[Dr Naazir Mahmood](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-naazir-mahmood)

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**Two promising institutions Part I**

A visit to Balochistan invariably becomes educative. The rest of Pakistan does not hear much about anything good happening there. But it is not all doom and gloom; on a recent visit I observed a couple of well-oiled institutions that the readers may find informative.

The first is the International Centre for Refugee and Migration Studies (ICRMS) located at the Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering, and Management Sciences (BUITEMS) and supported by the UNHCR, which is the UN Refugee Agency. The second is working under the People’s Primary Healthcare Initiative-Balochistan (PPHI-B). Both are contributing positively in their own ways to the betterment of society in terms of advocacy and service delivery. The ICRMS works to improve cohesion and integrations of refugees, whereas the PPHI works to improve the quality of healthcare services for the people of Balochistan.

The ICRMS generates research exploring the possibility of collaboration among refugee populations and their host countries. This is a challenging and interdisciplinary task that the young director of the Centre, Hammal Baloch, is ably leading forward, and Dr Jan Mohammad, dean of faculty of social sciences is supporting him. The Centre is striving to map the economic and social landscape for refugees not only at local and regional but also at global levels. With an increasing number of displaced populations, the need for organizing conferences and dialogues, and developing policy papers becomes imperative. To obtain a comprehensive perspective of causes and patterns of migration, the UNHCR collaborates with the ICRMS.

Recently, the UNHCR supported the Centre to hold a policy dialogue on the access of Afghan refugees to higher education in Pakistan. Held on December 8, 2020, this event focused on the issues Afghan students face in Pakistan. These issues range from access and documentation to opportunities available for refugees especially in the higher education institutions in the country. The policy dialogue turned out to be a success despite the constraints of the protocols under the Covid-19 pandemic. It brought together representatives from different levels of decision-making and programme implementation.

The ICRMS managed to assemble not only Afghan diplomats and students but also deans of faculties from several universities who could share their experiences with Afghan students and offer suggestions to solve their problems. Moreover, the officials from the government of Balochistan, the Higher Education Commission (HEC), and the UNHCR had a lot to offer to the participants. One of the takeaways from the dialogue was that Pakistani society and state both need to address the challenges the Afghan students face in Pakistan. There has to be a comprehensive higher education policy for Afghan students that we have not been able to develop.

During the over four decades that these refugees have been in the country, the world has been more interested in who is fighting whom; rather than spending more resources on development and education, the so-called ‘world community’ has been supporting diverse factions in their attempts to annihilate their purported or real enemies. We have lost broader development goals in the smoke of warfare. We have sacrificed the larger public good for both locals and refugees at the altar of national and religious hubris. In the past four decades, we have not been able to encourage different actors and stakeholders to find common ground.

In this matter, the UNHCR has taken a lead in its education policy for 2020-22. It clearly mentions the importance of strengthening the linkages to education pathways. It stresses the need for education that should not only be equitable but also inclusive for all segments of society, including refugees from Afghanistan. Interestingly, there has been more attention to primary and secondary education for Afghan refugees in Pakistan but there has been little focus on higher or tertiary education. Even adult students of Pakistan do not get many opportunities for lifelong learning.

There was near consensus among the participants of the dialogue that there has been a lack of clarity among the higher education circles in terms of access and opportunities for Afghan students trying to get admissions to Pakistani degree-awarding institutions (DAIs). There is a dire need to analyze and write about the interests of Afghan refugees and their higher-education needs in Pakistan. And this we cannot achieve without advocacy and raising awareness among as many stakeholders as possible.

The Afghan refugee context in Pakistan is quite dissimilar to some other refugee contexts in the world. We have hosted them for over 40 years now and nearly half of them opened their eyes as a refugee. At the moment, there are 1.4 million Afghan refugees registered in Pakistan but per some estimates a similar number is still unregistered. Even if you count them to be at least two million, nearly half of them must be under 30 years of age, meaning in need of education or skills training at various levels. The representative from the HEC, Jahanzeb Khan, was right in pointing out that we cannot blame the HEC for all the issues that Afghan students face in getting higher education in Pakistan.

After 1979, when Afghan refugees entered Pakistan, they were not a monolithic group. They were diverse in their ethnicities and material conditions. Some were rich and could buy properties and start businesses in Pakistan but a majority of them lacked resources. Some were even able to get Pakistan identity cards and now live in the country as its citizens. Most of those unable or unwilling to get such fake ID cards continued to live as refugees, and they mostly belong to the lowest-income strata among the Afghan refugees. They are simply unable to pay university fees in Pakistan.

Thanks to the efforts by the ICRMS and the UNHCR, the dialogue was able to provide a forum to significant actors to engage in meaningful discussions and also offer some possible solutions. This process must continue because a comprehensive higher education policy can emerge only if a series of discussions leads to solid recommendations regarding possible solutions to the problems of Afghan students. Sadly, some important policymakers were missing from the dialogue. For example, no representative from the IBCC (Inter Board Committee of Chairmen, which assumes that it will only have men) was there.

One of the problems that Afghan students face in Pakistan is the issuance of equivalence certificates. The IBCC deals with this, so they must participate in any such dialogue. I suggested that the Federal Ministry of Education has a lot to answer for, as it has reduced the budget to public sector DAIs in the country. Most DAIs are facing dire financial constraints and some are even unable to pay salaries on time. With this situation, Pakistan has one of the lowest enrollment ratios for higher education in the world, even lower than Bangladesh and India.

The Planning Commission should also take the issue of higher education seriously, not only for Afghan students but for Pakistanis too. The Ministry for States and Frontier Regions (Safron) primarily deals with Afghan refugees and Pakistan, so it must also come up with a policy for Afghan students including those wishing to pursue higher education. Lastly, I suggested that rather than higher education we should discuss tertiary education which should include education at the college level too. Intermediate education for class 11-12 is perhaps the most neglected level in Pakistan.

Similarly, Technical and Vocational Education (TVET) is also a significant area where we must focus to enroll and train Afghan students so that rather than pursuing degrees, they can also get some technical skills for gainful employment. An Afghan student, Saad Uddin, presented his case very well. One hopes that in all future dialogues more Afghan students get an opportunity to participate.

To be continued

The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK and works in Islamabad.

Email: mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk