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IT was an incongruous sight: a security guard aimed his gun at every visitor who had come to hear Malala Yousafzai speak. It was a gun that had interrupted her education in Swat 10 years ago, and that shot her to the Nobel Peace Prize.

On Dec 15, Malala participated in a panel discussion at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (Lums). The topic was ‘Building Higher Education Institutions for the 21st Century’, organised by the Oxford Pakistan Programme (OPP). Accompanied by her husband and parents, Malala entered the packed auditorium to an ovation. She is smaller and more petite than one expected and dressed, like any 25-year-old Pakistani married woman of her age, demurely in a shalwar-kameez and chiffon dupatta.

She was half the age of the other panellists — Prof Stephen Blyth (principal, Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford), Dr Nick Brown (principal, Linacre College, Oxford), and Prof Faisal Bari (dean, Lums School of Education) — and one quarter the age of Syed Babar Ali, founder of Lums. Nevertheless, she proved that even among elderly intellectuals she could hold her own.

The vice chancellor, Lums, set the tone by offering two stark options: education or catastrophe. He distilled Lums’s experience into three components: access to education, relevance of curriculum and the benefits of collaboration.

‘A child is meant to learn, not earn’.

Dr Talha Pirzada of OPP spoke of the paucity of Pakistanis studying in science at international universities, the imperative behind the OPP initiative which seeks a higher percentage of Pakistanis entering Oxford.

The discussion that ensued reached levels of erudition unheard of here. Prof Blyth drew from his previous experience at Harvard University where he managed an endowment fund of over $50 billion. He disabused the myth that Harvard admitted only the elite who could afford its high fees — now $70,000 per annum. Its new policy is ‘pay, or we pay’, ie if a deserving student cannot afford the fee, Harvard awards a full scholarship. In fact, fees constitute only five per cent of Harvard’s annual budget — the rest comes from its endowment income.

For Dr Nick Brown of Linacre College, higher education was not a privilege available only, as statistics had shown, to the top 10pc of the population. It is a basic human right. He echoed the remonstrance of the Labour prime minister Harold Wilson who asked: “Why am I the only Wilson in 14 generations of my family to be able to enter university?”

Dr Faisal Bari lamented that out of 100 million Pakistani students, only 6pc reach the university stage. The remaining 94pc drop out. The problem is graver at the postgraduate level. For a population of 220m, Pakistan has only 220 universities offering variable standards of learning and facilities for research. (India has 5,288, Indonesia 2,595, China 2,565, Iran only 46).

Syed Babar Ali has been one of the pioneers promoting education, first with the Ali Institute of Education (established to train teachers) and then with Lums. He spoke feelingly about Lums’s National Outreach Programme (NOP), under which about 7,000 talented students are identified at schools across the country. Then, 500 of them are brought to Lums’s campus where, after attending a boot camp, they compete for regular admission. The 100 or so who do gain admission are given full scholarships.

Another initiative has been to get experienced retirees to mentor NOP students.

The role of national governments in higher education evoked a robust response. In Pakis­tan, regrettably, the short-sighted Higher Education Commission cannot distinguish private sector wheat from public sector chaff.

Malala predictably emphasised the importance of educating the girl child. The audience was keen to know about the operation of her Malala Fund. She explained that its focus was on secondary education. The fund has a presence in nine countries. Her concerns were for children travelling to school (transport and safety), and within school curriculum, adequacy of teachers, and at home the support offered by parents.

Although she did not mention specific numbers, those familiar with the Malala Fund’s latest financials know that her fund has liquid current assets of $32.8m. During the year ended March 31, 2021, the fund received $28.9m, and incurred $17.9m for programme services (including $12.3m for grants made) and another $3.2m for supporting services.

Of the two joint recipients of the 2014 Peace Prize — Malala Yousafzai and Kailash Satyarthi — Malala has received unprecedented recognition and support internationally. In India, Satyarthi and his team at Bachpan Bachao Andolan (founded by him in 1980), have liberated unobtrusively more than 90,000 children from child labour, slavery and trafficking. His simple credo? “A child is meant to learn, not earn.”

God — ever optimistic — creates children to learn. Man puts useful education beyond their reach.

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