DAWN

EDUCATION: RESTRUCTURING HIGHER EDUCATION

Ishrat Husain Published May 17, 2026 Updated about an hour ago

It has been nearly 25 years since the Steering Committee on Higher Education, working alongside the Task Force on Improvement of Higher Education, submitted a comprehensive set of reforms to overhaul Pakistan's higher education system. These reforms were approved by the government, leading to the establishment of the Higher Education Commission (HEC), in place of the University Grants Commission (UGC), in 2002.

The overarching objective was to steer Pakistan toward a technologically driven, knowledge-based economy, capable of delivering rapid and sustainable growth. Human resource development and technological advancement were placed at the core of this vision.

A quarter century later, it is both timely and necessary to evaluate HEC's performance against these original aspirations, using measurable benchmarks.

A QUARTER-CENTURY ON: TAKING STOCK

Recent indicators present a sobering picture. Pakistan's rankings in the Human Development Index and the Human Capital Index have declined. The country remains near the bottom of the Global Innovation Index and was ranked 113th out of 133 countries in the Global Competitiveness Index.

Particularly alarming is its position near the bottom of the Global Gender Gap Index. Per capita incomes have stagnated, poverty has risen and the integration of technology into the real sectors — especially exports — remains

limited. While multiple factors have contributed to these outcomes, the anticipated synergy between talent development and technological progress has not materialised.

The Higher Education Commission was created to power Pakistan's transformation into a knowledge-based economy, capable of delivering sustainable growth. A quarter-century on, the gap between ambition and outcome demands an honest audit and bold structural change

At the outset, HEC identified three priority areas: access, quality and relevance. In terms of access, the achievements are notable. The tertiary enrolment ratio has increased from two percent to around 12 percent, while student enrolment has surged from approximately 200,000 to 2.5 million — an impressive compound annual growth rate of over 10 percent.

The number of universities has expanded from about 60 to more than 250. Similarly, PhD output has risen sharply, with over 32,000 doctoral degrees awarded in the past decade, compared to just 3,300 in the first five decades after Independence.

However, this rapid expansion has come at the expense of quality and relevance. During its early years, HEC undertook several commendable initiatives: thousands of faculty members were sent abroad for doctoral studies, foreign faculty were engaged to strengthen curricula, and research infrastructure — such as digital libraries, enterprise resource systems and learning management platforms — was established. Anti-plagiarism tools were introduced and doctoral theses were evaluated by international experts.

Unfortunately, many of these initiatives proved unsustainable. Funding constraints became acute: while the HEC budget stood at Rs 63 billion in FY2018 for around 100 universities, a similar allocation persisted in FY2025, despite a substantial increase in the number of institutions.

Financial limitations were compounded by internal conflicts within HEC and between the Commission and the government, leading to erosion of its autonomy and increased bureaucratic control.

As foreign scholarship programmes were curtailed, emphasis shifted to domestic PhD production. This resulted in the proliferation of doctoral programmes without adequate quality assurance. Weak admissions screening, limited supervisory capacity and incentives tied to publication counts contributed to declining research standards and the neglect of teaching.

The pressure to publish — often in low-quality journals — fostered questionable practices, including the appropriation of students' work by supervisors for career advancement. The academic culture, thus, drifted significantly from its original intent.

The third pillar — relevance — has suffered the most. Despite producing a large number of graduates annually, employers consistently report a mismatch between qualifications and skills. Graduates often lack the technical, digital and soft skills required by industry.

DEGREES WITHOUT DIRECTION

Even the public sector faces difficulties in recruitment; only a small fraction of candidates appearing in competitive examinations qualify. This disconnect has led to a paradox, where job vacancies coexist with high graduate unemployment, estimated between 23 and 30 percent.

The composition of graduates further exacerbates the problem. Of the approximately 450,000 graduates produced each year, only about one-third are from STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] disciplines, while the majority are concentrated in the social sciences, arts and humanities — fields with relatively lower market demand.

In contrast, countries such as China have dramatically expanded their STEM output, producing nearly three million graduates. The corresponding number for the US is estimated at 850,000. Twenty-five years ago, the ratio was in favour of the US by 2:1. This shift has been central to China's economic transformation. For Pakistan, building a strong base in science and technology is indispensable for achieving sustained development.

GOVERNANCE IN REVERSE

The original reform agenda also emphasised autonomy and improved governance of universities as prerequisites for national competitiveness. Unfortunately, progress in these areas has been reversed.

Over the past decade, the system has been undermined by weak leadership, poor governance, and excessive political and bureaucratic interference. Universities have become increasingly bureaucratised, losing the autonomy necessary for innovation and excellence.

Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, multiple layers of governance have emerged: provincial higher education departments, provincial HECs, chancellor secretariats and the federal HEC. The roles and responsibilities of these bodies are often unclear and overlapping, leading to fragmentation and turf battles. In some provinces, conflicts between political authorities have delayed the appointment of vice chancellors for extended periods, creating institutional paralysis.

University governance structures themselves are also problematic. Syndicates and senates are often too large and meet infrequently, resulting in delayed decision-making and widespread frustration. Although search committees exist for appointing vice chancellors, their criteria are heavily skewed toward academic publications rather than demonstrated leadership, managerial competence, and engagement with industry and society.

A BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM

To address these systemic issues, a comprehensive restructuring is required.

The new leadership of HEC, in consultation with federal and provincial stakeholders, should propose legislative and regulatory reforms to clarify institutional roles. Provincial higher education departments should be abolished, and provincial HECs should focus on funding universities based on transparent criteria and overseeing the appointment of vice chancellors.

The responsibility for funding has to be shifted to the provinces, as they have a stronger resource base compared to the federal government. Governance bodies such as senates and syndicates should be streamlined to enhance effectiveness.

The federal HEC should concentrate on setting standards, accreditation and policy guidance, while avoiding micromanagement. Universities must be granted greater autonomy to manage their academic, financial and administrative affairs.

Looking ahead, universities should be differentiated into three categories: (i) teaching universities, (ii) teaching-cum-applied research universities and (iii) research universities.

Teaching universities should focus on expanding access, particularly in underserved regions, and offer programmes aligned with market demand. Teaching universities should be mainly located in underdeveloped areas with

high poverty incidence, low female participation rates and inadequate connectivity. They should award degrees in subjects for which there is market demand, along with foundational courses in social sciences and liberal arts, English, maths and information technology subjects.

Tuition fees in these universities should be kept relatively low, as the main purpose of such universities is to improve access. Undergraduate and Master's programmes offered at these universities should have adequate provision for scholarships, stipends, financial aid and Qarz-e-Hasna [Shariah-compliant interest-free loans], both from the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and provincial social protection departments as well as philanthropists and corporate social responsibility programmes. For example, the Oil and Gas Development Company (OGDC) provides scholarships to the students from the area where they are operating. Other companies should be encouraged to follow this example.

Teaching-cum-applied research universities should address local economic challenges by working closely with industry and communities. Experiential learning for the students working on local socio-economic development problems would not only enhance their skills and prospects of employability but also help local communities.

Faculty evaluation should be based on practical contributions, such as skill development, productivity enhancement and innovation, rather than purely on academic publications. For example, The University of Sialkot should work with the sports goods industry, surgical goods industry and the leather gloves industry to upgrade their technology, improve their quality and compliance with international standards and buyers' requirements.

Students can have summer internships and apprenticeships in these industrial units to sharpen their skill sets. Postgraduate students can work on projects aimed at solving the problems of these industries and others in the larger geographical area.

Research universities should operate at the frontier of knowledge creation and innovation, admitting primarily postgraduate students and focusing on advanced fields such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology and advanced materials. Special technology zones should be set up within these university campuses, where firms engaged in these technologies can set up their offices and labs. Research students can work in these firms on their projects identified by and supervised and assessed jointly by the university faculty and

the firm research team. This would pave the way for a smooth transition from academia to employment.

These universities can offer micro-credentials courses, professional refresher courses and other short-duration courses in specialised skills to outsiders as community service. Faculty members should compete for research grants and projects, and be free to work as consultants for firms.

Centres of excellence, in which foreign researchers can visit for a period of their choice to work in collaboration with their peers in their field of specialisation, should be part of the university infrastructure. Large universities have huge parcels of unutilised land while other research universities can be granted additional land for this purpose. Since the university would be admitting only postgraduate students, the physical space requirement would not be as large as for the other categories of universities. A successful example of this model was the Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, when it was first established.

These institutions should foster strong industry linkages, promote commercialisation of research and generate alternative revenue streams through patents, consulting and partnerships.

Finally, the current funding model must be reformed. Allocations should be linked to performance, with clear, measurable and verifiable indicators. Differentiated funding frameworks should reflect the distinct roles and contexts of institutions, including regional disparities.

In sum, while Pakistan has made significant strides in expanding access to higher education, the challenges of quality, relevance, governance and performance remain unresolved. Without bold and coherent reforms, the sector will continue to fall short of its critical role in driving economic growth and social progress.

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