**Exporting skilled human resources**

[Ahsan Munir](https://nation.com.pk/authorpost/columnist/ahsan-munir/)

On **Apr 1, 2022**

The 60s’ and 70s’ decades of the twentieth century saw Western countries slowly transfer low-skilled jobs to developing countries, which helped these countries to industrialise. With what started as doing low-skilled jobs, many developing countries, such as South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore, moved to manufacture high value-added products and came to be known as Newly Industrialised Countries (NICs). These countries are exporting to both developing and developed countries, and are now deriving rent from new knowledge created through R&D. There were some late comers such as Vietnam and Malaysia, which are now aggressively trying to become exporting economies.
Pakistan has mostly been importing or assembling engineering products. For instance, the auto policy was liberalised in the 1980s, which allowed auto manufacturers such as Toyota, Suzuki, and Honda to set up assembly plants. However, three decades down the road, we are still assembling automobiles with imported core technological products. Similarly, we have one of the highest tele-densities globally, but only recently, an international brand has announced plans to assemble mobile phones in the country. Similarly, our consumer goods industry is also assembling units such as fridges, air-conditioners, with imported core technological products. Thus, more than seven decades since independence we are still an import-based economy, a situation that has not only hurt the economy but also hampered the development of skilled, exportable human resources.
Realising the technological lag, a Knowledge Economy Task Force (KETF) has recently been established to move towards a knowledge economy. Industrial clusters of hi-tech fields such as biotechnology, engineering goods, electronics, and pharmaceuticals among others have been identified to undertake R&D and generate new knowledge and products, thus improving the quality of existing products and enhancing exports. Similarly, the Lahore Knowledge Park Company (LKPC) was established in October 2014, as a separate corporate entity by the Government of Punjab to strategise, plan, undertake and oversee the development of knowledge and growth parks. To support human resource development for industrialisation, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) was created by the government of Pakistan in the early 2000s, and generous funds were allocated to the HEC to send competent students abroad for higher studies. Consequently, over time, Pakistan has developed a repository of highly trained academic manpower.
However, industrial exposure and training are required if the highly trained academic manpower is to develop any exploitable kernels of tacit and explicit knowledge. And the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative, an investment of more than $60 billion USDs with a diverse portfolio, could provide such exposure. Available manpower is now being employed in the various projects of CPEC, which include, among others: building roads through arduous topographic terrains, digging tunnels through mountains, constructing bridges, expanding and upgrading existing railway networks, building large and small dams, generating power through thermal energy and renewable energy sources, and establishing special economic zones (SEZs) along the CPEC. A major portfolio of CPEC is the Gwadar seaport, which upon completion would be the largest deep seaport in the world, and Pakistani and Chinese engineers are working tirelessly to make it a success. And working on the development and operationalisation of the largest deep seaport in the World is giving Pakistani human resources a unique experience. As the projects under the CPEC umbrella come online, Pakistani engineers and scientists are operating and maintaining them. However, Pakistani engineers and scientists must be trained and given major responsibilities in new areas and technologies in the aforementioned projects of CPEC.
Similarly, to be able to export skilled manpower, SEZs industries should be set up through the transfer of technology and technology licensing, which will help Pakistan train its human resource in new technologies and rapidly upgrade its general industrial base. Further, Pakistan has extensive experience in power generation through nuclear power plants (NPPs), which helped it recently install and commission numerous NPPs with Chinese cooperation. Thus, the aforesaid steps will help Pakistan develop a highly skilled human resource in different technologies and fields through the courtesy of CPEC.
Now to benefit from the available pool of skilled manpower, the government should actively engage with other Muslim countries such as Malaysia and developed countries such as South Korea and Japan, which need trained human resources in various advanced technological areas. The export of trained human resources would not only help to generate sustained higher foreign remittances but would also create demand for new engineers, scientists, managers, and technicians in the country.