

STRATEGIZING THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES IN 21th CENTURY: THE PAKISTANI CONTEXT

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Abstract

Universities are supposed to be engines of innovative ideas and research; besides promoting high quality education and research they assist in national growth and development. Overpopulation, along with measly spending on health, education and social welfare has relegated many Muslim countries to the bottom of the global pile. Illiteracy and militancy have thus spawned and become rampant—allied with adverse international factors. It is said that the total number of universities in the Muslim world (nearly 700 or so) are lesser than that of Japan alone. The national budget for education earmarked is below 2 per cent, whereas according to the UN requirement, it should be minimum 6 percent of GNP. Experts recommend at least 10 per cent for the next decade or so if Pakistan is to cast off the albatross of poverty, ill-health and illiteracy. The plight faced by most of Pakistani universities is that they are woefully starved of funds, talent and other facilities. To overcome, research, value-added items, academia-industry-defence linkages, disruptive innovations, new technologies in IT, biosciences and genetics are needed. As leading edge of research activity, the universities should capitalize on their alumni intellectually and financially and national diaspora and prevent brain drain through well-regulated retention policies. Universities should focus upon or around industrial nodal points and award degrees on linkages with industry. These will assist in forging much-needed needed skills, promoting educational standards, instilling self-reliance and contribute to building a knowledge-based society. Ipso facto, this would contribute to overall national socio-economic development.

1. General

The academic landscape in the Islamic World, especially the state of education and universities, present a disquieting scenario. Pakistani universities also face a daunting challenge. Allocation of funds to health and education are abysmally low which act as serious brake to national development. The Islamic World represents one-fifth of the world with 57 OIC countries, possessing 70 per cent of the world's energy resources and nearly 50 per cent of world's raw materials. Instead of playing a meaningful role the Muslim nations contribute only 5 per cent to the global GDP -- thus reducing themselves to an inconsequential entity in global political, economic and social affairs. No wonder, this is strongly correlated with the current social issues of intolerance, violence, and militancy in Muslim societies.

It is strongly felt that universities can play a major role in research, innovation and dissemination of knowledge. Besides, they can be engines in socio-economic and cultural development of a nation. Furthermore, they can nurture and mould the minds of the youth to become motivated, humane and proactive citizens of the state. In short, they can act as powerful agents of socio-economic and cultural transformation in concert with other actors in national life.

Unfortunately, the Muslim World is presently going through a period of acute socio-economic turmoil. Poverty, lack of education and ill-health make a lethal mix. Education is a *sine qua non* for any sustainable socio-economic development. It may not bring immediate results but the long term dividends are undisputed. A strong and sovereign nation needs 'hard power' coupled with 'soft power' to become a 'smart power' -- thus states the noted US scholar, Dr. Joseph Nye, Jr.

The situation is grave in the Islamic World. Allocation of funds to health and education in are abysmally low which acts as serious brake on national development. The Islamic World represents one-fifth of the world with 57 OIC countries, possessing 70 per cent of the world's energy resources and nearly 50 per cent of world's raw materials. Instead of being an economic giant the Muslim World contributes only 5 per cent to the global GDP -- thus reducing it to an inconsequential entity in global political, economic and social affairs.¹ No wonder, this is strongly correlated with the current social issues of intolerance, violence, and militancy in Muslim societies.² With dire technological and educational backwardness the latter cannot blame the West all long, nor nostalgically dwell on their past glories alone.³

Very recently, in Britain the universities have, too, started facing an economic crunch and have resorted to help from the bond market to attract funds for their upkeep. In most of the developing

¹ See Ambassador (ret'd) Shamshad Ahmad, "The Muslim World: Medusa's wreck," *The Express Tribune*, daily, Islamabad, 19 July 2014, p.7.

² See the review by M. Ziauddin titled: "War of minds," *The Express Tribune*, Islamabad, 25 June, 2014, p.7 on [International Crisis Group](#), *Education Reform in Pakistan*, June 16, 2014. Brussels

³ Ambassador (ret'd) Shamshad Ahmad, op.cit.

countries, the situation is much more serious: overpopulation along with very low spending on health and education has adversely affected the quality and performance of universities.

2. Rationale

The objective of this policy paper is to highlight the problems facing universities in the Islamic world. The premise is that financial strength is the core issue and unless the sea of economy does not rise up the other boats of national sector/ institutions will not correspondingly rise. Notwithstanding the challenges, the universities could still plan and devise some home-grown and innovative strategies that could make them more self-reliant in raising their own funding and lessen dependence upon own governments.

3. State of Universities in Islamic World

One of the caveats is that the Islamic world is not monolithic: there are e.g., countries which are relatively developed in education (Malaysia, Turkey, some Central Asian Republics, Iran, and Egypt) whereas there are extremely poor countries such as Somalia, Mali, Afghanistan, Upper Volta, and Chad. Significantly, many parts of the Muslim world now fall in the categorization of ‘Fourth World’ rather than the Third World. The former are characterized by low population, very scarce resources and low technical manpower. Pakistan is a nuclear power and possesses technical manpower; it has a relatively better infrastructure and has linkages with the West -- yet its educational levels, like other sectors, have lately suffered and leave much to be desired.

It is said that the total number of universities in the Muslim world (nearly 674 or so) are less than Japan alone. The appalling fact is that due to fragile and poor economies most of these Islamic governments are either inept, or ill-equipped or ill-motivated to improve educational sectors. Mal-administration, lack of merit and distorted priorities are other factors that contribute to this educational malaise.

Ideally, the universities should be houses of learning, knowledge, innovation and high quality research; besides promoting high quality and state-of-art education and research methodologies they should assist in overall national growth and development through research, innovation and linkage with industry. Moreover they ought to be national emblems of pride and emblems of soft power of a nation.. These should mark their ranking status⁴ if they have to become national emblems of pride.

According to UN requirement, the earmarking of budget for education should be a minimum of four percent. Some experts recommend at least 10 per cent allocation to education for the next decade or so (like Indonesia) and Cuba) to free societies from the heavy albatross of illiteracy, poverty and ill-health—which act as major impediments to national development.

⁴ Dr. Noman Ahmed, “Getting university rankings right,” *The Express Tribune*, 16 June 2014, p.6.

In Pakistan, the HEC budget has been considerably axed and a lucrative source for funding for universities has been consequently truncated. Poor funding and misplaced priorities have hit the education sector and universities. No wonder, illiteracy directly correlated with militancy and terrorism has increased in Muslim societies in general. Stated differently, it has become rampant, allied with other adverse international factors.

Pakistan has a low literacy rate of 30 per cent. According to UN Report (2012-2013), its ranking is 146 amongst 187 countries.⁵ In the FY (2013-14) the national budget for education was 1.9 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 8 per cent of total expenditure.⁶ If allocation to research is concerned the figure plummets further.

Tellingly, Pakistan education expenditure is the lowest in South Asia. It is less than its South Asian peers such as India and Nepal who spend 3.3 and 4.7 of their respective GDPs on education.⁷ Low allocation is not only the issue as during (2012-13) the actual expenditure on education was merely 50 per cent of the allocated amount. On average, 82 per cent of the allocated funds are spent on non-development items.⁸

4. Policy Guidelines

4.1 University Leadership Ideally, the university should be headed by a respected and renowned scholar who is also a competent administrator with a committed, visionary, progressive and with an entrepreneurial outlook. Political appointments which are not based on merit are the curse of all institutions, thereby sapping their academic vitality. A competent head with solid linkages to industry, technical centers, foreign institutions, defence establishment and government is essential in galvanizing the university system. In other words, leadership with effective, motivated staff is an asset for organizational health and progress of the university.

4.2. Funding Issues

With the overall economic crunch that is hitting nationally and globally, attracting funds and resources have become a crying necessity. The head should be blessed with qualities of head and heart requiring experience, persuasion and many other skills -- just like any progressive entrepreneur.

⁵ According to the above report, Bangladesh stands at 145; India 134; and Sri Lanka 97 out of 187. The budget allocation for 2013-14 is 0.8 per cent of GDP and 1.8 percent for health which makes Pakistan as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the world. See Editorial, "Education—An Ignored Orphan," *Frontier Post*, Peshawar, daily, 8 June 2014.

⁶ "Provincial issue: Education is a concern but only on paper," The allocations province wise on education (2014-15) are: KP 27 per cent, Punjab 26 per cent, Sindh 21 per cent and Balochistan 13 per cent respectively. See *The Express Tribune*, 23 June, 2014, p.15.

⁷ Marc- Andre Franche, "Making education work in Pakistan," *The Express Tribune*, 26 June, 2014, p.7.

⁸ Ibid.

As we know, the HEC budget has been recently heavily axed and thus a lucrative source of funding for the universities has considerably diminished. Therefore, in order to mobilize and generate funds the universities have to conjure up bold and innovative techniques and methodologies that would uplift the stagnant educational system and morph it into a dynamic agent of socio-economic growth and human development.

Pakistanis, as a people, are generally altruistic by nature. When the crunch comes, and if and when their heart strings are tugged, they have little hesitation in opening up purses for noble causes like charity and alms in difficult situation like natural or man-made disasters. Likewise, if the cause for education can be turned into a *national cause* through a *national emergency* and mobilization, it would surely appeal and galvanize them.

4.3. University-Industry-Defence Linkage

In all developed countries there is a usual triangle of university-industry-defence linkage which is symbiotic in spurring research and innovation. This lessens the burden and creates a synergy. For this, there is need for cooperative participation amongst different institutions and more coordination national cause.

4.4. Learning from National Institutions

Fund raising is an art of the university leadership. An example that may sound not very relevant here but is germane to the issue at hand is that how Pakistani armed forces have learnt since many years in raising own funds. Facing the budget crunch many years ago -- despite being a well endowed institution--they started running own canteens, schools, colleges, universities, factories, real estate, farmlands and even businesses like banks and insurance. Some remain critical of this measure, arguing that their job is to fight the enemy and not indulge in businesses or launching such profit-making enterprises. However, little realized is the fact that this financial autarchy enables them to be more self-reliant and enables them to look after the welfare of troops. Many national armies viz, in Egypt, Turkey, China and others are doing this by raising indigenous funds for the welfare of their troops --albeit the armed forces in all these nations are a relatively well-funded organization as compared to civil sectors. Over and above, they also have the advantage of manpower, discipline and managerial skills. But there are other islands of excellence in certain civil sectors and universities where requisite standards have been achieved by attaining some financial autonomy.

4.5 Short-Term Measures

Besides regular teaching, the starting evening classes/training courses/workshops with suitable fees should be offered. These could be in e.g., civic education program; basic engineering skills; secretarial services; basic computer skills; project designing; proposal writing; resume writing; speech training; building social and conflict resolution skills; interviewing; relaxation and stress-coping techniques; language workshops, and creative writing skills; offering workshop for civil service exams; diploma courses for overseas workers in e.g., plumbing, carpentry, motor mechanic, masonry, telephone operators, electricians and refrigeration. In addition, driving, gardening, and medical attendants could be trained with expertise available from within

universities. The wish list may be extensive but the staff earmarked for training should be drawn from the university pool and given adequate financial incentives.

An active internship program for students should be launched whereby different offices/bureaus/department/ and sections of universities could cut down hiring of regular and redundant staff and instead employ the student community. This will not only equip the latter with some financial support, practical experience for future jobs but also impart them dignity of labor. This is practiced in most of the Western universities. These could be part-time jobs in sports complexes, libraries, security duties, administration, cafeteria etc. Upon completion, the students could get a certificate of experience which would be helpful in securing jobs in the market.

Granted, the above tasks are not meant to be performed exclusively by the universities alone; the civil society, government, and press have to play their part. But many foreign universities have developed the concept of evening classes/ distance learning and devising special workshops on a range of practical themes as above to generate funds.

Besides generating extra resources, they provide the needed skills/training to those who have not been able to attend regular education. These could be retired senior citizens (men and women) and young people interested in shifting careers; to keep themselves meaningfully occupied and keen on learning new skills or contemplating new ventures in life.

4.6 Medium--Long-Term Measures

Besides some universities as in the West, could try setting up small businesses on their campuses such as constructing small malls; modest business complexes, building halls and theatres; conference /lecture halls and properties for leasing and small farms etc. The incubator Centre in CIIT is a welcome step. This could generate extra income which would make them less reliant and lighten the burden on the government. The universities could also establish small hospitals, undertake themselves on-campus cleanliness campaigns; owning parks/trees thus saving cost. These could be combined with visiting SOS Villages/orphanages/old homes and charity walks on voluntary basis.

4.7. Capacity Building, Preventing Frequent Turnover and Issues of Retention

A bane of many universities is attracting merit, and preventing frequent turnover amongst the teaching staff. Proper mentorship programs are needed. The causes for this are multiple: unsatisfactory wages and incentives and poor working conditions and lack of procedures and adequate system of rewards and promotions. Politicking has also taken its toll like other national institutions. This has to be minimized by streamlining the rules and procedures and offering incentives.

4.8. Tapping the Pakistani Diaspora

In this regard, effective and special task force committees can be formed in the universities to explore devising imaginative, creative and innovative methodologies to keep linkages with alumni and tapping the Pakistani Diaspora. The HEC has done some commendable work but it has to be sustained. For this, close coordination with foreign embassies, foreign universities and financially well endowed Pakistanis is important.

4.9. Employing ‘Disruptive Innovations’

According to a physicist, Muslim nations do not do fundamental research—they go more into experimental science. There is need for value addition; to spend time with entrepreneurs; emphasis on laboratories; new generation technologies; super-computers, food and biotechnology and nano-technology. Besides, planning and implementation in policies are crucially important as South Korea has vividly demonstrated.⁹

Shift from low-valued added agriculture to knowledge-based economy, nano-technology, bio-informatics, genomics, effective linkage of university with industry, tapping of technical professional Diaspora, creation of technical parks, incentives to private sector to undertake R&D are some of the means to lift the quality of universities.¹⁰ This is what a writer calls through “disruptive research.”¹¹

The stark fact is that difficult times in many of the Islamic world may persist for some time in future till their economies stabilize. In the meantime, the universities have to start thinking anew and seriously ponder how to become autonomous and self-sustaining in financial matters by generating own funds. This may seem very challenging *but is not entirely impossible*.

4.9.1 Imbibing Latest Technologies

According to a Pakistani physicist, Muslim nations do not concentrate seriously on fundamental research — they instead go more into experimental sciences. There is a need for value- added products; spend time with entrepreneurs; emphasize laboratories; build new generation technologies; super-computers, food and biotechnology and nano-technologies. Besides, planning and implementation in policies are crucially important as South Koreans have ably demonstrated.¹²

It is important to shift from low-valued added agriculture to knowledge-based economy, nano-technology, bio-informatics, genomics, effective linkage of university with industry, tapping of technical professional Diaspora, creation of technical parks, incentives to private sector to undertake R&D. These are some of the means to lift the level of academic/technical level of

⁹ Dr. Mansoor Baig, talk at *Adviser’s Forum*, COMSATS, June 2014.

¹⁰ Atta-ur-Rahman, “Budgeting for a knowledge economy.” *The News*, International, 31 May 2014, p.7.

¹¹ Dr. Athar Osama, “Why education is ready to be disrupted,” *The News*, 16 April 2014.3, p.6.

¹² Dr. Mirza Mansoor Baig’s talk at Adviser’s COMSATS, *Adviser’s Forum*, CIIT, June 2014.

universities.¹³ Development hubs can be established around industrial zones and universities brought into the loop.

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4.9.2 Good Governance in Universities

Impact of education investment and allocation of funds should not be considered as simple linear function of inputs and outputs. This applies equally at national level and in the universities. The entire process by which outcomes occur need to be addressed: emphasizing good governance viz., performance benchmarks; system of monitoring and accountability; and revamping of accounting and budgeting formulae for allocation of funds. The system should go beyond the criteria of mere apportionment of funds, number of student enrollment and student results etc.

Performance should be judged at different levels through online systems as e.g. instituted in Mexico and Colombia in providing regular updates to decision makers.¹⁴ In this regard, statistical and data-collection systems have to be continuously updated for providing accurate and latest information to the policy planners.¹⁵ Encouragingly, Pakistan government is thinking upon similar lines in *Vision 2025 Plan* and the *Five Year Plan*.¹⁶

5. Final Remarks

“Desperate times call for desperate remedies” is a trite saying. Universities need to attract endowments in an innovative way, undertake bold financial investments and generate own finances through pro-active collaboration with industries, technological centers and foreign universities. University degrees should be linked to attachment with industry and offered to students linked with industrial-technical development.

Today, universities in the Muslim world are adrift and have lost grip over the wrenching changes occurring in their societies. Hence it is imperative that they should be in sync with contemporary demands and times. Economic growth and technological developments are quite important -- yet hardly enough for national development. Education in science and humanities are not mutually exclusive entities -- as commonly thought in academic circles. In raising a balanced, humane and socially vibrant citizenry-- hard sciences and liberal sciences ought to go hand in hand.

¹³ Dr. Atta-ur-Rahman, “Budgeting for a knowledge economy,” *The News, International*, 31 May 2014, p.7.

¹⁴ Marc- Andre Franche, “Making education work in Pakistan,” *The Express Tribune*, 26 June, 2014, p.7.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Realistically, many Islamic World universities in the foreseeable future may remain dependent upon their governments. Yet the above broad policy suggestions/measures could cumulatively enable gradual weaning away from total dependence on their governments and provide instead stimulus for attaining some fiscal autonomy.

Needless to say, education for any nation is a long-term and serious, solid investment. While it may not yield immediate dividends, investment in human resources is a *sine qua non* for any meaningful socio-economic development. Like the Chinese dictum of giving someone hungry a fish to eat, it is essential to teach him how to catch fish and become self-reliant.
