**[Prioritizing Higher Education](https://nation.com.pk/18-Feb-2020/prioritizing-higher-education" \t "_new)**

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No society has progressed without significant and sustained investment in higher education. Today, as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, higher education is considered critical for the achievement of economic progress and prosperity. However, higher education sector in Pakistan, now-a-days is facing a number of problems of severe nature, which have started affecting its progress across the country. Due to budget cuts and low allocations, many of the public sector universities are even unable to pay salaries and pensions. On the other hand, private sector universities which constitute 40% of total recognized universities both at national and Punjab level (83 out of 210 recognized universities with 35 sub campuses at national level and 28 out of 70 universities in Punjab), have also raised serious concerns over higher education policies.

The access to higher education, defined in terms of the participation of youth, in Pakistan is one the lowest in the region i.e. Turkey (69%), Iran (52.2%), Indonesia (32%), India (25%), Sri Lanka (17%), Bangladesh (13.2%), Pakistan (9.5%). The multiple challenges are being faced by higher education sector of Pakistan. There is dire need to pay immediate attention towards these challenges and problems. According to the key recommendations by Task Force on Improvement of Higher Education in Pakistan, universities are considered as the pillars of the higher education system. They must have autonomy from all extraneous influences in order to govern and manage their academic, administrative, and financial functions. In particular, universities must have autonomy to develop their academic programmes; recruit, assess, and develop their faculty; and select, train and educate their students. The Task Force also recommended that each university should be governed and managed as an independent institution, not controlled by the Ministry or Department.

The Steering Committee on Higher Education in its final report also recommended to the Government of Pakistan that Higher Education Commission should be a supportive and facilitative body rather than an intrusive one which has already been realized. The Task Force further recommended that along with focusing principally on strengthening public sector universities, same principles should be adapted for the private sector universities by the government.

Meanwhile the Executive Council constituted, by the Association of the Private Sector Universities of Punjab, through a 10 points charter of demands, emphasized that higher education should be the first priority of the government. As the private sector is the equal partner in delivery of education, an enabling environment is required to be created which would be helpful in improving education and training through joint and collective efforts.

The Association of Private Sector Universities from the most populous province of Pakistan also demanded promotion of creative and research activities, one window operation to further avoid lengthy process that involves years in pursuance and approval of petty things like opening of a new department in a university, funding of private sector universities, review and change of anti-research policies, right of education for deserving students, jurisdiction of private sector universities ( private sector universities may be allowed to operate and function within the powers and autonomy as per provision of their charter in letter and spirit) and management of private sector universities in consultation with stakeholders.

Like the other developed counties who have top ranked higher education system, it is high time to acknowledge the significant contribution of private sector in higher education as private sector institutions have developed over more than two decades, having invested hundreds of billions of rupees in land, infrastructure, equipment, human resource development and have been contributing to the national economy in many ways. These universities, have been navigating through the tough terrain of multiple registration, accreditation and regulatory departments of the government whereby decisions on critical issues would take years, and in some cases, even decades.

The multiple challenges and problems in higher education sector need immediate attention both by the federal and provincial governments through declaring Education Emergency as committed by the ruling party in its election manifesto. As per international standards, at least 4% of GDP should be allocated for the education sector and 25% of total education budget should be spent on universities. Autonomy of the universities needs to be respected and protected both at national and provincial levels. In order to ensure efficient governance and accountability in universities, role of governing boards and syndicates should be strengthened through appointment and nominations of relevant experts. Instead of announcement of new public sector universities, existing one should be strengthened through provision of required funding and support. If desired, new sub campuses of existing universities should be announced instead of opening new universities. After ten years, these sub campuses should be converted into full-fledge universities. Merit based transparent appointments would also be helpful in improving the state of higher education in Pakistan. The persons with controversial career and background with severe proven allegations should be avoided for key posts in higher education sector.

All the policies of higher education should be formulated in consultation with relevant stakeholders. One sided policies without taking the concerned stakeholders on board, could not yield the desired results. As per follow up of the recommendations presented by Steering Committee and Task Force on Higher Education, the role of private sector should be strengthened in higher education to increase access in higher education sector and equipping youth with required modern knowledge and skills. The genuine grievances of stakeholders especially private sector should be addressed immediately by considering them as partners in higher education sector.