**University challenges**

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In the developed world, higher education institutions are considered key architects in the building of a society due to their central role in social and economic development, by creating and promoting required knowledge and skills.

Universities possess unique capacities to develop knowledge, mobilize education resources and provide learning opportunities to diverse populations.In other words, universities are the driving forces for a fundamental shift from educating young students from secondary schools to encouraging learners from different backgrounds to enter higher education at different ages and stages of their personal and professional lives.

The higher education sector has a huge potential for promoting lifelong learning processes. Unfortunately, in our society, there is little or no sense of its true contribution. As a result, these premium nation-building institutions are facing numerous challenges and struggling for their survival.

Higher education institutions across Pakistan and in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) face financial instability. The challenges being faced by these premier institutions are of course mediated by local contexts, embedded in levels of development and socio-economic inequalities, prevailing political cultures, institutional capacities and a confluence of other forces.

Before readers wonder how universities in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) are facing more problems than those in Pakistan, let it be reminded that after the 18th Amendment, universities have become provincial subjects. And the provinces are allocating the required necessary resources for the financial stability of their respective universities. But in AJK, this situation is quite different.

Let us take the example of the University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (UAJK), the largest and the oldest university of the state, as a case study and try to understand the problems being faced by the institution.

Since its inception in 1980, the UAJK has come a long way in providing quality higher education to the young people of the state and has achieved a prominent position among national universities. Unfortunately, the oldest university of the state with over 8,000 students is currently facing a severe financial crisis due to several reasons.

As of 2009, the UAJK, being the only institution of tertiary education in the region, had a large number of students. But later, with the establishment of four new independent universities — the Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST), the University of Kotli, the University of Poonch, Rawalakot, and Women University Bagh — student enrollment in the UAJK and a number of colleges affiliated with it declined steeply, which led to significant revenue shortfalls.

As mentioned earlier, all the four provincial governments in Pakistan are providing regular financial assistance to their respective universities in their provinces. However, the AJK government, which earlier was providing a modest grant of Rs6 million to the UAJK, has slashed it to Rs3.5 million due to its financial constraints. This meagre amount is insufficient to run even the smallest teaching department of the university.

It is worth mentioning that two of the four main campuses of the university namely Jhelum Valley Campus and Neelum Valley Campus are located near the Line of Control (LoC) in the Indian firing-affected areas where, in the past, shelling from across the LoC not only displaced border-dwellers but also disrupted economic activities of the local population, drastically reducing the paying capacity of the students.

After the 2005 devastating earthquake, which decimated the entire university structure in Muzaffarabad, a new and state-of-the-art campus of the university — King Abdullah Campus — was built with the generous financial assistance of the Saudi government. The campus, which is now fully functional, has further increased the operational and transportation costs.

The Higher Education Commission’s (HEC) share in the university’s educational expenditure is also decreasing day by day. Until a few years ago, the HEC used to cover 30 to 35 per cent of the university’s expenditure, which has now come down to 15 per cent. So, the university’s cumulative income is gradually decreasing while expenses are constantly increasing, which is leading to an alarming impact on the financial health of the institution.

The Covid-19 outbreak further aggravated the already fragile financial health of the university. The closure of university during the state-wide lockdown, reduction of income due to discontinuation of semester sessions and additional expenditures on preventive measures against the pandemic squeezed the financial resources of the university and left them in the financial lurch.

Also, employees who were recruited at the time of the establishment of the university are now retiring on attaining the age of superannuation (60), but the university does not have enough financial resources to pay pension and other retirement benefits to them.

The UAJK has also become a soft target for a particular group of people who, through their baseless allegations, media trials, and malicious campaigns, are continuously involved in the character assassination of high-ranking university officials for their vested interests. Interestingly, these derogatory and defamatory campaigns launch as soon as the university calls for applications to influence the intake and cause financial damage to the premier institution.

Despite these challenging circumstances, more than 10,000 students enrolled in 78 degree programmes, from BS to PhD. Around 50.2 per cent female students are continuing their education at the UAJK.

It is time both the federal and state governments took immediate and solid remedial measures to rescue the public-sector universities of AJK out of these multifaceted challenges and safeguard the future of these institutions, which is actually the future of the state.

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