

## Undergraduate Education Policy (UEP) 2023: A Framework to Promote Broad-based Education in Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

*The Higher Education Commission (HEC) formulated the first-ever Undergraduate Education Policy (UEP) in 2020. After receiving feedback from relevant stakeholders, a revised policy (UEP-Version 1.1) has been notified by HEC for implementation with effect from fall 2023 in all universities/HEIs and affiliated colleges of Pakistan. This study explores the salient features of UEP with a special emphasis on the foundational constructs of the policy. The main objective of this study was to decipher the Liberal Arts model that has been used as a basis for formulating the UEP. A qualitative research method was used to explore the key concepts of the policy. The method included interviews with education consultants, officials of the Higher Education Departments of respective provinces, Vice Chancellors, Deans, Registrars, faculty, and students at mainstream universities located in major cities of Pakistan. Additionally, a focused group discussion was conducted to seek collective wisdom from academicians. The findings of the study revealed that the UEP would help the higher education sector to improve the quality of graduates produced from undergraduate programs through competence and broad-based education models. The findings of the study are useful for universities/HEIs and affiliated colleges in the process of implementing UEP effectively.*

**Keywords:** Undergraduate Education Policy, Liberal Arts, Broad-based Education, Competence-based Education, General Education

### INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Commission (HEC) is a federal authority to regulate higher education in Pakistan. A Federal Model University Ordinance was also promulgated in the 2002 to restructure higher education in Pakistan (Tarar, 2006). One of the responsibilities of HEC is to formulate national policies related to higher education. In 2020, HEC

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established Postsecondary Education Reform Unit (PERU) with a mandate to formulate national educational policies and assist universities/HEIs and Affiliated Colleges to implement those policies. Soon after the inception of PERU, a group of consultants in collaboration with relevant stakeholders in HEC and educational institutions initiated a process to prepare a framework for undergraduate education in Pakistan.

The quality of undergraduate education being provided by universities and colleges in Pakistan has been poor. The poor quality is reflected in the low-level skills of students and higher rate of unemployment after the graduation. Therefore, a considered reform process was initiated in 2020. There have been several education policies in Pakistan since its inception, but there was no specific policy that may address quality issues related to undergraduate education in Pakistan. The need to reform and improve undergraduate education in Pakistan is considered obvious.

Since the inception of HEC in 2002, most of the emphasis was laid on postgraduate programs (MS and PhD). As a result, there was a phenomenal growth in postgraduate programs where enrollment of MS/PhD has increased along with improved PhD faculty in universities/HEIs. It has been evident by the increased number of universities and institutes of higher education in Pakistan in recent years. In contrast, the undergraduate education sector has been ignored. There was an urgent need for undergraduate education reform to provide the student a better quality and competence-based education as per international standards.

Pakistan inherited its education system from the British. Regarding higher education, the defining traits of the British legacy were low, inequitable access, lack of attention to developing the academic skills and competencies of students. It is evident from the low passing marks of the Indian students set as 33 instead of 60. These trends continued till now. The access has improved but remains inequitable. Similarly, academic quality in public universities and colleges has remained low.

The HEC formulates policy and regulates undergraduate education in Pakistan, which is provided by universities and degree awarding institutions as well as affiliated colleges. A detailed analysis of the factors contributing to the poor quality of undergraduate education being provided in public universities revealed that governance structures and autonomy, leadership, management and administration, faculty, research, and finances and financial accountability are key contributing factors as determined by Hoodbhoy (2009).

Another aspect of undergraduate education in Pakistan is the much higher student enrolment in colleges than universities. However, due to inherent academic and administrative mismanagement, the quality of undergraduate education at colleges is poorer than that of universities. In most cases, the same college faculty are teaching at intermediate (FA/F. Sc) level and BS/AD level with the same poor infrastructure and academic resources. Moreover, colleges across Pakistan are academically affiliated with Affiliating Universities and follow the same curriculum, and in some cases their students took exams organized and conducted by the university. Unfortunately, the affiliation system is weak and problematic where some universities are giving numerous affiliations

to colleges without a rigorous review and regulations. Lastly, there is no serious quality check on the colleges for their academic and administrative activities. Due to these contributing factors, the quality indicators were found to be weak in the Affiliated College system.

### **Need For UEP-2023**

Historically speaking, the Task Force on the Improvement of Higher Education (TF) initiated the reform process of undergraduate education in Pakistan (Task Force on Higher Education & Society, 2000). The TF recommended that the duration of an undergraduate degree be increased from 14 to 16 years, and general education must be included in the BS programs. Introducing general education would ensure the creation of a core curriculum, which would prevent the narrow focus in disciplines and motivate students to learn all domains of knowledge and become familiar with a core body of knowledge.

Soon after its establishment in September 2002, the HEC directed universities to implement the TF recommendation by moving to a four-year undergraduate degree and transitioning from the annual to the semester system of examinations. To achieve this, HEC took steps to implement the recommendation of including general education in the undergraduate curriculum. However, the HEC undergraduate education reforms were adopted in a superficial manner by the universities and affiliated colleges. As a result, no substantial improvement was found in the quality of undergraduates that were produced by the universities even after transitioning from 2-year to four-year programs and from annual to semester system. Thus, undergraduate education, especially in public universities and colleges, deteriorated rather than improved.

Moreover, the change of the successive governments affected the implementation of these recommendations (Mahmood et al., 2015). Expectedly, the overall impact of the reform on improving the quality of undergraduate education was minimal. In short, the quality of undergraduate education being provided in public sector universities and colleges deteriorated after the reform. The intervention in undergraduate education had been in place for about twenty (20) years but had not resulted in any significant improvement in the knowledge, skills, and competencies of our graduates. This was evidenced by the formal and informal feedback from multiple sources, but especially the industries and job market that employers were unable to find the required knowledge base and desired skills among the graduates that universities and affiliated colleges were producing. Therefore, revamping of undergraduate education with special emphasis on curriculum was necessary and critically important to produce better graduates who must attain the required knowledge base and desired skill set to become successful in post-graduation phase of their lives.

Keeping in view the above arguments regarding undergraduate education in Pakistan and its intriguing problems, HEC in 2019 decided to formulate a comprehensive policy to address issues related to quality of undergraduate education in Pakistan. Postsecondary Education Reform Unit (PERU) was tasked to formulate a framework of

undergraduate education, as well as providing training, guidance, and facilitation of universities and colleges in its adoption and implementation. Starting early 2020, the PERU goals and activities of undergraduate education reform were incorporated the World Bank 'Higher Education Development Pakistan (HEDP)', which provided financial support. First (UEP-2020) and revised versions (UEP-Version 1.1) of the policy were published in August 2020 and July 2023 respectively.

The policy making process began with a nationwide consultation process that included all stakeholders in our higher education system. Multiple modes of communication such as workshops, conferences, focus groups discussions, in person meetings and interviews, reflections sessions, formal and informal interactions with multiple stakeholders were conducted and documented. Later, a group of consultants under the ambit of Postsecondary Education Reform Unit (PERU), formulated a formal Undergraduate Education Policy (UEP) 2020 and shared with universities/HEIs and Affiliated Colleges for implementation with effect from fall 2021.

Some of the universities started the process of implementation while others showed concerns on its implementation process and requested for a deferment of policy until the universities/HEIs, and Affiliated Colleges make necessary adjustments in their administrative and academic system to adopt and implement UEP-2020. HEC approached all universities and HEDs for formal feedback and suggestions for smooth adoption and effective implementation of UEP. Based on feedback of the universities/HEIs and Affiliated Colleges, HEC revised the UEP-2020 and incorporated feedback/suggestions to make it more acceptable for most of the universities/HEIs and Affiliated Colleges in Pakistan. Finally, a revised policy called UEP-Version 1.1 was published by the HEC for adoption and implementation with effect from fall 2023. Now, the revised version of UEP is in process of implementation in Pakistani universities/HEIs and Affiliated Colleges.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was aimed to elaborate the rationale and salient features of the UEP and argue the Liberal Arts model as a framework to improve quality of undergraduate education in Pakistan. A qualitative research method was used to explore the salient features of the UEP and the Liberal Arts model. Document review was conducted in which Liberal Arts model was reviewed in context of undergraduate education and with special focus of Pakistani higher education sector.

A total number of seventeen (17) consultations, workshops, and dialogues were organized and held across the four provinces of Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), all of which were transcribed and documented. About 1000 stakeholders participated in these activities, including Vice Chancellors/Rectors/Heads of Higher Education Institutions, Deans, Registrars, University Faculty, College Principals, College Faculty, Office bearers of Professional Councils, and Officials of Provincial Higher Education Departments. Multiple formal and informal focused group discussions was conducted to get the collective reflection on the UEP. Later, a thematic analysis approach was used to bring out the salient features of the UEP, followed by the

incorporation of reflective commentary on the themes emerged from the thematic analysis. Finally, a conclusion was drawn from the results analyzed from the data.

### **Results and Outcomes of the Study**

The formulation of the UEP was informed by learnings from the various consultations, documents review, workshops, conferences, in person interviews, and focused group discussions.

### **Salient Features of the UEP**

Based on the data collected, following themes emerged as the salient features of the UEP.

- a) Broad-based education.
- b) Competence-based learning.
- c) Mandatory Internship/Field Experience.
- d) Capstone project.
- e) Flexible graduation options with Major, Double Major, and Minors.

### **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

This section explains the relevance of the results (and findings) in context of the UEP. Five (5) distinct themes have emerged from the data gathered as the result of documents review, consultations, in person interviews, and focused group discussions with relevant stakeholders. In this section of the paper, detailed discussion on five (05) distinct themes is presented as follows:

**a). Broad-based education:** By virtue of the UEP, students have to receive a broad-based education in the earlier semesters through general education courses. It has been estimated that about ninety-five percent of the four-year colleges and universities in the United States offer general education programs (Aloi, Gardner, & Lusher, 2003). For BS students, it is mandatory to complete the prescribed general education courses in first four semesters of the program. Structure of the general education program is as follows:

General Education Courses	Quantity	Credit Hours
Arts & Humanities	1	02
Natural Sciences	1	3 (2+1)
Social Sciences	1	02
Functional English	1	03

Expository Writing	1	03
Quantitative Reasoning	2	06
Islamic Studies/Religious Education	1	02
Ideology and Constitution of Pakistan	1	02
Applications of ICT	1	3 (2+1)
Entrepreneurship	1	02
Civics and Community Engagement	1	02
Total	12	30

**Table 1.1:** General Education Courses for BS/AD Programs

As per table 1.1, twelve (12) general education courses comprised of thirty (30) credit hours are included in the BS/AD degree program. The courses cover all domains of knowledge such as Arts and Humanities, Natural Science, Social Sciences, Quantitative Reasoning, and Expository Writing. Additional courses of ICT, Entrepreneurship, and Community Engagement are added to cater the contemporary needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, traditional courses of Islamic Studies and Pakistan Studies (now Ideology and Constitution of Pakistan) are included with a recommendation to upgrade these courses with improved contents and discourses.

Previously, many other courses that were taught at undergraduate level and labelled as general education were not actually the general education courses. These education courses cannot be classified as general education courses. In fact, these courses were other specialisms that were to be taught in addition to the disciplinary courses. Further, there was no discernible logic by which a particular set of the so-called general education courses were mandated for a specialism. In the UEP, first time in the history of higher education, these actual general education courses were identified and listed in the UEP. General education is not only a curriculum but also a life-long philosophy, attitude, and learning style.

The content of these courses is based on all domains of knowledge and thus provide life-long traits and learning experiences. It should expand general education course options to allow students to fulfill their general education needs and interests in each major area and set up comprehensive general courses at different levels and across multiple academic fields around the theme to ensure the integrity and relevance of students' knowledge systems. Contemporary general education should be designed to develop in students the habits of mind that will facilitate their understanding of critical issues, as well as their abilities to learn and act independently, both inside and outside of their areas of specialization (Bastedo, 2002; Stearns, 2002). More importantly, these courses set a strong foundation for broad-based education. Now, the students will get the chance to learn about

different domains of knowledge and broaden their perspective and worldview in a much better way.

The prescribed general education courses will be taught to all students regardless of their disciplinary choice of subjects. As a result, a student with a major in Natural Sciences will get the opportunity to learn about Social Science, Arts and Humanities. Similarly, a student with a major in Social Sciences will get the opportunity to learn about Natural Sciences. General education should emphasize cohesion, integration, and interdisciplinary connections throughout the curriculum (Gaff, Ratcliff & Associates, 1997). By completing the general education course requirements, a student is expected to learn about all domains of knowledge and this learning will help students to transform into a well-rounded graduate instead of just focusing on one major subject. In short, the Liberal Arts model of education is promoted through the inclusion of broad-based education in which a student's mind is liberated by exposing them to all domains of knowledge.

**b). Competence-based learning:** Second salient feature of the UEP is competence-based learning. Competency-based education (CBE) is an emerging discourse higher education. This is evidenced by publications on the topic (Frank & Danoff 2007; ten Cate and Scheele 2007; Harden 2007; Whitcomb 2007; Albanese et al. 2010; Carraccio et al. 2008; Brooks 2009). Competence-based learning is comprised of knowledge, skills, professional behavior, and interpersonal attributes. Knowledge that was concentrated to just disciplinary knowledge has been expanded to interdisciplinary, epistemic, and procedural knowledge in the UEP.

Inclusion of distribution (interdisciplinary) courses will increase the knowledge base of students. Distribution courses are closely related to interdisciplinary courses that will help students to consolidate learning experiences and promote disciplinary mindset. Due to saturation of knowledge in basic disciplines, many new fields have emerged in the contemporary academic world. As a result, many interdisciplinary academic programs are becoming mainstream academic areas. In short, competency in the modern world is not an expert in one discipline. Instead, it is the knowledge of other fields and their influences on the major disciplinary area.

Skills that were restricted to motor skills have been extended to soft skills such as communication skills, proficient use of ICT, quantitative reasoning, analytical and problem-solving skills, critical and creative thinking. Through the UEP intervention, the skill base of an undergraduate student will be enhanced to contemporary skill set that makes the students successful in 21<sup>st</sup> century. These soft skills are not restricted to one disciplinary area. They are spread across the curriculum. Moreover, these skills are critically important to compete and excel in today's academic world.

Professional behavior is a core element of competence-based learning that includes self-regulation, time management, integrity, intellectual curiosity, and intellectual openness. Generally, these behaviors are ignored on our academic settings. The UEP stipulates these behaviors as critically important for professional success of a student. Focus on these skills will enable the undergraduate education system to prepare students



with refined behaviors that would help them to succeed after the graduation when they will enter in the professional lives.

Finally, Interpersonal attributes completes the notion of competence-based learning that includes empathy, self-efficacy, and teamwork. These skills might not be taught in the classroom setting. For that, a mandatory internship/field experience and Capstone project have been incorporated in UEP. Previously, Internship and projects were confined to limited disciplinary areas such as Management Sciences, Psychology and Medicines. In the UEP, it is mandatory for all students to get the internship experience and take a Capstone project. Through these two main activities, it is desired that a student will develop interpersonal attributes such as empathy, self-efficacy, and teamwork.

**c). Mandatory Internship/Field Experience:** The UEP mandates all students to take a mandatory Internship/Field Experience of 6-8 weeks. It is a professional learning experience that offers meaningful, practical work related to a student's field of study or career interest. It is an opportunity to apply knowledge gained in the classroom with practice to the field. Integrating a practical element into higher education enables students to not only acquire knowledge related to their chosen area of study, but also the ability to apply it outside of the classroom (Deuster, 2009). The field experience will be graded by the instructor in collaboration with the supervisor in the field. The site supervisor will liaise with the Internship office and the faculty supervisor. UEP stipulates that the site supervisor must provide orientation to the intern and explain organizational aspects and the nature of work at the Internship site.

Moreover, the site supervisor will train, guide, and provide feedback to the student intern throughout the course of the internship. Finally, the complete periodic evaluations every three weeks will be submitted to the internship office and the faculty supervisor. Internships under the UEP for BS programs will have 3 credit hours and graded by a departmental committee including the supervisor. Performance during internship will become part of the student's academic record and reflected in the transcript. Research suggests that an experiential education program's learning outcomes are categorized by these five areas: personal, interpersonal, academic, employment, and civic (Conway, Amel, & Gerwein, 2002; Knapp, Fisher, & Levesque-Bristol, 2010; Raman & Pashupati, 2010). The newly formulated Internship program is more structured and useful for students to make smooth transition from academic to professional life.

**d). Capstone project:** Capstone project became a mandatory requirement in revised version of the UEP. In this project, students will demonstrate their six or seven semesters learning through a project. This will not only become a hands-on experience but also a self-assessment for a student. A capstone project is designed to enable students to apply their knowledge and acquired competencies to address real-world problems. It is designed to allow students to bring together concepts, principles, and methods that they have learned during their degree programs. Peterson et al (2011) found that qualitative findings also indicated that the project increased practice confidence and encouraged practice evaluation.



Students wrote that the project helped them think critically about practice, evaluate their practice, and learn more about themselves as social workers. The purpose of the capstone project is to consolidate final-year students' learning with valuable hands-on experience to groom them into creative, constructive problem solvers in their major field of studies. All graduates shall be required to complete a mandatory capstone project of 03 credit hours as partial fulfillment of the degree program. Inclusion of the Capstone project adds value to student's learning and provides a hands-on experience before they graduate from a university.

**e). Flexible graduation options with Major, Double Major, and Minors:** Another salient feature of the UEP is the flexible graduation options with Major, Double Major, and Minors. Disciplinary and major basic courses should construct a curriculum system according to the academic relationship and development trend of different disciplines or majors, follow the educational concept of general education, strengthen the connection with major education, and truly reflect the nature of the connection (Xue C, Yang T, Umair M. (2023). The UEP allows students to earn additional credits to upgrade their degree with double major, major with one minor, and major with two minors. These combinations will increase the job potential because a signal major is just one specialization whereas double major prepares students for specialization in two disciplines.

Similarly, a major with one minor and two minors provides a substantial knowledge base in addition to the chosen major discipline. By combining two fields of study, students would expand their way of thinking and problem solving. This interdisciplinary study allows students to envision connections between ideas they may never have seen before. They become aware of how concepts relate to one another and build on one another, allowing them to create forward-thinking solutions. As they study across two or more subjects, they gain extensive knowledge, as well as valuable skills that prepare them for a wide variety of careers. Students who do this often experience more career opportunities and higher earning potential than those with a single major. Their resume will stand out to potential employers. They will know that as a double major or with minor (s), students gained wide-ranging knowledge, as well as critical time management and organizational skills. The UEP with such flexibility creates multiple opportunities for students to develop multi-layered skills and qualities.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The UEP is a major milestone in the history of higher education sector, especially for the undergraduate education in Pakistan. The UEP will ensure the implementation of Liberal Arts model through the provision of general education courses and other flexibilities that the UEP offers. The paper explored the salient features of the policy, and the findings of the study would help the academicians and university management to understand the policy in its context.

Moreover, the findings are significant to understand the process of implementation of UEP in its true spirit. It is important to mention that the UEP is a paradigm shift in higher education sector of Pakistan. As a result, the process of implementation is very challenging

and an uphill task for universities/HEIs and Affiliated Colleges. The fate of the UEP depends on conceptual understanding of the policy and its deeper philosophy nested in liberal arts model of education. It is strongly recommended that researchers use this study as a foundation to conduct further research on implementation of UEP and other contextual issues related to quality of undergraduate education in Pakistan.

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