

Education

The model we have used in Pakistan so far has been to take higher education into the public sector. We think that the government is responsible for providing university education. We have employed the method of keeping tuition fees very low, and have tried to give access to large numbers by keeping financial entry barriers low. The state has provided the universities with finances to meet the expenditure-revenue gap. But we know that the ability of the state to provide funds, has been and will remain, low. It cannot give the kind of money that universities need to educate the kind of numbers that we need to educate at the university level. The result has been that the universities have been starved, growth of universities has been slow and we have been imparting, by and large, very low quality education at the university level.

Within the public sector, barring a physics department here and a chemistry department there, there is hardly any place that can be shown to be at world standards. Student intake is lower quality, student results are lower quality, academic staff quality is very poor, there is hardly any research output, and what is present is of very poor quality, there are almost no interesting educational initiatives going on, and publication records are dismal. If you are not convinced, have a look at Akbar Zaidi's 'The State of Social Sciences in Pakistan'. It provides ample evidence of the poverty I mention above.

This has been a poor compromise. We have failed our students, and we have ensured that the development process of the country also remains derailed; and we do not 'take-off' in the near future.

There have been countries that have kept higher education, or some of it, in the public sector. Prominent examples are of course the European nations and Canada. And they have also maintained the quality of education at a decent level as well. But this has required major subsidies and outlays by the state. The governments that have been in power in Pakistan have been unable and unwilling to do that. It is also true that being a relatively poor developing country, our government has not had the fiscal space to be able to provide the funds needed. But then they should have involved the private sector in higher education long ago.

After failing to finance higher education adequately and providing the requisite incentives needed to structure it well, the state has given up on providing quality higher education now. Slowly the state has come round to talking about autonomy, private-public partnerships.

In the last 15 odd years a number of higher education institutions have come about in the private sector. It is still early days to decide if they will be able to establish and maintain quality in the future. They would have to go in for niche existence, sustain themselves on tuition fees only. A number of international donors and multilateral agencies have been talking about helping Pakistan in the education field, but they tend to be too fixated on primary education to look at the positive role that they can play in higher education. I hope that they can realize it themselves and maybe the Higher Education Commission can also help in getting the case of higher education institutions across as well.

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