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**A force for knowledge**

The Knowledge Economy Task Force chaired by the prime minister had its first meeting in January 2019 when the roadmap presented by me in my capacity as vice chairman was approved.

This envisaged investments in education, science, technology, innovation and entrepreneurship with particular focus on the new and emerging technologies. Within a short period of 2.5 years, a huge amount of work has been done which has begun to transform the landscape of science and technology in Pakistan.

One shining example of the leadership of Prime Minister Imran Khan and the achievement of the present government is the ‘Pak Austrian Fachhochschule’ about 45 miles from Islamabad. This university of Applied Science and Engineering was a part of my vision back in 2003-2008 when I was chairman of the HEC but the projects were abandoned in 2008, a few months before classes were to start. However, persistence pays, and the scheme was restarted with the support of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government in 2018 and under the leadership of PM Imran Khan – with the result that there is now a very unique institution functioning near Islamabad.

It is the first university in the world to be set up in collaboration with eight foreign engineering universities. It is also the first university in the world which has a hybrid character in that it has two distinct parts – a Fachhochschule that provides BSc and MSc level training in Bachelors and Masters level technical education and a postgraduate part that will have Centers of Excellence in various cutting edge fields of engineering, including high speed railways manufacturing, artificial intelligence, materials engineering, food processing technologies etc.

The heart of the new university will be a technology park which is focused on developing new products for industrial manufacture and exports. The university has begun operations, but it will take another three years for it to be completed and become fully functional. The efforts of many colleagues in the successful establishment of this wonderful institution must be acknowledged. They include Prof Nasser Ali Khan (Project Director), Prof Mohammed Mujahid (Consultant, now Rector of the University), Prof Haroon Ahmed (Cambridge University), Prof Michael Rode (Innsbruck, Austria), Prof A Tjoa (Vienna, Austria), and Prof Chunli Bai (China). The KP government has provided generous funds for its development while the Artificial Intelligence Center will be set up with the support of the IT ministry.

As a result of the support from Prime Minister Imran Khan, a similar hybrid university is being established near Sialkot by our Task Force. Initially the university will focus in the following five fields: 1) Industrial Engineering; 2) Chemical and Materials Engineering, 3) Information Technology; 4) Agricultural Engineering; and 5) Business Management, Entrepreneurship and Innovation. This development has greatly excited the industrial leaders around Sialkot, Gujranwala and Gujrat and several meetings have been held with top industrialists as well as senior representatives of the respective Chambers of Commerce and Industry to ensure that the programmes are focused on improving their industrial products.

An important project undertaken by our Knowledge Economy Task Force in 2018 was to work closely with NADRA and the FBR to increase the tax revenue and widen the tax net. Using innovative AI protocols and algorithms, NADRA and some FBR transaction records were closely examined. Within three months about 3.8 million non-tax filers, each with a tax liability of more than Rs100,000, were identified. They owed an estimated Rs1.6 trillion in income tax in the fiscal year ended June 30, 2017. The information was made available to them individually on websites where only confidential and private access was given to those individuals. This led to a truly dramatic development: the total declared assets moved sharply up to Rs3 trillion and the actual taxes paid to Rs65 billion, illustrating the power of modern technologies. As a result, more than 90,000 non-tax filers became tax filers and the number of total tax returns for the year ending June 2018 crossed the two million mark, by far the highest number ever in the history of the FBR.

The Knowledge Economy Task Force has also been focusing on magnifying high quality education across the higher education sector. As a result, a project has been approved for the Virtual University, Lahore which was established by me as minister in 2001. The project will lead to the expansion of blended learning in our universities and will later also be extended to colleges. This will result in students in our universities learning not just from their teachers but also from lectures delivered using Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) available at MIT, Stanford, Harvard and other top universities. This should result in a major improvement in educational standards.

Faculty training lies at the heart of any serious attempt to improve the quality of higher education. The Knowledge Economy Task Force has therefore formulated a major project aimed at strengthening the faculty in our universities by sending a large number of our brightest students to top universities abroad. This project will soon be implemented by the HEC.

Another very interesting project of the Knowledge Economy Task Force is to endow students at the matriculation level with certain technical skills. This special Matric Tech programme has been launched as a pilot in about 500 schools so that in the last three years of their education, matric students are trained in certain specialized skill sets. Besides these, a host of other projects have been initiated to develop expertise in Pakistan in new and emerging technologies.

A major weak point that we need to address is the quality of our school and college level education. At present, higher education is being built on weak foundations which will not work. My proposal to the prime minister to declare a National Education Emergency is now under serious consideration at the highest level and a number of meetings have been held with the provincial education ministries too. It is hoped that this important programme will be launched soon so that we can tackle the issue of quality education at the school and college levels where serious problems exist.

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