

A fresh approach is needed

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manpower, link them with economic development, and so it is a whole series of things.

We have taken a very late start but it has to be sustained.

Q: Why is our higher education sector in the state that it is in?

A: In the first five-year plan in the 1950s, we found that about 31 per cent of the total education budget used to go to higher education. This over the years eroded to a point that now only 10 per cent of the education budget was going into the higher education sector. And this meant that the universities got less and less funding, and so they in reality became high schools or 'O' level colleges. And most of the universities in Pakistan are, in fact, no better than colleges in terms of international standards.

Today, the situation is that even universities in Bangladesh have funding which is at least three-fold higher on average than in Pakistan. We now compare with sub-Saharan Africa in terms of funding. India has budgets in which universities have funding five to 10 times higher.

You can give 10 times as much funds as you have given to universities in the past, and they can absorb them easily because most of our universities lie in a totally dilapidated state. Out of the 7,000 faculty members that we have today, only about 1,550 have Ph.D. degrees. In India you cannot become an assistant professor in a college, let alone a university, unless you have a Ph.D. degree.

Another problem with most of the universities in Pakistan was that the vice-chancellors decided to do away with Bachelor's classes to make life easier — fewer student problems, basically — with the result that except for two universities in Pakistan, the rest of them do not have a B.Sc. Hons. programme. They only have an M.Sc. programme.

Q: How supportive financially has the new government been to higher education?

A: There has been a directive from President Pervez Musharraf that the universities' budget shall be doubled over the next three years, with a 50 per cent increase in the coming financial year, and another 50 per cent in the subsequent year. This is the kind of thing we need to move forward.

Q: What are the major plans being made to take Pakistan ahead in the field?

A: A major programme is being launched so that in about eight years from now, 50 per cent of our faculty members should have a doctorate degree. But then again, people come back into a barren environment and they get frustrated and move away. So one should have sustainable support for these people. We have come up with a programme that will assist them on their return.

The second is infrastructure, which means that the working environment has to be improved, and that means laboratories, libraries and sustainability of the entire thing. Because you have these expensive toys coming in and then people do not have the ability to maintain them. They get out of order and then you go ahead and buy more toys. There is no need for that. One has to really make sure that they have the necessary infrastructure in terms of stable electricity supply, UPS systems, electronic engineers, maintenance facilities, technicians and so on.

The third area is international linkages, because there is a lot of talent across the world that we can tap into. We have come forward with a programme called POOR — Pakistan Organization for Collaboration in Research — in which a professor abroad — he may be a Pakistani or another nationality — comes in for three or four weeks, writes up a detailed project with a partner institution in Pakistan, identifying an area for collaboration. This project can be for about \$700,000 (about Rs40 million) for a four-

year programme initially, so that there may be a long-term sustainable linkage with the exchange of faculty, training and so on. This could be in any of the priority areas, including the social sciences.

The fourth is the use of technology, which has suddenly opened a window of opportunity for Pakistan. For instance, the first lecture from MIT will be held soon through video-conferencing. This will be the first of a series of lectures. We have linked all the universities together by fibre — 10 universities are now fully linked up and the linkage of the rest will be completed in the next couple of months. The PAKSAT-1 project has succeeded in getting a Pakistani satellite in place — and that has an enormous capacity — and we are using all these facilities now to use distance-learning as an effective tool. And this is being done under the umbrella of the Virtual University.

The fifth aspect is linkages with industry and agriculture. This is a vitally important aspect because at the moment education is not need-oriented. There has been no long-term planning or vision where this country is going, what are going to be our needs — five years, 10 years, 20 years down the road? Are we going to make aircraft, computers or chips or pharmaceuticals? What is the industrial vision of Pakistan? Our educational programmes have to be linked to this so that we may have the ability to deliver.

Jointly with the ministry of industries, we are working out proposals to see what is going to be done by Pakistan and what kind of needs does it have in the next 15 to 20 years. I will be talking to the prime minister, and I will be asking him that there should be a consensus behind the scene, a bipartisan approach. The opposition should also be involved in this vision process so that if there is a change in government, the basic parameters don't change, and we come

forward with a medium- and long-term development vision of Pakistan.

This should be based on a discussion process in which educationists, planners, scientists, engineers are involved, and then dovetail our own programmes to this vision so that we produce the kind of quality and quantum of human resources that are required.

Q: Will Pakistan be able to compete with other countries, and be able to find the market for its products?

A: Absolutely. We have 140 million people — almost 100 million are below the age of 30. That is our real resource. We have to tap into our young people and train them in areas where there are opportunities. And there are lots of such areas. For instance, the castor oil industry in the world relies on one starting material, which occurs in abundance in medicinal plant form in Punjab area. There is a huge opportunity here. There are thousands of such opportunities for going into value-added products and processes.

Pakistan absolutely should change gear and move out from agriculture. About 81 per cent of total exports from Pakistan are directly or indirectly linked to agricultural products, and, therefore, they are subject to the vagaries of weather, and they also have the problem of being low on value-addition because they are not in high-tech areas.

So, the name of the game now is high technologies. If you want genuine poverty alleviation, it will not come from increasing your agricultural output. Our GDP is \$65 billion. Twenty-five per cent of that — \$17.18 billion — comes from agriculture. Even if you have a 30 per cent agricultural growth, you at best will only add \$3 billion or \$4 billion to your GDP. You may go up from \$65 billion to \$70 billion. You are not going to go from \$65 billion to \$165 billion. So there is no way out except to go into hi-tech areas or into value-added products.

The interview panel included Raja Asghar, Ihtasham ul Haque and Nasir Iqbal.