Science Foundation, and the ministries of science & technology, IT, agriculture, and others may be utilised for soliciting research proposals from Pakistani universities, and public and private research institutes in priority fields through an open and competitive process. These proposals should be vetted by international experts in their respective fields and time-bound grants may be awarded to the successful recipients.

Those whose proposals are found deficient in some aspects should be given feedback to improve, mentored and guided by top Pakistani domain experts and encouraged to reapply. Principal investigators and team members of the successful grantees should be paid a portion of the grant as remuneration and allowed to commercialise their products, processes and innovations.

Look at the MIT and Stanford faculty and alumni's records in bringing their innovations to the market. The institutions in which the grantees are working should charge an overhead cost for the use of their facilities. Exchange of these scholars and collaboration with their counterparts in academically advanced countries would further ensure quality assurance and relevance by keeping the Pakistani scholars abreast of contemporary developments in their respective fields and cognisant of future trends.

The question that arises is very pertinent in our context: which is the institution that will administer this grant — without bureaucratic hassles, nepotism and favouritism? It's hard to find a definitive solution to this

difficult question. A second-best solution may be designed. A committee of the top well-reputed scholars in Pakistan, with high ethical standards, can be assigned this task with secretariat support from either an autonomous and empowered HEC (not in its present form as an attached department of the government) or the ministries of science & technology and IT. This fund should be audited by the auditor general of Pakistan but kept outside the purview of the ministries. The built-in mechanism in the proposed model, ie, open, competitive grants and vetting by international scholars would be able to ensure the integrity of the process and minimise the usual traits of nepotism and favouritism.

There is still time for the government to revisit and reexamine dispassionately its present initiative and find a cost-effective way to translate its commendable vision of Pakistan catching up with its competitors. The opportunity cost of this huge investment in a new university is quite high compared to the proposed alternative presented here.

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