**Tank-ing Higher Education**

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An image first shared by a local English daily has been doing the rounds across social media platforms for at least three days now. “Defence budget hiked by six per cent,” it reads, showing the country’s military leadership atop a tank in the background.

The viral image pertains to news reports that the armed forces are likely to be allocated Rs 1.45 trillion – 2.2 per cent of the GDP – in the upcoming budget, which would be about Rs 83 billion higher than the outgoing year’s allocation of Rs 1.37 trillion.

According to reports, the decision to increase the defence budget was taken by the Economic Coordination Committee that in total approved a whopping Rs 182 billion in supplementary grants so as to meet the needs of the armed forces, including their enhanced salary requirements amid rising inflation.

Despite defence ministry officials’ clarifications that the net effect of the allocation would remain the same as the previous year at an inflation rate of 11.3 per cent reports of the six per cent increase in the defence budget of a country with the world’s ninth-strongest military, as ranked by Global Firepower Index for 2022, continue to be widely shared abreast with claims of proposed cuts in the same country’s higher education budget.

Despite long-pending demands from the vice-chancellors of public sector universities, budgetary documents last year showed that there was no serious increase in the non-development budget.

We spend a lot of time talking about the value of education in Pakistan and the need to have a strong higher education system to ultimately be able to deal with the many crises facing the country. However, according to Times Higher Education World University Rankings, Pakistan has only 42 universities in the overall global rankings, the highest among which is ranked at number 501-600.

While government ministers continue to assure vice-chancellors of public-sector universities that there would not be any cuts in the higher education budget, it merits a mention that heads of these educational institutions have demanded allocation of Rs 104.9 billion recurring budget for the fiscal year 2022-23.

The recurring budget of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) was Rs 63.1 billion in 2017-18, Rs 65.02 billion in 2018-19, Rs 64.1 billion in 2019-20 as well as 2020-21, meaning that the recurring budget remained almost stagnant that year.

For the outgoing fiscal year, the federal government had earmarked Rs108 billion – 42.4 billion for development and 66.25 billion for non-development expenditure – for the higher education sector with a Rs 15 billion increase in the total budget of the HEC.

Despite long pending demands from the vice-chancellors of public sector universities, budgetary documents last year showed that there was no serious increase in the non-development budget (Rs 66.25 billion), which was meant for salaries as compared to the same head in the fiscal year 2020-21 (Rs 64.1 billion).

With vice-chancellors expressing concerns regarding the indicative budget ceilings of a mere Rs 30 billion for higher education’s recurring grant for the fiscal year 2022-23 and ministers seemingly only “standing by these valid demands” until they actually need to be met, the ultimate collapse of the higher education sector does no longer seem like an anticipatory fear but a fast-approaching reality.

There is no denying the internal and external threats facing Pakistan, but if the logic that “one indicator of a nation’s priorities lies in its federal budget” is to be believed, the disparity between the allocation of funds to be realised, and the persisting financial crisis to be comprehended, tank-ing (read: resetting) not just the higher education sector but the entire economy, might not really be a bad idea.

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