[**More universities…**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1682859/more-universities)

[Faisal Bari](https://www.dawn.com/authors/568/faisal-bari)Published April 1, 2022 - Updated a day ago

The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.

OVER the last year, the Punjab government has announced the setting up of 10 new universities. Not all of these are being created from scratch. Some of these universities are being created by upgrading colleges that have been around for quite some time. Nonetheless, there are important issues to discuss in this regard.

Why 10 more universities? We know many older, much more established and reputable public-sector universities are in deep financial trouble. Some of them have significant deficits, some cannot make their payrolls, some are having difficulty paying pension dues of retired employees and some have had to make significant cuts in expenditure which has adversely impacted the quality of education as well. So why 10 more universities at this point? Why not take the option of strengthening the existing ones?

We also know that given the larger financial situation of the country and the priorities of this government, higher education has seen no significant funding increases over the last few years, and irrespective of which political party is in power over the next few years, it is unlikely that funding for universities will go up significantly. So, how are we going to ensure the survival of existing universities and how are we going to fund new ones?

**Editorial**: [*Masters for sale*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1673035)

Even when existing colleges are converted into universities, there is a lot of expenditure that is needed. These institutions will need a significant amount of funds to build and improve infrastructure, hire new and more qualified faculty, build better laboratories and libraries, and put in a much more elaborate governance structure than what they had as colleges. All of these universities are being set up in the public sector so they are not going to be able to raise their tuition fee by much. They will need money from the provincial higher education commission or the federal one.

Setting up new universities will not improve the situation.

We have a severe shortage of good faculty in Pakistan. The university sector has expanded rapidly to some 220-odd universities by now. But I do not know of a single university, private or public, that does not struggle to find quality faculty. This is true of even our best and most reputed universities. How are 10 new universities going to find quality faculty members? And what is a university if it does not have quality faculty?

If the government’s aim was to increase access to higher education, why was it not done by expanding existing universities and strengthening their connections with colleges? Why incur the fixed cost of setting up new universities? The existing ones could have used the extra resources more efficiently and needed these injections too. Was it just for appeasing political constituencies that these universities have been announced?

Some government representatives have also argued that these universities will not be ‘tier one’ research universities, they will be ‘teaching universities’ and so will not be as expensive as the more established ones. But this argument seems to be weak. If the purpose was to keep them as ‘teaching universities’ then why did the government not keep them as colleges and try to improve their teaching quality?

Once a university charter is granted, the way incentives for faculty recruitment and promotion are set up in Pakistan by the Higher Education Commission, the pressure on the faculty at these new universities will be to do what the faculty at the older ones are doing. The faculty will have to publish research in order to be promoted. They will need published research if they want jobs in other universities. If faculty has to do research, research facilities will have to be provided and expenses will have to be incurred. It will not be easy to keep a university from following this path if the overall incentives are what they are right now. So, how will the distinction between ‘teaching’ universities and ‘research’ universities be created and/or maintained? It cannot be.

Private universities have also increased in number in Pakistan. This has expanded access to higher education. It is true that private education is pricier and if the government wants to increase access to higher education based on merit or for students from more constrained economic backgrounds, higher education will need subsidy. How far does the government want to go in this direction is a topic for later. But, if affordable higher education needs to be provided it will have to be funded directly through public-sector universities or the government will have to increase scholarships for needy or deserving students.

Last year, the government [started](https://www.dawn.com/news/1578646) a 50,000 scholarship programme through Ehsaas. Why could this not be extended to 500,000 students? And even if the government prefers direct subsidy for public-sector educational institutions, why did they not decide to strengthen colleges instead of setting up new universities? We already have a major issue with the quality of education in most of our established and mainstream universities. How will setting up new universities improve the situation? It will not. In fact, the real fear is that as resources, human and financial, get more diluted — and they will get diluted when the new universities start vying for these resources — the quality of education is going to go down further. Will giving out more degrees that do not educate and skill students adequately help increase ‘access’ to higher education?

Expanding the public-sector education system at this pace, when older institutions are crying for resources, is a disservice to education and it is a disservice to Pakistan. The unemployment rate in educated youth is already high in the country. It will go higher if the number of graduates increase and the quality of education remains the same or is further diluted. Setting up 10 new universities will do exactly that. Better options of strengthening teaching abilities at the college level and/or offering more scholarships should have been explored more thoroughly. The government chose the easy way out of pleasing political constituencies.

*The writer is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.*

*Published in Dawn, April 1st, 2022*