

POLICY BRIEF

EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES



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Evolving Landscape of Higher Education in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities

[Centre for Business and Economic Research](#)

Summary

Higher education institutions are facing unprecedented challenges in a rapidly changing global landscape. From the rise of artificial intelligence and the evolving demands of the job market to the increasing cost of education and the growing pressure to ensure student success, institutions must adapt and innovate to remain relevant and impactful. This brief highlights insights from the 4th Annual International Conference: Rethinking Economics in the Contemporary World 2024, focusing on two sessions on higher education. In the first session the Vice Chancellors Dr. S Akbar Zaidi from IBA and Dr. Ali Cheema from Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), two leading institutions in Pakistan, shared their insights on the key challenges facing higher education today. The second session was a round table discussion with the Sindh Higher Education Commission chairman and academicians from national and international universities. This session was moderated by Dr. Asma Hyder. By bringing together renowned academics and policymakers, the sessions aimed to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and best practices. This included the development of joint research projects, student and faculty exchange programs, and capacity-building initiatives.

Key recommendations include curriculum reform, pedagogical innovation, institutional strengthening, importance of fostering a vibrant academic community. and partnerships with industry and government.

What's the issue?

The increasing global competition for top students and faculty requires institutions to continuously innovate and improve their academic programs, research capabilities, and overall reputation. The rapid pace of technological advancement and automation is transforming the job market. Higher education institutions need to adapt their curricula and teaching methods to equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in this dynamic environment. This includes fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability, as well as developing in-demand skills such as data

Key Take Aways

Strong leadership, sustained vision, and structural reforms are essential to improving Pakistan's higher education.

Universities in Pakistan must adapt to global standards while addressing local needs.

With the right strategies, higher education can play a transformative role in Pakistan's future.

Need to shift focus from producing graduates to nurturing critical thinkers and innovators.

Structural reforms are needed to modernize curricula, leverage tech in teaching, and connect academia with industry and government.

Universities must become spaces for discovery, not just degree factories.

Universities are pivotal for socio-economic transformation but need proper support to fulfil this role.

Challenges in Higher Education:

Universities are chronically underfunded.

The institutes have short-term policies, and there is lack of capacity-building.

The current focus is expansion of higher education that is quantity over quality. This has led to universities failing to produce globally competitive graduates.

There is reliance on bureaucratic systems which slows innovation and decision-making.

The bright students and academics leave for better opportunities abroad. The main reason for this brain drain is lack of support for research, low premium on education and skills of university

analysis, digital literacy, and AI literacy. The rise of online learning platforms and artificial intelligence presents both challenges and opportunities for traditional higher education institutions. Institutions must navigate these changes effectively to maintain their relevance and ensure the quality of their educational offerings. The increasing cost of higher education poses a significant financial burden on students and their families. This can limit access to higher education for many, particularly those from low-income backgrounds.

Higher education in Pakistan and role of institutions

A significant concern is the erosion of academic quality across many institutions. Building a strong faculty base is paramount for institutional growth, necessitating the attraction and retention of top talent, both from within Pakistan and internationally. This requires strategic investments in faculty development, including competitive fellowships, mentorship programs, and professional

development initiatives to enhance their teaching and research skills.

There is a need to redefine the purpose of higher education. The focus should shift from solely degree-granting to fostering critical thinking, creativity, and responsible citizenship within students. Addressing the "brain drain" of top Pakistani academics who often pursue opportunities abroad is crucial. While acknowledging the role of government in supporting and regulating higher education, the conversation stressed the need for a more nuanced and less bureaucratic approach, empowering universities with greater autonomy in decision-making. Finally, the emergence of AI presents both challenges and opportunities for higher education, necessitating a re-evaluation of teaching methods and assessment systems.

"I think it's important that we re-evaluate the purpose of higher education. It's not just about degrees, it's about fostering critical thinking, creativity, and responsible citizenship."—Dr. Akbar Zaidi

"I think it's important to really push for higher educational institutional strengthening."—Dr. Ali Cheema

Conclusions

There are several challenges faced by the higher education in Pakistan.

- The central concern is the erosion of academic quality across many institutions. There is a critical need to strengthen faculty, attracting and retaining top talent. This necessitates strategic investments in faculty development, including competitive fellowships, mentorship programs, and professional development initiatives to enhance their teaching and research skills.

- There is a need to redefine the purpose of higher education. Moving beyond solely degree-granting, the focus should shift towards fostering critical thinking, creativity, and responsible citizenship within students. Addressing the "brain drain" of top Pakistani academics who often pursue opportunities abroad is a key concern. While acknowledging the role of government in supporting and regulating higher education, there is a need for a more nuanced and less bureaucratic approach, empowering universities with greater autonomy in decision-making.
- the emergence of AI presents both challenges and opportunities for higher education, necessitating a re-evaluation of teaching methods and assessment systems. The conversation highlighted the importance of preparing students for a future increasingly shaped by technology while ensuring that the core values of critical thinking and human interaction remain central to the educational experience.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Invest in Faculty Development:
 - Establish competitive fellowships and research grants to attract and retain top academic talent.
 - Create mentorship programs to support the growth of young faculty.
 - Invest in professional development programs for faculty to enhance their teaching and research skills.
2. Reform Higher Education Governance:
 - Streamline regulatory processes and reduce bureaucratic hurdles.
 - Empower universities with greater autonomy in decision-making.
 - Foster collaboration between public and private universities.
3. Revise the Curriculum:
 - Emphasize critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity in all disciplines.
 - Integrate technology and AI into the learning process.
 - Develop interdisciplinary programs that address complex societal challenges.
4. Promote Student Well-being:
 - Prioritize student mental health and well-being.
 - Create a supportive and inclusive campus environment.
 - Foster a culture of intellectual curiosity and exploration.

- **Sindh HEC committed to provide facilitation to domestic institutions in forming collaborations with foreign institutions. It will also facilitate exchange of faculty and students.**

This brief was prepared based on the discussions of the following experts:

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