[**Campus and tarmac**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1723584/campus-and-tarmac)

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AT the outset, I should clarify that I did not attend Quaid-e-Azam University as a student. However, as a resident of Islamabad between 2011 and 2013, I would frequent the campus to attend a study circle that a former teacher of mine, now employed there, conducted with his colleagues and students. It was my first interaction with students of the university and my first experience of the university campus itself. A decade later, nothing I’ve seen since changes my opinion of there being no educational institution quite like it anywhere else in the country.

Being a federal government university, it features tremendous and unmatched ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. A place located adjacent to the province of Punjab but the only such place, as some would joke, where an average gathering might count Punjabis in a minority. Repeatedly endorsed by local rankings as the best public-sector university, the academic environment remains robust and several of its departments produce excellent teaching and facilitate research as a valuable form of public service. The student body is engaged with a number of broader issues facing Pakistani society, is active in terms of self-organisation, and hosts considerable diversity of intellectual beliefs and ideologies. Despite recent efforts of policymakers, possessing monetary privilege is still not a deal-breaking requirement to attend.

And then there’s the campus. Several universities possess large land grants, but nearly all of them fall prey to the bureaucratic (or is it militarised?) need for manicured order, with painted tree trunks and lawns where protection of the length of grass blades takes priority over basic human mobility. The QAU campus is a stark departure, given how seamlessly it integrates itself with the natural outgrowth of the Margalla foothills. It suffers from none of the curated pretensions of other educational institutions, and offers a welcome respite from the indoors to students and visitors alike. Hard to describe it in words, but the natural sprawl fits well with the social diversity of the campus. And it is precisely this balance that is threatened by a proposed bifurcation of the campus for a 76-metre-wide bypass project.

Several have written about the project and its legal standing at some length in the national press. Recent pieces by Dr Hoodbhoy and Dr Ayesha Razzaque identify a number of legal as well as principled reasons for opposing it, as faculty members obtained a still-active stay order from the Islamabad High Court in mid-October. For a sympathetic observer located elsewhere, the very conception of the project and the single-mindedness that the government is pursuing it with highlights several failings of the way decision-makers treat higher education and the wider universe outside of their contractor-and-tarmac driven ambitions.

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First and foremost, the project deserves to be opposed on aesthetic grounds alone. No outdoor space should be bifurcated with an ugly road project, designed to facilitate private motor vehicles and the insatiable need for higher traffic speeds. Such development is accompanied by air and noise pollution, and poses a perennial risk for pedestrians. It will likely damage the ecological balance of the campus, and opens the door for further concretisation through other means. In his piece on these pages last week, Dr Hoodbhoy documents the attrition of 450 acres of university land over the last few decades, which have fallen prey to commercialised and politically backed encroachments.

The idea of further land being commercialised once this project is built is thus not inconceivable, and is something that decision-makers refuse to rule out. Some have even brazenly questioned the ‘need’ for such a large campus, given the rising value of land in the area. For a country already bearing the environmental cost of its cut-price Dubai fantasies in cities like Lahore and Karachi in the shape of smog, congestion, and service delivery failure, this disregard is jarring.

In her recent piece, Dr Ayesha Razzaque mentions that the underlying logic of this project is one of picking the path of least resistance, rather than finding a solution to the traffic problems caused by encroachments on a pre-existing route. And therein lies another failing. This path of least resistance is on offer simply because of how universities and their resources are thought about in policymaking discourse. The proposed project directly impacts the university’s botanical gardens and several research centres located on its route. Campus bifurcation will be detrimental to student experience from both an aesthetic and functional perspective. Yet it’s clear once more that in the list of government priorities, universities fall well below vanity road infrastructure, as evidenced by their chronic underfunding and, alternatively, the billions spent on underpasses, flyovers and bypasses.

A third, and deeply familiar, failing is how insulated the decision-making process is when it comes to questions of basic urban infrastructure. Friends who attended a recent public hearing on the project’s environmental impact pointed out that they received actual life threats for their opposition to the project from individuals pretending to be concerned citizens but were likely associated with the local construction and real estate sector. Given past experience with how development authorities usually treat public hearings, it is also very likely that these ‘supporters’ were bussed in by the government agency executing this project.

So what we have is a project conceived top-down, designed out of expediency, appropriating the resources of another institution for some unspecified utility that it would bring mostly to people located far elsewhere. In the middle of it is the disregard for the natural environment and perhaps even more egregiously for a space of learning and the people who belong to it. For a country prone to lamenting its developmental failures and then tracing these failures to an ‘absence of education’, the dissonance here is remarkable.

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