

An Examination into the Higher Education System in Pakistan: A Reality Check

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the higher education system in Pakistan in light of its role in the global knowledge economy. The objectives are threefold: to evaluate the significance of higher education in national development, to analyze the prevailing challenges in Pakistan's higher education sector, and to assess recent reforms and propose recommendations for improvement. The research adopts a qualitative and exploratory design, relying on secondary data from government reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature. Findings reveal persistent challenges including poor governance, lack of faculty development, inadequate funding, and weak accountability mechanisms, despite reforms initiated by the Higher Education Commission (HEC). However, recent developments such as the HEC Vision 2025, digital transformation initiatives, and performance-based funding frameworks show potential for progress. The study concludes with recommendations for strengthening institutional governance, promoting faculty capacity building, fostering international collaboration, and aligning higher education with national socio-economic priorities. This research contributes by providing an updated evaluation of Pakistan's higher education system and actionable policy directions.

Keywords: Higher education, faculty, challenges, knowledge economy, developing country.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Pakistan has come to be seen as a potential tool for social stability and national advancement as a result of the country's escalating political, religious, sectarian, and economic instability. Higher education still faces challenges with access, quality, governance, and global competitiveness, despite promises of reform from succeeding administrations. The growth of the global knowledge economy puts even more pressure on Pakistan's universities to support research, innovation, and the development of human capital in addition to offering high-quality instruction.

Existing scholarship highlights the fact that universities are no longer isolated organizations whose legitimacy is taken for granted. The ongoing battle to strike a balance between institutional expansion and efficient governance is highlighted by recent studies of

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Pakistan's higher education system. Significant differences in accountability and transparency between public and private universities are revealed by a recent study by Ahmed and Hali (2023), underscoring conflicts regarding research support systems and faculty workload. Similarly, Qureshi (2024) contends that systemic issues like ineffective leadership, stagnant funding, and weak industry-academia ties continue to erode the efficacy of reforms, even in the face of increases in PhD graduates and research outputs. All of these findings point to the fact that Pakistani higher education policies frequently prioritize quantitative goals, such as the production of degrees, at the expense of addressing the fundamental problems of quality, governance, and strategic alignment.

Research on Pakistan's higher education system is still dispersed and has a narrow focus, despite a sizable body of literature highlighting the importance of higher education for the country's development. Without completely incorporating these viewpoints into a larger socioeconomic framework, existing research frequently concentrates on either the role of higher education in economic growth or on specific governance and quality concerns. Additionally, although a number of reports have emphasized persistent problems like financial limitations, governance flaws, and shortcomings in quality assurance, there hasn't been much systematic examination of how recent reforms—especially those started by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and associated state policies—have dealt with these systemic problems.

Another significant flaw is the dearth of policy-oriented research that not only identifies the issues but also assesses how well reforms have been implemented and suggests evidence-based laws that are suited to Pakistan's unique institutional and sociopolitical circumstances. Without providing thorough policy implications, a large portion of the current scholarship either takes a descriptive approach or mainly uses secondary data. There is therefore an urgent need for a study that bridges this gap by critically evaluating current reforms, relating higher education's role in socioeconomic development, and producing specific, context-sensitive policy recommendations for the future.

By analyzing the significance of higher education for Pakistan's socioeconomic development, identifying the main barriers facing the industry, evaluating the degree to which reforms have addressed these issues, and suggesting policy directions that can improve the efficiency, equity, and sustainability of higher education in Pakistan, this study seeks to close this gap.

Research Questions and Objectives

Three main goals underpin this study: determining the importance of higher education for Pakistan's socioeconomic development; analyzing the ongoing problems facing the higher education sector; and analyzing recent reforms and suggesting future policy measures. The following research questions serve as the framework for the study in accordance with these goals:

- i. What are the main obstacles Pakistani higher education faces?
- ii. To what extent have these issues been addressed by recent reforms?
- iii. What legislative actions can enhance the field of higher education?

Together, these goals and inquiries create a logical framework that links the contribution of higher education to the advancement of the country with an evaluation of reforms based on evidence and the creation of practical policy recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Significance of Higher Education

Higher education remains a critical driver of socio-economic development across the globe. Seminal scholars such as Memon (2007) and Hayward (2008) emphasized the role of higher education in human capital development, national innovation capacity, and poverty alleviation. This foundational argument still holds, but in the contemporary context, universities are increasingly being evaluated on their ability to contribute to the knowledge economy and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education) (UNESCO, 2019).

Higher education systems in developing nations play a critical role in fostering social justice, innovation, and workforce preparedness, according to recent studies. According to Ahmad and Batool (2022), Pakistani universities must adapt their curricula to meet the rapidly shifting needs of the labor market. According to Khan and Yousaf (2021), higher education is now a center for research productivity, technological innovation, and global competitiveness rather than just teaching and credentialing.

Globally, higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their value through performance-based outcomes, employability rates, and research impact (World Bank, 2021). For Pakistan, this entails shifting the focus from increasing enrollment to faculty development, quality control, and alignment with national socioeconomic priorities.

The Predicament of Pakistani Higher Education

Even with reforms, there are still structural issues with Pakistan's higher education system. Governance, faculty capacity, and politicization issues were emphasized in earlier works (Hoodbhoy, 2003; SPDC, 2002), and new research indicates that many of these issues are still unresolved.

Persistent disparities in financing, equity, and quality are noted in the HEC Strategic Plan 2020–2025 (Higher Education Commission [HEC], 2021). Given that higher education receives less than 0.5% of GDP—much less than the UNESCO (2022) recommendation of 4–6% for the education sector as a whole—funding limitations continue to be a significant obstacle. Faculty shortages, lack of research incentives, and outdated curricula further weaken the system (Shah & Alam, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated structural weaknesses. Even though HEC launched online learning programs quickly in 2020, students in low-income and rural areas were severely excluded due to inadequate internet infrastructure and digital injustices (Ali, 2021). This crisis revealed the urgent need for sustainable digital transformation in higher education, including blended learning, e-libraries, and digital governance systems.

Moreover, the issue of brain drain continues to hinder institutional growth. According to UNESCO (2021), a significant proportion of Pakistani PhD graduates seek employment abroad

due to low salaries, limited research funding, and lack of career progression opportunities in local universities. This trend undermines the HEC's efforts to build indigenous research capacity.

Recent Developments and Reforms

In the past ten years, Pakistan's higher education system has seen substantial reforms, especially as a result of the HEC Vision 2025. (i) Quality assurance and accreditation; (ii) excellence in research; (iii) international collaborations; (iv) innovation and entrepreneurship; and (v) digital transformation are the strategic focus areas (HEC, 2020). Recent developments include:

- National Research Programs for Universities (NRPU) were established with the goal of providing funding for competitive research.
- To encourage faculty productivity, the Tenure Track System (TTS) was introduced.
- The growth of professional program accreditation councils and quality assurance frameworks (Shah & Alam, 2020).
- Post-COVID investment in digital infrastructure to improve online education (Ali, 2021).

But there are still implementation issues. According to studies, a lack of accountability, corruption, and weak governance structures continue to cause compliance issues at many universities (Ahmad & Batool, 2022; Khan & Yousaf, 2021). Furthermore, partnerships frequently remain symbolic rather than substantive, despite HEC's emphasis on internationalization (Saeed, 2022).

The World Bank (2021) notes that without significant financial investment and governance reforms, Pakistan risks falling further behind regional peers such as India, Malaysia, and China in higher education competitiveness.

Overall, despite reforms aimed at modernizing and improving the quality of higher education in Pakistan, the sector is still hindered by problems with governance, inadequate funding, a lack of faculty, and weak industry-academia ties. According to literature published between 2018 and 2023, Pakistan's universities will find it difficult to meet the demands of the knowledge economy unless it closes the gap between policy and practice and implements context-sensitive reforms.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

In order to investigate Pakistan's higher education system, this study uses an exploratory, qualitative research design. Given the conceptual and policy-oriented nature of the inquiry, the research is based on a desk assessment of secondary sources rather than primary data collection. With an interpretive focus, the design seeks to critically synthesize the body of existing research, policy papers, and reform projects while pointing out inconsistencies, gaps, and implications for future practice and policy.

Sources of Data

To provide a thorough grasp of Pakistan's higher education system, the research draws on a range of secondary sources. These are academic literature, especially peer-reviewed journal articles that look at issues of governance, reforms, and difficulties in Pakistani higher education as well as similar regional settings like Malaysia and India. To capture the policy landscape and reform agenda, several official government publications were examined, including the Higher Education Commission's (HEC) Vision 2025, the National Education Policy 2018–2023, accreditation frameworks, and other policy documents. In order to offer comparative perspectives on regional and international higher education systems, publications and statistical data from international organizations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and the OECD were also studied.

Analytical Approach

Key themes that emerged from the literature and policy papers were identified, categorized, and synthesized as part of the thematic content analysis approach used to examine the gathered data. These topics included the importance of higher education for socioeconomic advancement, the sector's problems (such as funding reductions, political meddling, brain drain, and a lack of research culture), and the recent policy changes (such as the tenure-track system, digital libraries, and quality control procedures). Furthermore, a comparative approach was used to evaluate Pakistan's changes in light of regional and global standards.

Limitations and Scope

The study excludes original empirical research, such as surveys or interviews, and is restricted to secondary data analysis. Although this limits direct stakeholder perspectives, the method offers a thorough summary of the policies and evidence currently in place, which makes it appropriate for producing policy insights and suggestions. In order to validate and deepen the findings, future study may build on this by including empirical data from administrators, students, and teachers.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Interpreting Policy Reforms in Context

Through initiatives like the tenure-track system, digital library access, and overseas scholarship programs, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has been credited with transforming Pakistan's higher education system since its founding in 2002 (Hoodbhoy, 2009; Qazi et al., 2020). However, the implementation of these reforms has revealed contradictions. For example, while HEC sought to promote research productivity, excessive focus on quantity over quality fostered “publication pressure” and the proliferation of low-impact or even predatory journals (Shah et al., 2024).

Comparative insights from South Asia highlight these limitations. India's National Education Policy (2020), for instance, emphasizes holistic curriculum reform, interdisciplinary learning, and outcome-based education (NEP, 2020). Malaysia has developed strong linkages between universities and industry, positioning higher education as an engine of innovation (Azman et al., 2019). By contrast, Pakistan's reforms remain largely input-driven, emphasizing numbers

of PhDs, publications, or institutions, rather than sustained outcomes. This mismatch reflects a broader policy tendency towards expansion without sufficient consolidation of quality.

Structural Issues: Quality vs. Expansion

Higher education is now more accessible thanks to the growth of public and private universities over the last 20 years; by 2022, there were over 1.7 million students enrolled, up from 135,000 in 2002 (HEC Annual Report, 2023). Yet, this quantitative growth has not translated into enhanced global competitiveness. No Pakistani university currently ranks among the world's top 200 (QS Rankings, 2024).

The cause of this discrepancy is structural bottlenecks. Chronic underfunding restricts investment in labs, libraries, and research facilities; Pakistan invests less than 0.4% of GDP in higher education, compared to the UNESCO benchmark of 4-6 percent (World Bank, 2022). Research productivity is further limited by a lack of faculty and a heavy teaching load (Mahmood, 2020). Furthermore, curriculum changes are frequently postponed, which leaves graduates out of step with changing demands in the labor market. Therefore, the expansion vs. quality conundrum exemplifies what Marginson (2016) refers to as the "massification trap," in which institutional credibility is undermined by rapid expansion without systemic strengthening.

Autonomy, Governance, and Political Intervention

Political intrusion and poor governance are two more recurrent themes. Although HEC was designed as an autonomous regulator, successive governments have frequently restructured its mandate, undermining stability (Shah et al., 2024). By causing overlaps between federal and provincial authorities, provincial-level interventions following the 18th Amendment further complicated the governance of higher education (Aly, 2017).

These tensions impede long-term strategic planning. For instance, the Vision 2025 plan emphasized knowledge-based economic growth, yet frequent leadership changes in HEC and universities disrupted continuity (Ahmed & Jamil, 2021). Political appointments of vice-chancellors compromise meritocracy, weakening institutional accountability. Similar challenges have been documented in African contexts, where political capture of higher education has hampered institutional autonomy (Teferra, 2017). Thus, governance reform is not merely a managerial issue but a political one, requiring systemic depoliticization and institutional independence.

Global Competitiveness and Research Culture

Even though more PhDs are being awarded each year, Pakistan still makes a small contribution to international research. Pakistan contributes less than 0.3% of the world's research output, and its citation impact is lower than that of its regional peers, including Iran, Turkey, and India, according to Scimago (2023).

Both structural and cultural problems are reflected in this research gap. Faculty members frequently lack institutional incentives for conducting high-quality research, proper mentorship, and exposure to other countries (Qureshi, 2021). Furthermore, a strong reliance on projects funded by donors leads to a cycle of dependency rather than long-term capacity building.

The implications are demonstrated through global comparisons. For instance, China converted scholarly research into technological innovation by strategically tying reforms in higher education to industrial policies (Altbach, 2016). Pakistan's universities, however, remain largely disconnected from industry and national development goals, weakening their relevance to society.

Social Inclusion, Equity, and Access

Inequalities still exist even after reforms increased enrollment. According to Aslam (2019), female and rural students are still underrepresented in higher education, especially in STEM fields. Social stratification is reinforced by the disparity in quality between prestigious urban universities and underfunded regional campuses.

Furthermore, the English-medium instruction that predominates in Pakistan's higher education system serves to perpetuate linguistic hierarchies, disadvantageously affecting students from Urdu or regional language backgrounds (Rahman, 2022). This reflects more general discussions in postcolonial settings, where language policy influences educational inclusion and exclusion (Phillipson, 2017). Therefore, higher education runs the risk of escalating inequality rather than reducing it in the absence of equity-sensitive reforms.

Digital Transformation: Prospects and Difficulties

Pakistan's adoption of online learning platforms was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought to light both their advantages and disadvantages. The National Knowledge Platform and HEC's "Smart University Project" increased access to digital information (HEC, 2021). However, a glaring digital divide was revealed by connectivity issues, especially in rural areas (Khan & Arshad, 2021).

With nations like Singapore incorporating digital pedagogy into their national strategies, blended learning has become popular worldwide (Lim, 2020). However, Pakistan is still in a transitional phase, with pedagogical models, faculty training, and infrastructure not entirely in line with digital learning. This digital lag weakens global competitiveness and perpetuates existing disparities.

Synthesis: The Meeting Point of Reforms and Difficulties

When combined, these findings point to a basic contradiction in Pakistan's reforms to higher education: despite the nation's impressive growth, quality, governance, and sustainability issues remain. Although they have had some success, policy reforms (such as tenure-track, scholarships, and digitization) are still dispersed. Because reforms concentrate on surface-level results rather than structural change, issues (funding, political meddling, and research culture) continue to exist. International comparisons show that while Pakistan's approach is still reactive and erratic, successful higher education systems incorporate reforms into larger national development plans.

To put it briefly, reforms have gained traction without causing any changes. In order to meet short-term demands without attaining long-term sustainability, the higher education system functions in survival mode.

Moving Forward with a Transformational Agenda

This study emphasizes how Pakistan's conception of higher education has to change. Reforms should place quality above number, making sure that higher enrollment doesn't erode standards, rather than concentrating on growth and quantitative results.

A long-term reform plan for Pakistani higher education must take into account a number of interrelated factors. To ensure that institutions are subject to the proper scrutiny while maintaining the independence necessary for academic innovation and efficient governance, it is first necessary to establish a balance between responsibility and autonomy. Second, in order for higher education to actively support national development, research and curricula must be meaningfully linked to industrial, social, and technological challenges. Third, by granting disadvantaged and excluded groups more access through focused policies and helpful procedures, equity and inclusion must be given top priority. Lastly, in order to guarantee that technological innovation benefits all students, blended learning methods and closing the digital gap should be promoted in order to advance digital transformation. Pakistan can only move past "reform as survival" and toward true "reform as transformation" by adopting these changes, which will allow higher education to realize its full potential as a catalyst for socioeconomic advancement.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

Governance and Policy Reforms

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) must be given more authority and protected from political meddling in order to improve governance in higher education. Regular external audits and transparent appointment procedures can both contribute to credibility and trust. Setting explicit performance metrics for institutions, such as research output, employability of graduates, and quality of instruction, and tying financing to these metrics will help to ensure institutional responsibility.

Human Capital and Faculty Development

The proficiency of the faculty is crucial to the achievement of higher education. Programs for mandatory continuous professional development (CPD) that prioritize research techniques, curriculum design, and pedagogy ought to be implemented. Grants, fewer teaching responsibilities, and chances for foreign collaboration should all be provided to teachers in order to encourage research production. In order to encourage scholars to stay in Pakistan, steps must also be taken to stop brain drain, such as providing attractive retention bonuses and increasing chances for local research.

Allocation of Funds and Resources

Sufficient funding is essential to bolstering higher education. Less than 2% of Pakistan's GDP is now allocated to education, which is far less than what is expected globally. It is crucial to increase funding designated especially for research, faculty development, and higher education infrastructure. In order to lessen reliance on government assistance, public-private partnerships can also be extremely important in financing collaborative research initiatives, scholarships, and innovation hubs. Additionally, in order to minimize the urban–rural divide, equitable resource

allocation is required to strengthen smaller and rural colleges through staff training and investments in digital infrastructure.

Innovation and Digital Transformation

Universities need to embrace digital transformation if they want to keep up with global trends. Teaching and learning will become more modern with the use of blended learning models, virtual classrooms, and Learning Management Systems (LMS). Effective use of these tools will be ensured by national training programs in digital literacy for both students and educators. Furthermore, establishing open-access repositories and centralized digital libraries can encourage cooperation, the sharing of knowledge, and creative research methods.

Accreditation and Quality Assurance

More robust quality assurance mechanisms are also necessary for bettering higher education. The HEC's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) needs to be redesigned to ensure strict oversight of governance procedures, faculty qualifications, and curricula. In addition to enhancing international recognition, aligning Pakistani universities with foreign certification programs like AACSB and EQUIS would guarantee that academic standards adhere to global standards.

Collaboration and Internationalization

For academic progress and competitiveness, global interaction is essential. Pakistan should work with top international universities to increase exchange programs, dual-degree programs, and collaborative research projects. South Asian regional cooperation can also facilitate the exchange of best practices in digital learning, governance, and curriculum design. International engagement and visibility can be further increased by luring international teachers with incentives and attracting international students to Pakistani universities.

Implications for Policy

Policymakers must put long-term, sustainable reforms ahead of politically motivated temporary solutions if they want to see significant change. Universities ought to be urged to abandon rote learning approaches and promote creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving instead. Policy improvements should be guided by evidence-based decision-making, which is based on data from reliable sources like the World Bank, UNESCO, and HEC. These steps have the potential to improve Pakistan's higher education system and make it more economically, socially, and globally competitive if they are carried out successfully.

CONCLUSION

People's expectations regarding the improvement in the quality of higher education were boosted with the establishment of an apex regulatory body; the Higher Education Commission, in 2002. However, the vehemence for change started vanishing when the Commission soon adopted the bureaucratic culture of the region, confirming the status quo.

The HEC should continuously revise its policies and procedures in accordance with international educational standards. New reforms should be introduced that aim at eradicating the problems that have been identified in the paper, and a fair and transparent accountability system

needs to be in place. With the emerging significance of the knowledge economy, Pakistan's higher education system needs to be transformed accordingly and produce graduates who can contribute towards the society with their research, critical thinking, and civic sense.

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