

The Education System in Pakistan



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Education is the bedrock of multidimensional socio-economic development of a nation. It is the most fundamental ingredient needed to achieve sustainable development. Man's journey towards a better world is impossible without quality education. This is because the most important national resource a nation can utilise to grow fast is human intelligence which is preserved and promoted through education. The mind-blowing world of today where two people living at two different poles of the globe can get connected within seconds and exchange huge data is the miracle of education. However, this educational and technological miracle is not occurring in the Muslim world. While India has around 790 universities and thousands of higher education (HE) institutions with 3 HE institutions in top 200 and 3 in top 300 universities of the world (QS World Universities Ranking), Pakistan has fewer than 190 higher education institutes with none in the list of top 300 best universities of the world. With 17% out-of-school children and barely 58% percent literacy rate (above 62% according to Economic Survey of Pakistan 2019), Pakistan is suffering from an acute education crisis which is adversely affecting the socio-economic development of the nation. This essay shall present an introduction to the education set-up of Pakistan, followed by a diagnosis of its shortcomings and finally a few suggestions to deal with the problem.

Education system in Pakistan is overseen by Federal Ministry of Education of the Government of Pakistan and the provincial governments. Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan obligates the state to provide free and compulsory quality education to children of the age group 5 to 16 years. After the passage of 18th amendment in the constitution of Pakistan the curriculum, syllabus, planning, policy, centres of excellence and standards of education fell under the purview of the provinces, whereas formulation of standards in institutions for higher education and research, scientific and technical institutions is responsibility of the federal government. So, the academic institutions are the responsibility of provincial governments; whereas the federal government mostly assists in curriculum development, accreditation and some financing of research.

The education system in Pakistan is generally divided into five levels: (i) primary (grades one to five); (ii) middle (grades six to eight); (iii) high (grades nine and ten, leading to the Secondary School Certificate or SSC); (iv) intermediate (grades eleven and twelve, leading to a Higher Secondary School Certificate or HSSC); and (v) higher education involving graduate and post-graduate degrees.

Alternative qualifications in Pakistan are also available and their examinations are conducted by institutions. Most common alternative is the General Certificate of Education (GCE), where SSC and HSSC are replaced by Ordinary Level (O-Level) and Advanced Level (A-Level) respectively. Other qualifications include IGCSE which replaces SSC, GCE

and GCSE O-Level, IGCSE and GCE AS/A Level are managed by Cambridge International Examination (CIE) or Edexcel International of the Pearson PLC.

Another type of education in Pakistan is called "Technical Education" and combines technical and vocational education. The vocational curriculum starts at grade 5 and ends with grade 10. The examinations are conducted by provincial boards of Technical Education which offer Technical School Certificate (TSC-equivalent to 10th grade) and Diploma of Associate Engineering (DAE) in engineering disciplines. DAE is a three year programme of instructions which is equivalent to 12th grade. Diploma holders can take admission in B.Tech. and BE in their related disciplines.

The education system in Pakistan is embroiled with a plethora of problems which have caused heavy damage to the prosperity and well being of the nation. There are above 20 million out-of-school children and those who can 'read and write their name' to be called 'literate' are only 58 per cent, whereas the global standard of literacy entails percentage of people aged 15 to 24 years who can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement on their everyday life. Generally, 'literacy' also encompasses 'numeracy'—the ability to make simple arithmetic calculations. If calculated by this standard, the actual literacy rate in Pakistan would be far less than 50 per cent^[1]. According to UNESCO Pakistan is only better than Afghanistan among SAARC states in terms of literacy rate. While the developed countries have 99.2% literacy rate; a comparison with Malaysia, which has an overall literacy rate of 95%; Iran with an overall literacy rate of 92.6% , and Myanmar with an overall literacy rate of 75.6% should also be kept in mind for better understanding of Pakistan's poor state of education. This embarrassing picture has many causes which are discussed in the coming paragraphs.

The greatest problem in Pakistan as regards education is low enrolment and high dropout which cause more than 20 million children to contribute to a huge out-of-school population. There are both out-of-school and in-school factors responsible for this alarming situation. The out-of-school factors include, general poverty, child labour, socio-cultural inhibitions towards education of the females, feudalism and dynastic politics. Among the in-school factors, dilapidated school buildings, lack of equipment and teaching aids, shortage of competent teachers and their low morale, corporal punishment, and dull curriculum significantly contribute to the present poor state of primary education in Pakistan. The main reason of this poor state of affairs is low budgetary allocation for education. In the fiscal year 2018-19, public expenditure on education was 2.4 percent of GDP (Economic Survey of Pakistan 2019). The nation never raised expenditure on education above this standard making education nowhere to be seen on the nation's priority list.

At school level, the class-based education is a big issue in Pakistan's education system. The education system continuing for the last seven decades has three types of schools: Elite private schools (English medium schools), Government schools and madressahs (seminaries). The highly expensive English medium schools mostly cater to the rich and the upper class of society whose children are later sent abroad for higher education. Then there are government schools and cheap private schools for the children of lower classes of society. Their standard of education, teachers and administration are pathetic. A large percentage of students enrolled in such schools either do not complete their target educational level and withdraw prematurely or follow an educational trajectory to land in low paid jobs after further education. The madressah schools, which impart religious education to the children of the poor strata, have entirely different mindset and

world view. Their courses are more focused on preservation of their respective sectarian identity and canonical texts. All the three categories are based on the class system and rich-poor divide, which is a major cause of a divided society.

With the exception of highly expensive English medium schools for the elite class, the general masses are bound to get education from around 145,000 government schools where the standard of education is very poor due to poor budget. The meagre budgetary allocations stand in the way of improvement in infrastructure, teacher training, provision of teaching aids and laboratory equipment, curriculum development, and reliable examination systems. Apart from scanty expenditure, the careless use of available resources is another dilemma. There are many schools without buildings and many buildings without furniture.

Unavailability of quality teachers is also a big reason for poor condition of education in Pakistan. Very low salaries of the teachers and their low standard of living in society make teaching a disesteemed profession to be desired by few. Majority of the teachers are not self-motivated and they accept teaching when they have exhausted all chances of any other more lucrative job in any other department. Once on job, they seldom feel the need of improving their knowledge or pedagogical methodologies. The high-ups in the education departments also lack any vision and systematic mechanism to make these teachers ensure quality education. Most of the schools, especially those in the rural areas, are without subject specialists. The teacher to students ratio in our school is also very poor. As per the findings of UNESCO in 2016, on average one Pakistani teacher was handling 47 students in his classroom, which is far worse than international standards.

The menace of ghost schools in different provinces of the country also dealt a heavy blow to the child education in rural areas of Pakistan. These ghost or shadow schools exist on government rosters, but provide no services to students, although the ghost teachers or administrators assigned to these schools continue to receive salaries. As per a report of Nadia Naviwala published by US-based Wilson Center, there used to be around 20 per cent ghost schools in the country by the year 2000. When alarm bells were sounded in the media and conference rooms of some foreign organisations, the situation improved a little but it is yet far from being satisfactory. An Al-jazeera report published on 15 November 2015 claimed that there were about 400 to 500 ghost schools in Balochistan.

Another most alarming problem of education in Pakistan is discrimination between genders. According to Economic Survey of Pakistan 2019, this gender gap is 22 percent. However, in Pakistan's rural areas the gender gap in education exceeds 25 percent. The data reveals that poor, rural Pashtun women are the most disadvantaged in literacy. However, Saraiki and Sindhi women and girls from the poorest rural areas are also equally deprived. This gender gap in education is a great impediment in the way to our becoming a prosperous nation and is the main cause of the exploitation of women's rights which in turn is the great cause of a plethora of social problems.

The state of higher education in Pakistan is also flabbergasting. Out of 187 recognised public and private sector universities, less than 20% i.e. 35 higher education institutes are federally chartered; remaining 80% are under the legislative and administrative control of provincial governments. The higher education is confronting significant problems including meagre funding, lack of academic freedom, insufficient infrastructure and most

importantly the undemocratic governing structure, which discourages teachers' empowerment. A number of universities are still working with incomplete ordinances due to which the appointments of teaching faculty and particularly vice chancellors is made on political basis. The universities established during martial-law are still lacking senates or syndicates and are being governed in an undemocratic fashion. Some universities being without mandatory 18 members governing board, the decisions are made in bureaucratic ways or on ad-hoc basis. HEC has also not published its progress report since 2014, which puts a question mark on transparency of work in the commission.

One of the multiple problems with the higher education is that there is yawning gap between industry and academia, which is a big cause of unemployment of the degree holder youths. Unavailability of funds for research and development in universities and stereotyped educational degrees which the students acquire just to be tagged as graduates are among the main causes of the gap. The job-seekers in possession of professional degrees are seldom able to relate their learning with the demand of the industry for lack of practical knowledge or irrelevant learning. Even graduates aiming entrepreneurship normally settle for less creative ideas like franchising instead of opting for ideas that can address the gaps within the society.

In order to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which include Universal Primary Education by 2030 the nation has to take certain practical measures on war footings. UNESCO proposes that every underdeveloped nation should allocate at least 4% of its total GDP for education. However, Pakistan should try to increase the education budget to 5 percent of the GDP. The irregularities and embezzlement of funds—as was unearthed in case of Danish Schools in Punjab and ghost schools in other provinces—should be dealt with iron hands. In our fight against corruption, the first and foremost target should be corruption in education. Increase in education budget is the basic need to solve all the above mentioned problems.

A uniform system of education should be adopted gradually to eliminate the problem of different educational systems as pointed out earlier. One medium of instruction should be introduced across schools for all strata of society. A Curriculum Board should ensure that all the children study the same contents no matter whether they are in public schools or private schools. Religious education should be incorporated in the mainstream of education and the same text material should be provided free of cost to all the seminaries to be able to come at par with the mainstream society.

Since Pakistani society is typically patriarchal, the main impediment in the way of women's education is resistance from the males who stop women under their influence to get education. Fruitful results cannot be achieved in this regard unless the resistive mindset of the male elders in tribal societies and rural areas is changed. Islam makes it obligatory for every Muslim (male and female) to get knowledge. The religious scholars, social intellectuals and media can successfully convince the dominant male heads of families to send their girls to schools to fulfil this religious obligation. Distant learning programmes can be used to enrol more and more women to get education while being inside their homes.

The government and private sector should take necessary measures to improve the quality of teachers. Monetary incentives should be given along with periodical training to improve their teaching skills and schools should be equipped with necessary equipment and audio-visual aids. In order to improve the infrastructure for education the government should do the needful and allocate funds generously.

The problems of higher education should be addressed in line with the models prevalent in the developed countries. For good governance in universities the systems being executed at top universities of the world may be studied and adopted after taking the stakeholders into confidence. The acts of old and well-established universities like Karachi University, the Punjab University and Peshawar University are splendid and formed on the democratic norms. The act of each university should be revised according to the acts of these well-established universities with some university specific amendments. The provincial governments should undertake the financial responsibility of provincial universities through respective provincial Higher Education Commissions (PHECs).

In order to bridge gap between academia and industry we should focus on the positioning and the value of industry-oriented research. The technical experts from various industries should be hired by the curriculum development boards to recommend required changes and innovations to the curricula. The internship programmes should not be just an eyewash, limited to clerical activities ranging from filing of documents to setting up racks at day end. Moreover, gaining industry experience should not be restrained only to students; it should be compulsory for the teachers and professors to have relevant industry experience.

For the sake of sustainable development and to bring Pakistan at par with the developed nations of the world, the nation as a whole has to focus undivided attention on the uplift of its education system. In order to achieve the target of 100 percent literacy rate by 2030 Pakistan should take necessary measures to ensure that all children between 5 and 16 years of age get adequate education. To preclude class differences a uniform curriculum should be introduced in all educational institutes including seminaries. It should also be ensured that the syllabi at all levels synchronise with the rapidly transforming world. The higher education deserves special attention and universities should be operated according to legally devised framework. To materialise these dreams it is imperative that Pakistan ensure at least 100 percent increase in the education budget along with transparency in the utilisation of available funds and zero tolerance for corruption. All this necessitates that all segments of society and the government work in complete harmony according to a national vision.

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