

COMBATING CHALLENGES OF IMPROVING QUALITY OF HUMAN CAPITAL¹

Ishrat Husain

I would like to thank Dr. Sarosh Lodi for giving me this opportunity to speak on a subject that is very close to my heart--- the role of governance and management in our education system. The starting point for any societal transformation is our value system, our capabilities to perform well and our efforts to create a fair and just society. Without this foundation, a country inevitably falls behind and that is what international experience shows across various developing nations.

Drawing from my own experience having served as a member of the Steering Committee on Higher Education that led to the formation of the Higher Education Commission (HEC), later as Chairman of the Social Sciences Council of HEC, and subsequently for eight years as Dean and Director of IBA Karachi I have had the privilege of seeing our education system from multiple perspectives. Now, I spend much of my time visiting universities across the country, from Gilgit-Baltistan to Balochistan, trying to understand and address these challenges firsthand.

Based on this experience I would like to share a few thoughts with you today.

First of all, we need to view education as an integrated value chain, not fragmented into isolated segments. A strong schooling system feeds into strong colleges, and in turn, those colleges strengthen universities. Expecting universities to perform well when both schools and colleges are weak is simply unrealistic.

Therefore, we must adopt a system-wide approach. I have very capable colleagues the Secretary of School Education, the Secretary of College Education, and the Secretary of Universities and Boards but they often work in silos. Each performs their respective duties diligently, yet there are no real linkages among these segments of the education system.

We have focused heavily on higher education, and today we have around 215 universities, but my experience with the college sector has been extremely disappointing. Classes are not held regularly, teachers are casual in their approach, they do not spend enough time with students, and I won't even go into issues such as cheating, plagiarism, and examination malpractice. When we bring students from schools even good ones into a college system that is largely dysfunctional, and then expect universities to produce high-quality human capital for the nation, we are expecting far too much.

¹ Key note address delivered at Sindh Higher Education Commission at high level consultative session held at Karachi on September 25, 2025

The mechanisms of coordination and linkage across all levels of education need to be strengthened. All secretaries must work together to develop a comprehensive, system-wide strategy rather than creating isolated plans for their respective departments.

My second point is that teachers are the backbone of any education system. I was just telling Mr. Zahid (Secretary School Education) about my student days at Government High School, Hyderabad, Government College, Hyderabad and later at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro. The level of commitment and passion that teachers showed in grooming their students at that time was truly remarkable.

My geometry teacher at school noticed that I was weak in the subject. He would spend hours outside of school hours regular helping me, patiently coaching me through the difficulties I faced and other teachers did the same for other students as well. The teachers of that time were not well paid; in fact, their salaries were only a fraction of what teachers earn today. Yet, they possessed a deep sense of professional commitment. Without that sense of dedication, no education system can ever be truly vibrant.

I am sorry to say that, in my experience, even university professors today often expect additional remuneration for any extra task assigned to them.

As one professor once said to me translated from Urdu:

"If you are assigning us additional work, please tell us how much we will be paid for it."

That kind of bargaining reflects a mindset focused on personal gain rather than on contributing to the development of the younger generation. If our primary goal is personal benefit instead of service and mentorship, we must recognize this motivation rather than collective gain for the society as an objective is a serious impediment to our transformation process as a nation.

My third observation with due apologies to my colleagues who are Vice Chancellors — concerns how success is often measured in our universities these days. .

Translated from Urdu:

"Sir, we have constructed five new buildings; I have established six centers and developed four institutes."

When I ask about the quality of their faculty, the employment outcomes of their graduates, or their contributions to local communities, whether in Sargodha, Nowshera, or Lasbela — I rarely get a meaningful response.

What are you doing to help the people in your community?" The answer is often, "No, we have a lot of work to do at our own university, and we don't have time to help out." However, the idea behind the land-grant colleges in the United States was based on the principle that, since you are receiving free land, you have a responsibility to help the people in your area develop by sharing your knowledge and expertise

I went to Faisalabad, where there are a number of universities , NIAB, NIBGE, and Ayub Research Institute. I asked a simple question: Are the yields of wheat, cotton, rice, and maize in the Faisalabad area higher than the national average? The answer was no. So, despite having a large cluster of research institutions and universities, there is no noticeable improvement in the surrounding areas. This lack of connection between universities and research institutes and the real-world problems of Pakistan is something we need to think about seriously.

I don't mind if you are publishing papers in reputable journals but honestly, many of them are so advanced that only experts in those specific fields can fully understand them. In fact, I must confess that I cannot follow what is published these days in most of the major economics journals these days , That's fine, but in addition to academic research, the faculty should also contribute their expertise to solving real-world problems. Right now, there is very little connection between the two.

The other point I want to highlight is the ratio between faculty and administrative staff. In every university I have visited especially public sector universities this ratio is completely distorted. Too many administrative and support staff and fewer faculty members. Public institutions often lack the financial resources to adequately pay or attract qualified faculty members, yet there always seem to be sufficient funds for administrators, managers, examination controllers, finance staff, assistants, clerks, peons, messengers etc and other support services.

One of the reasons I am proud of IBA is that we were able to recruit 72 PhDs from around the world and today, we have more than 100 PhD faculty members. How did we achieve this? We outsourced all janitorial, HVAC, and other support services, leaving only 16 people in administrative staff. Of course, we maintained finance , examination, admissions, departments etc but these were kept very small and had more professionals .

Through Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and Learning Management Systems (LMS) every process is managed electronically, and the savings from reduced administrative costs were redirected to offer market-based salaries to our faculty. However, in most public sector universities I visit, the administrative-to-faculty ratio remains extremely high.

I conclude by saying that the Sindh Government is the only one that actively supports universities and higher education. No other province does so, even though they have their own provincial HECs and Higher Education Departments. I have nothing against these departments or commissions, but they have led to the bureaucratization of universities and colleges.

In the current system, there is confusion in the chain of command you cannot effectively have both a provincial HEC(s) and a Higher Education Department operating simultaneously. This overlap creates contextual challenges and inefficiencies. Moreover, there is far too much interference from those in power in university affairs.

We must grant greater autonomy to Vice Chancellors and select them based on merit not merely their academic record, but also their leadership qualities, management skills, financial acumen,

and ability to motivate students and staff. These should be the true criteria for leadership in higher education.

Sindh HEC should establish clear benchmarks for each university, allowing them to compete for grants based on specific criteria. I believe this approach will create a multiplier effect, enabling us to clearly see improvements in performance

I am proud of what IBA Sukkur has achieved. They benchmark themselves against IBA Karachi, and look where they are today they have earned AACSB accreditation, which is shared only by IBA Karachi and LUMS. Look at IBA Sukkur's graduates you'll find them in the Civil Service, at the State Bank, and in multinational companies. Because they set high benchmarks for themselves and we supported them, they have excelled. Similarly, the Sindh HEC should also establish clear benchmarks and specific criteria that must be met to qualify for grants. And I assure you, if we reform ourselves along these lines, real progress will follow.

A journalist once asked me, "You were the Governor of the State Bank and later the Chairman of NCGR with the status of the federal Minister so how did you agree to become the Dean of IBA Karachi?" I replied, "Those were my jobs, but this is my passion." If you don't have a passion for education, then you have nothing meaningful to contribute.

So, my request to all of you on this very important occasion is to substitute your pursuit of personal benefit maximization with a passion for transforming society.

Thank you very much.