

Challenges in Higher Education: Special reference to Pakistan and South Asian Developing Countries:

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Abstract

Higher education has great importance in the development of a country. But unfortunately, its importance is yet to be realized in South Asian developing countries. For over a decade, countries have been working to uplift their educational standard by providing quality higher education to their citizens but there are many obstacles and hurdles that are emerging. These challenges (quantity, equity, quality, etc) are very common in nature but require proper procedure to address in the best manner.

Introduction

Education is a basic need of every society. A better education system can enhance the social, scientific, and technological improvement of a country. The human resource development of a country depends upon the quality of education imparted in country (Mohanthy, 2000). Higher education caters to the education in the colleges and universities. Allen (1988) observed “It is academically consider suitable to present distinctive feature of two stages for the purpose of clarity of concepts and avoiding duplication” Higher education is admittedly a separate stage quite distinct from primary, secondary, elementary, and higher secondary stage. (Best, 1994)

Higher education is recognized today as a capital investment and is of paramount importance for economic and social development of the country (Barnet, 1990). Institutions of higher education have the primary responsibility for equipping individuals with advanced knowledge and skills required for positions of responsibility in government,

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business, and other professions (Mughal & Manzoor, 1999). Quality higher education is a source of great potential for the socio economic and cultural development of the country. Stone, Horejs, & Lomas (1997) found “The nation can be transformed into a developed nation within the life time of a single generation.” Factors such as the distinctive nature of higher education institutions, international mobility of students, and teachers accessibility of computer based learning pursuit of research and scholarship, globalization of economy, and emerging challenges of the 21st century have a direct impact on the future development of higher education. (Mughal & Manzoor, 1999).

The purpose of higher education is not simply to impart knowledge in certain branches of knowledge; it has deeper meaning and objectives. The purpose may be multidimensional and may be termed as personal, social, economical, and cultural (Moore & Farris, 1991). Education and particularly higher education cannot be divorced from its milieu and social context. Religious, moral, historical, and cultural ethos permeates through the fabric of the educational system of a country (Best, 1994). Allen (1988) found “In the time of rapid international, political, and economical changes, the universities in South Asia and in developing countries are being transformed. Public expectations about access to higher education direct concern about role that universities can play in innovation and economic development” The applications of principles of market economies to the university systems of all countries have created a new context for higher education (Rao, 2003).

The people in Pakistan and South Asia are neither deficient in talent nor in moral qualities in comparison to any other nation of the world, but about two centuries of foreign rule and blind imitation of western attitudes and methods, unsuited to the genius and spiritual conditions of its people, have spoiled some of the virtues and have brought a bad name to their intellectual capacities (Siddiq, 1978). Hassan (1990) observed “Pakistan is unfortunately really backward in education as in certain other spheres of intellectual activities but luckily people are not inherently incompetent or morally incurable.” It is however necessary that the diagnosis about maladies should be correct and the measures for curing these maladies should be appropriate in the light of that diagnosis (Abdullah, 1992).

Challenges in Higher Education

South Asian countries are facing a critical period in their history, and on that account, everybody concerned with education has a responsibility for knowing what he is trying to do in bring up the next generation and why he is trying to do it (Mohanthly, 2000). Higher education is faced with very severe challenges in the shape of various economic, social, political, and moral changes, and its future depends on the response made by its people to these challenges (Rao, 2003).

Hayes (1987) found “The problems plaguing the educational system of Pakistan and South Asian countries are multidimensional like population explosion, lack of resources, non participation of the private sector, scarcity of qualified man power, inconsistency in the

policies of various regimes, political instability, inefficient educational management system, wastage of resources, and poor implementation of policies and programme etc.”

The major challenges in higher education include:

Quantity

Despite the constraints of resources, the quantitative expansion has been highly spectacular in the post independence period. The institutions have not only been multiplied, the student enrollments at colleges and universities have registered exceptionally high rate of growth (Aeth, 1975). “The numbers of new entrants is now more than the total number of students in higher education prior to independence” (Iqbal, 1981). “The demand of higher education has thus increased by leaps and bounds. In spite of quality control as well as consolidation, it will continue to grow constantly for a long time to come” (Adeeb, 1996).

“The quantitative expansion is evident due to increasing aspiration of the people and social, economical, and political forces influencing the development of higher education. In the post independence period, the role of higher education has been very well recognized in the development of science and technology, as well as various arenas of human advancement” (Mohanthy, 2000).

Equity

The major break through was evident in the democratic countries of the world where franchise was given to all adults irrespective of caste, creed, sex, and economic or social status (Barnet, 1990). Qureshi (1997) stated “The ideal of equity was severely constrained by existing in qualities in the distribution of property and productive resources, low level of education and awareness among the people, and strong influences exercised by individual and group to further their own sectional interest rather than total social interest.”

“The philosophy of social justice is very much akin to the principle of equity. It is a welcome development over the concept of inherent inequality which was sought to be explained by biological differences among individuals” (Bayli, 1987).

1. The philosophy of equality of men being applied to political process, distribution of property, and productive resources is viewed as the source of inequities in society. This approach helped the development of capabilities among men through equal distribution of higher educational opportunities both in quality and quantity.
2. There is the philosophy of inequality as a natural hereditary, biological phenomena, without any scientific rational evidence. This concept is rooted in sectional interest rather than in societal interest.

The growing numbers of colleges and universities have provided access to higher education to the people in various parts and sections of developing countries in South Asia.

“But the enrollments of students especially female students is relatively very small” (Varghese, 1980).

Quality

Development of society not only depends upon quantity of goods and services produced, but also on their quality. “It again leads to quality of life of the people and the quality of the society in general” (Hayes, 1987). It is rightly said that the philosophical basis of quality is the innate characteristics of a human being to attain a higher standard and the need of excellence for attaining a higher stage in the development (Quddus, 1990).

The scope of the idea of quality is severely limited by two widely prevailing views.

1. Quality is a selective phenomenon and only few can attain it.
2. Quality for quality sake or with regards to specific area rather than quality as mutually exclusive and emphasize selectively at the expense of equity.

Attempts to realize specific objectives of quality tend to narrow down the scope and discourage efforts to attain quality in various walks of life. Allen (1988) determined that “Various programs have been developed and are being implemented for the last two decades for improving the quality of teachers and their proficiency in discharging their duties and responsibilities.”

“The higher education commission has been providing financial assistance for these programs of faculty improvement which enable teachers to keep abreast with the latest development in their subject and conduct research studies as well as interact with experts in their own subject’s area and related field” (Hassan, 1990). “These programs aim at improving the professional competence of teachers so that they can impart high quality instructions and contribute significantly to raising the standard of higher education in developing countries” (Quddus, 1990).

Student Unrest

Among the challenges of higher education is the vital role of addressing students unrest. Bayli (1987) studied that “The condition of higher education in universities and colleges is not satisfactory in the eyes of students. Lack of physical and educational facilities is bringing much hindrance in the way of development”. Iqbal (1981) states “Teachers are less motivated to do certain research work. Most teachers are not competent, and they are teaching in higher education institutions.” They have limited knowledge about subject matter they taught and many of them have no clear idea about the subject. “Even in Pakistani universities, the teacher at M.Phil. and Ph.D. level, are not competent” (Rao, 2003). “They feel it difficult to indulge in research work due to lack of knowledge about research methodologies” (Mughal & Manzoor, 1999).

“Most students with backgrounds in arts, humanities, and management rather than in engineering technology, science, and medicine get involved in political activities. Therefore social or academic background is an important factor in determining the attitude of the students toward social economic and political issues” (Allen, 1988). Barnett (1990) found that “Therefore studies are necessary to fulfill the hope of the government and the aspirations of the youth as well as to cope with the changes which are the demands of all students of today”. The university students should learn to think about possible solutions to this fast changing world. “So in order to achieve this, the students at the university level need to get much deeper knowledge about the citizenship role in society and the new opportunities that open to the student due to economic development and technological advancement” (Qureshi, 1999).

Emotional Integration

Education can play a vital role in strengthening emotional integration. It is felt that education should not aim at imparting knowledge but should develop all aspects of a student’s personality. Allen (1988) found that “It should broaden the outlook, foster the feeling of oneness, nationalism, a spirit of sacrifice, and tolerance so that narrow group interests are submerged in the largest interest of country.”

“Students, the future citizens of the country, should be trained in democracy, its value and ideals so that they will have sense of justice which is conducive for the development of national integration especially in the particular situation of developing countries which are striving to build up a structure of democratic living” (Rao, 2003).

Administrative Reform

In the last fifteen years or so, Pakistan and countries in South Asia have been giving increasing attention to the problems of university administration (Adeeb, 1996). Abdullah (1992) observed “They have noticed that despite the resources available for university expansion, they have not been able to obtain the best possible results.” “Further they have also begun to realize that much of this is due to lack of proper administration and what the outcome is on the development of higher education” (Aeth, 1975).

Social and cultural factors, which are often ignored, are as significant as any of the purely technical factors in the formulation and implementation of administration policy. Barnett (1990) states that “The linkages between the policy and these factors are neither casual nor limited to the contemporary period so the university administration clearly demonstrates that the success or failure of university administrative reforms hinges on the presence and absence of certain variables given below.”

1. Strong commitment and determined leadership
2. Appropriate political environment
3. Supportive social environment

4. Types of reform agents
5. Nature of reforms
6. Favourable bureaucratic attitude towards change

However bureaucratic resistance to reform is a phenomenon which can be found both in the advanced and the third world countries (Mohanthy, 2000). "Resistance to reform within a bureaucracy usually manifests itself in the behavioural patterns and attitudes of its members" (Hayes, 1987). "These responses may be grouped in two broad categories, those that seek to project the university administration service as an institution, and the individual responses to various threats, perceived from within and outside the bureaucracy. In both cases changes in the status quo are regarded as a potential threat to survival" (Varghese, 1980).

Faculty

The current size of present faculty is very small according to the general international standard. Mughal & Manzoor (1999) found that "The teacher/student ratio is very small even according to many third world countries standards. The quality of university education at the college has decreased because of the exiting faculty". "Many present faculty members are teaching courses which are not their own specialization" (Bayli, 1987). "Many faculty members in most of universities are just master degree holders with little or no practical knowledge and higher education experiences" (Iqbal, 1981).

"The salary, financial rewards and benefits for the faculty is very low according to the rising cost of living in Pakistan. The higher education commission is making an effort to provide facilities to their teachers and hiring foreign faculty for the uplift of educational standards in Pakistan" (Rao, 2003). Still the staff and technical support of the teaching professor are not present. Adeb (1996) found that "There is no real plan or set of rules for teaching evaluation or teaching effectiveness. The above problem is a great challenge for higher education in Pakistani and South Asian developing countries."

"Studies include: an examination of the present supply and future prospects for attracting competent faculty members in sufficient number to meet requirements in various areas; appropriate action should be taken to provide an attractive and competitive faculty salary; reasonable teaching and research assignments; and fringe benefits to attract top ranking educators" (Allen, 1988).

Educational Policies

The faculty should have primary responsibilities for determining the educational policies of the institution. Barnett (1990) found "If this responsibility is not conferred and defined by the character of the institution, it should be expressed in legislation of the governing board." "Educational polices include such fundamental matters as the subject matter and methods of

instruction, facilities and support for the research work of faculty members and students, standards for admission of students, etc” (Aeth, 1975).

Hayes (1987) identify that “They also include those aspects of student life that relate directly to the educational process.” Mohanthy (2000) observed that “The faculty should also actively participate in decisions made on other matters that may directly affect the educational policies for which it is primarily responsible.” “These matters include major changes in the size of the student body, significant alteration in the academic calendar, establishment of new colleges and universities or division, the provision of extension services to the community, and assumption by the institution of research or service obligations to private or public agencies” (Allen, 1988).

Academic Freedom

The right of academic freedom must be recognized in order to enable the faculty members, researchers, and students to carry on their roles. Gibbons (1998) studied “The freedom of universities in making professional appointments, tenure research, salary scales, and all academic decision.” “Academic freedom and university autonomy are sometimes regarded as synonymous, but they are two quite different concepts, although they overlap at many points” (Taylor & Tashakkori, 1997).

Rao (2003) found that “These two functions are the essence of the progress and development of the higher education and administrative endeavours.” Quddus (1990) studied that “The basic function of a college or university is to preserve, augment, criticize, and transmit knowledge and to foster creative capacities.” “These functions are performed by a community of scholars who must be free to exercise independent judgment in the planning and execution of their educational responsibilities” (Varghese, 1980).

“Unfortunately a university may find it difficult to earn the academic freedom or autonomy and retain it in a new state where most, if not all, the cost of university education is a direct charge on the government” (Siddiq, 1978). Qureshi (1997) identified that “The board of trustees should be more concerned with matters affecting the relations of the university with the outside bodies and general policy than with the routine administration work which is dealt with by the university council.”

Courses and Curricula

The courses and curricula are not designed in accordance with the standard of higher education of the present day. Iqbal (1981) observed that “There is no continuity of some of the important courses: there is also no relationship between the related courses of common or similar knowledge.” Bayli (1987) studied that “So many important and modern courses required for higher education are not taught at all.” “The curricula are not written in detail and are left to the professors personal likes, dislikes, interests or experience” (Adeeb, 1996).

Quddus (1990) observed that “The basic science courses are not designed well to fit the need of the students, and they are not well organized, or correctly supervised by the department.” “Generally speaking, there are not enough well equipped faculty and administration offices, classrooms, or engineering, science, and other laboratories for the growing student body and faculty members” (Hassan, 1990).

Taylor & Tashakkori (1997) studied that “The workshops at the higher level are not suitable for training, because necessary materials, equipment, space, and techniques are not up to the mark according to the required standard.” “Equipment is old and not fit for some of the more specialize laboratory experiments” (Quddus, 1990). Varghese (1980) identify that “There has been constant change in and lowering of the standard of syllabi and courses leading to lazy mindedness resulting in lack of urge for higher achievements.” “Frequent change of study material and difficulties in availability is another contributory factor” (Quddus, 1990).

Unemployment

“While education cannot directly reduce unemployment, except by requiring more teachers, a reform of the educational system could help alleviate its impact especially on young people” (Mohanthy, 2000). Hayes (1987) found that “There is a marked mismatch in terms of the field and specialization of graduates and the absorptive capacity of the labour market.” “In the sense of employment, the planners of higher education are handicapped in the assessment of the actual labour market needs for skills in various sectors of the economy” (Aeth, 1975).

Barnet (1990) studied “Even though empirical evidence justified investment in higher education for economic growth, except for direct self-consumption, higher education failed to create additional employment since the type of education offered restricted the entrepreneurial spirit and initiative and discourages self employment.”

Budgeting and Financing

Central to all the foregoing is a new concept of budgeting and financing at the higher level. Bayli (1987) observed “The conventional system of an annual budget is probably the most confusing and least understood.” “The budget of course, performs a number of essential functions which even the most frustrated will acknowledge” (Rao, 2003). Allen (1988) identify “The concern here is with the budget as an instrument of academic planning which may promote the special aims of each college and constitute a practical means by which all university purpose may be realized ideally it must not only insure financial solvency of the university, but should also place responsibility and commensurate authority where it may be exercised most.”

Gibbons (1998) observed “Concerning other elements of the budget and the allocations made by officers or governing boards among competing demands, the faculty should be informed of important developments in administrative planning including proposed capital expenditures, and the faculty should also be consulted on major issues of policy involved in

such development.” Taylor & Tashakkori (1997) says “Obviously any viable plan must be designed as to capitalize as fully as may be consistent with academic standards upon all of these, and hopefully to forestall periodic crises.”

Rao (2003) studied “In fact realistic planning and decisive action are the only way to prevent educational strategies from degenerating into spasmodic reactions to unforeseen exigencies.” “The university’s aim should be to fashion a system which in its year to year operation may provide for its own continuing renewal” (Adeeb, 1996).

Population Explosion

“The fast growing population in Pakistan and South Asian developing countries is another problem by causing over crowding in the higher educational institution because the number of higher level institutions is deficient” (Hayes, 1987). Mohanthy (2000) observed “The demand for the quantitative expansion of education at all levels remains one of the primary concerns because of the continuous population expansion.” Adeeb (2000) stated “The developing countries will account for nearly 50% of the total world population compared with 66% in 1950.” “The population of Asia as a proportion of the world’s total population (a reduction of 29.4% to 18.4%) is in a much weaker position than some ten to fifteen years ago” (Allen, 1988).

Suggestions to meet the Challenges

1. Stress is laid on the need for improving the quality of education at every stage so that a proper foundation can be laid for advanced study in science, engineering, agriculture, and those other areas which are most closely allied to the national economic development and reconstruction of the nation as a whole.
2. To begin from the top without reforming the lower stages is against the law of nature; it is against the law of evolutionary progress. Before any restrictions are imposed on the higher education, the earlier stages should be improved so as to produce better students for the higher stage.
3. A critical point to be considered by educational planner is the adaptation of a multidimensional, flexible, and dynamic education system, which serves people according to their ability and aptitude and is responsive to their economic, social political and cultural needs.
4. The new system of higher education should be flexible enough to offer a variety of courses, formal and non formal, full time and part time, correspondence and media based to fit every individual as well as the economic needs of the country

5. Economic conditions of the people cannot be ignored in all matters in which the question of equal opportunities to all is involved. In an atmosphere of economic depression as it is today in Pakistan how could one expect from our youth to be able to develop their potential qualities in desired way.
6. The test of qualities must be made reliable upon examination and more effective; the teaching method must be made more rational and natural; and last of all, the teachers must be kept fully satisfied. It is well known, that a foreign medium of instruction and examination is seriously hampering the progress of education. Pakistan will have to determine its policy with regards to this question also.
7. There is great question of availability of qualified university teachers, suitably equipped libraries, and fully developed plants and laboratories. It is a matter of common knowledge that our resources in all these areas are very meager. Any unnecessary addition to the number of the universities at present would therefore mean nothing, but more ill-fed and ill-equipped institutions with no specially or individuality of purpose.

Higher education institutions must be responsive to the challenges of the rapidly changing and challenging new world: expectation of society and growing demands of the rising student population. This policy therefore looks forward to a new beginning in higher education in South Asian developing countries.

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