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**HEC in dire straits**

The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan.

The higher education sector in Pakistan is predictably heading towards a severe financial crisis in the next fiscal year unless the government takes immediate measures to contain it.

This financial deficit occurs every year, but its severity is only getting worse with time. Only a few understand the underlying reasons for its recurrence, while the rest who question the performance of universities do not even have an iota of understanding how the higher education sector works.

The stakeholders need to realize that sustaining the same level of funding each year will leave higher education handicapped and lead to stunted growth. Only by meeting the minimal financial requirements of our universities can we make Pakistan a strong knowledge-based economy.

Higher education is unlike many other development sectors; it functions in a different way. Say the government wants to build 500 miles of roads every year. It can safely plan and allocate the funds for it with just a nominal increase every year to account for inflation. Likewise, the government may decide to electrify 1000 villages, or add power generation capacity by five percent every year. In both cases, the math is easy, and the bureaucrats only need to increase the budget by adding inflation every year.

The HEC budget works differently. It consists of two parts, recurring and development, but is allocated by the government each year in a similar fashion as for the two examples given above. Recurring pays for the salaries and operational costs of the universities is formula based, while development on the other hand includes growth, such as the opening of new universities, campuses or departments, buying equipment, human resource development, supporting research, and other programmes maintained by the HEC.

In the last five years, the HEC recurring budgets (for all 99 universities with 92 regional campuses) were Rs63.183 billion in 2017-18, Rs65.02 billion in 2018-19, Rs64.1 billion in 2019-20, and the same allocation of Rs64.1 billion in 2020-21. The proposed allocation by the government for the coming financial year 2021-22 is still Rs65 billion. One can clearly see that there has been no change in the recurring budget over the last five years, not even allowing for inflation.

But that is not all. In the last five years, the number of public sector universities has increased from 99 to 131, a 30 percent increase, with the number of enrolled students going up from 1.76 million in 2017-18 to 2.06 million in 2020-21. All these 32 new universities, which the governments themselves announced and established, mostly due to political reasons despite a laid down procedure by the HEC, have not been provided even a rupee of recurring funds.

In addition, the universities require PhD faculty to teach courses, supervise students and conduct research. The number of PhD faculty over the last four years has increased from 15,028 in 2017-18 to 19,978 in 2020-21. Scholars with a fresh PhD are returning at an even faster pace who need to be accommodated.

Salaries for PhD faculty are much higher than those without a PhD, and the goal of any university is to have as many PhD faculty as possible. None of this increase has been accounted for in the proposed allocation of Rs65 billion for the recurring budget by the government. The allocated budget is less than 50 percent of what is required by the universities!

On the other hand, universities, including new ones, need development funds. These funds are used to strengthen universities, to open new programmes in emerging and essential technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, blockchain, cyber security, etc, to establish centers of excellence in these technologies, for the promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship by establishing incubators and technology parks in areas of industrial and agricultural importance beneficial to Pakistan, and for enhancing applied research funds if we are ever to become an Asian Tiger.

To support all such initiatives, the HEC needs to send at least 2,000 scholars a year to the best foreign universities to pursue their PhDs, and another 1,000 for their postdocs abroad for advanced training. We also need to establish at least one top-notch federal university in each province, along the lines of the Pak-Austrian Fachhochschule established recently by the government, and another one under development in Sialkot. Southern Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan each require such skill-based universities for which development funds must be provided. The HEC development budget must therefore increase by at least 25 percent from the current year's allocation if we ever wish to become a technology-based knowledge economy.

A National Education Emergency is the need of the hour, so we can strive to achieve over 95 percent literacy for the youth within five years. There must be an increase in allocation to education by both the federal and provincial governments by at least 0.5 percent of GDP annually till it reaches five percent of GDP.

Thirty-three percent of these funds must be allocated to higher education and the remaining 67 percent be spent on schools, colleges and technical education. There should be expansion of a matric-tech programme in schools to provide technical training at matric level so that every Pakistani youth is skilled to work and provide a decent livelihood to his or her family.

The future belongs to the youth of Pakistan. Only by investing in value-added education at schools, colleges and universities can we make the future of Pakistan bright and strong, and where we can stand shoulder to shoulder with any developed country of the world. We are fortunate to have a democratic government that cares for the youth and for education. Let us not blow it this time.

The writer is a former chairperson of the HEC.