**Leadership matters**

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Higher education around the world is evolving fast. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has become the key factor in accelerating the pace of its transformation. The rapid evolution triggered by the pandemic paved the way for some opportunities for our educational think-tanks to alter conventional systems and reform the higher education sector in the country.

The struggling higher education system in Pakistan is steadily progressing and is solely reliant on universities that face numerous challenges, particularly on the part of technological advancement, inadequate funding, bad governance, poor infrastructure, political interventions, and a lack of academic freedom and growing competitive environment.

Despite such major adversities, our universities have made remarkable gains in terms of global recognition. This is the first time that 21 education institutions of the country were included in the list of the prestigious Times Higher Education (THE) World Rankings for 2022.

It is pertinent to mention here that the premier ranking agency hold immense weight when it comes to gauging a university’s progress. For the 2022 rankings, the Times Higher Education team analysed 108 million citations and 4.4 million research publications.

According to the analysis, Pakistan is ‘one of the world’s fastest improving nations on a range of key metrics’ and ‘one of the top five of nations globally for improvements in research citations, international outlook and industry links’.

The rankings showed Quaid-i-Azam University (Islamabad), Hazara (Mansehra), Abdul Wali Khan (Mardan) and Government College (Faisalabad) universities at top positions.

It also pointed out that Pakistan is among the top five countries in terms of teaching, learning, research facilities, and predominantly in the categories of research citations, international outlook, and industry linkages.

Following THE ranking 2022, I critically reviewed the performance and implementation status of the reformist agenda introduced by renowned educationist Prof Dr Muhammad Ali Shah (Tamgha-e-Imtiaz) soon after joining the varsity as vice chancellor, in 2018.

QAU faculty members are of the opinion that quality of research work was given the top most priority by the incumbent VC, in addition to improved teaching skills and international outlook. Catering to the need of fast evolution in higher education around the world, the QAU management took some bold steps to keep pace with global emerging trends in the sector. These interventions yielded encouraging results as the QS also ranked QAU 23rd globally on citation per faculty and 324th in employer reputation in the world which is, undoubtedly, an exceptional achievement of the institution.

Vice Chancellor Dr Shah ensured that education being imparted, or research conducted in the university must cater to the needs of society. For this purpose, special grants were given to researchers and faculty members to produce quality work in their domains. The VC remained successful in establishing a strong link between academia and the industrial sector, which resulted in the creation of better employability opportunities for graduates. Such steps turned the varsity into an eminent international educational brand.

Under the VC’s leadership, the university retained its top slot for three consecutive years and significantly improved its QS ranking from 454 to 378. There are major institutional drawbacks that exist in our higher education system which include quality and compatibility of higher education with international standards and industry requirements, fragile institutional structure, and knowledge gaps between cross-culture education systems.

To turn the country into an educational hub, the government ought to set clear objectives for university education, strengthen education institutions by giving autonomy to academia, adapt modern technology, produce quality research work through adequate funding, and develop regional and international partnerships with emerging higher education institutions.

The need is to give leadership roles to renowned educationists to form a functional and effective body to oversee the prospects and challenges of higher education in the country. It is time for the government to rethink, overhaul and set the priorities for the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and give its reigns to eminent educationists.

The upward trend of Pakistani universities in global ranking is encouraging; we need to sustain and further improve it.

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