**Quest for quality education**

BY FA I S A L B A R I 2021-11-26

UNIVERSITY students from across Pakistan will be protesting today. One of their demands is for the recent fee hike to be taken back and for tuition fees and other educational expenses to be kept low. For the school sector the problem, not the solution, is simpler. Article 25A of the Constitution clearly states that all fiveto 16-year-olds should have access to `free` education. They should not be charged for education, up to matriculation at least, under this article.

But providing quality education is expensive.

Buildings, infrastructure, teachers, materials and management cost a lot. The cost of each item is higher if minimum quality standards are to be observed. If public-sector schools cannot charge students for costs, the government/ society must find a way to pay the cost of education. For now, the government pays all expenses. But schools are severely underfunded so the provision is at a significant cost on both fronts: access to education and quality of education.

For better access, as Article 25A stipulates, we`ll have to increase funding for the education sector significantly. The same applies if we want to improve the quality. Not every rupee of the current allocation for education is being spent in the most efficient way, but even if all the wastage and poor allocations were to be remedied, we would still need more resources to provide for all children who are out of school and for ensuring better-quality provision for all who are and will be in school.

Society must acknowledge this if 25A and `Education for All` are to be a goal.

At the university level, the argument gets more complex. There is no `right` to university education in Pakistani law. We need many university-educated people for sustainable growth of the economy. University education also provides significant private returns so it is understandable that several young people want university degrees. But these arguments are not rights-based arguments. They are arguments about the instrumentality of highereducation.

The private returns argument (if I get a degree I can have higher returns in the future which will be good for my family and me) doesn`t give much support for public funding of university education.

Why should the state fund a person for his or her private gains? The state will have an interest if private returns to a person create some public returns for society too. The argument will have to be on the basis that having more university educated people allows Pakistan to have better human resources across all work sectors, makes higher and sustainable growth possible, improves the quality of life, and possibly, has benefits on the side of governance too. These arguments will justify subsidising education to ensure society gets the benefits mentioned.

In particular, if we feel that people should have opportunities based on potential and merit, and not their ability to pay, thus making higher education accessible to people who can`t afford to pay for it, it becomes an important policy goal for the government. But this still does not mean that every person who can, should have access to higher education. The instrumental arguments do not establish rights and do not cover all people who fall in a particular age or education level category.

How do we then see the students` demand to keep higher education costs low? It is a complex issue. Higher education is even more expensive to provide than school education. For sciences, laboratories are a major expense. For all subjects, faculty salary is the biggest ticket item. At higher education levels, research becomes an integral part of education provision and funding for it demands a significant proportion of funds too. If universities cannot charge students, where will they get the money from? Higher education funding for the last three years or so hasn`t increased. In some years, in fact, funding has decreased. So, how do we square the circle? Inflationary pressures have also been eroding the power of budgets set in nominal terms. Facultyand staff have been arguingfor higher salaries.If faculty/ staff salaries do not 1(eep pace with inflationary pressures and the opportunity costs of being at a particular university or in academia in general, people start leaving and this has an impact on the quality of provision: we do want the very best teachers and researchers we can get.

It is unlikely that philanthropy will fill the gap for subsidising quality education for all (school level) and for those who have potential/ merit (university level). Philanthropy, though not insubstan tial in Pakistan, is mainly not through formalised channels. The share of education is also not too large and very little of it, even out of the amount that goes towards education, is for higher learning.

Currently, we do not have a significant local funding base for research. Most research funding for now comes from the university`s own funds, HEC or overseas donors.

Quality education for every child up to matriculation or intermediate and for those who have the merit/ potential to attend university and contribute to national development is important. But quality education costs money. Given the levels of poverty in Pakistan and overall income distribution, most parents cannot pay for it. The state has taken on the responsibility of giving quality education to all children for the first 10 years. But it is not giving priority to this goal even now. Higher education too remains severely underfunded even when only a small number of those who should be getting higher education are doing so. And it seems the state has no intention of increasing funding for education in the near future. We seem to be in a poor equilibrium and there seems to be no way out of it for now. So, all children will not get education, and compromises on quality, for those who are in schools and universities, will continue.  The writer is a senior research fellow at the institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.