**Demystifying Access to Higher Education**

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Higher education is called a critical defining block in the creation of a knowledge-based economy as it defines pathways to both establish and preserve the socio-economic and cultural capital of a country. Since Pakistan has seldom adhered to achieving these lofty outcomes, it continues to struggle even in the basic areas that include increasing access to education, improving upon its quality at different levels, and materialising contribution to the development of the knowledge-economy structure. Moreover, commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by declaring them the National Goals should further prioritise the need to examine the issues of access and quality of education as well the governance mechanisms bearing the responsibility of meeting these targets.

The case of Punjab is a very pertinent one as far as developing an appreciation of the trilogy of higher education, SDGs, and governance mechanisms in our socio-economic and policy context are concerned. Punjab Growth Strategy 2023 and the Punjab SDGs Framework are two primary policy instruments that culminate in a public resolve to ensure equal, affordable, and quality access to higher education. While addressing the subject of prioritisation of SDGs, the SDGs Framework treats SDGs Target 4.3 i.e. higher education related target for Punjab as Medium Term target owing to policy support, development change, and sustained investments needed over a relatively long period. The Target reads, “By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university.” The provincial target defined by the Framework is “100 percent of the present value” but interestingly there is no present value recorded. The Punjab Baseline 2015 reported by the SDGs Framework does not talk about it. Target-setting in the absence of a baseline is like setting sail for an unchartered journey. Moreover, the notions of equality, affordability, and quality need to be defined at the policy level for course-setting, fixing of responsibility, engagement of stakeholders, mobilisation of both public and private resources, and progress tracking.

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UNESCO defines access as, “ensuring equitable access to tertiary education institutions based on merit, capacity, efforts and perseverance. Post-secondary opportunities for underrepresented groups such as indigenous peoples, cultural, ethnic and linguistic minorities; immigrants; refugees; the disabled; and women are key”.

This definition is broad and alludes to the existence of effective local systems addressing the subjects of merit, capacity assessment/potential of students, and mainstreaming of the marginalised groups. It may not be difficult for us to find systemic affinities for these concepts but a system-wide alignment and measurement as data sets may easily be labeled as institutional and data gaps at the provincial and local level. We may refer to access to school education as a yardstick of defining access at the policy level. The Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Act 2014 enacted for the implementation of Article 25A of the Constitution of Pakistan deals with the subject of access by stating that the government shall provide free and compulsory education to every child in the neighbourhood school or the school allocated for the child. The Act requires a local government to ensure and monitor admission, attendance, and completion of education by every child residing within its jurisdiction. The responsibility of private schools regarding the provision of free education has also been addressed by the law and each private school is required to admit in class one and then in every class, ten percent of the strength of the class, children, including disadvantaged children of the neighbourhood or other school.

We understand that the strength of the Constitutional provision led to the enactment of provincial law for ensuring access to free and quality education. However, higher education has been mentioned by the Principles of Policy of the Constitution that are non-justiciable. Article 37(c) of the Constitution calls for making technical and professional education generally available and higher education equally accessible to all based on merit. There exists a sharp contrast between the scope of these provisions and their implications in ensuring access to citizens of the country. On one hand, we have spelled-out notions of free and quality associated with education in the context of access but on the other, the mere guidance received for policy formulation is that of merit. Furthermore, at the sub-national level, allocation of business done for the Higher Education Department by the Punjab Government Rules of Business 2011, does not make any mention of increasing access to higher education in the province as a responsibility of the Department. Legislation, policy formulation, and sectoral planning have been made to the list of departmental responsibilities and one may optimistically stretch sectoral planning to cover for increasing access. Likewise, the Punjab Higher Education Commission Act 2014 is silent on the subject of access to higher education whereas the notion of quality reverberates through the functions of the Commission. One may discern that consideration of access in general and for the marginalised, in particular, is glaringly absent from our policy discourse. Holding to our optimism, we may consider different quota seats in public sector higher education institutions as a consolation along with the availability of merit-based and need-based scholarships for students in both public and private sector institutions. Although regulated by the HEC and implemented in letter and spirit by higher education institutions, the notions of access and affordability for a large segment of the population still remain questionable. Data by the Academy of Education Planning and Management (AEPAM) reported primary enrolment to be 23.6 million in 2018-19 (latest available data) whereas enrolment in universities was reported to be 1.86 million for the same year, which means that only 7.8 per cent of the enrolled students could reach universities. The situation of out-of-school children, according to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2020-2021 (32 per cent children aged 5-16 years are out of school at the national level) further compounds the challenges of access and applicable policies. Research on access to higher education takes into account the pre-admission and admission processes that cause exclusion, and stresses the need to strengthen the human agency. However, the exercise of this agency is viable only when opportunities are made available to students across the segments of society. The primary element of opportunity, translating into the human agency, i.e. availability of seats in higher education institutions creates further marginalisation in our system as the private sector universities are comparatively disadvantaged due to challenges of own source mobilization, and dependency of organisational response to the market needs whereas public sector universities are unable to cater to the mass of remaining students.

As an academician and active citizen, I (and all of us, for that matter) am bound to question the policy formulation and its implementation frame designed to accord rights to all citizens, including the right to education. Policy commitment for the provision of free and quality school education coupled with another commitment to provide access to affordable and quality university education needs to be translated into well-designed governance and market-sensitive regulatory mechanisms. Growth of private sector universities over the past two decades compellingly posits the need to mainstream their role in our policy discourse. Alignment with international commitments like SDGs has provided us with a yardstick to make our policy design and implementation structure citizen-centric. Therefore, it is high time to respond to the national and provincial development agenda by articulating policy and implementation plans concerning increasing access to affordable and quality higher education in Punjab.

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