

Consultative Workshop of Vice Chancellors
'Challenges to Quality Education under National Universities Amid & Beyond COVID-19'

The world has changed due to COVID-19. It has undergone a paradigm shift from traditional physical learning models to distance and virtual learning interactions. Under this new paradigm, educational institutions will be central in shaping the political economy and socioeconomic indicators of the global governing system. However, the methodologies will be entirely different from the previously existing traditional education mode. New Standing Operating Procedures (SOPs) will be needed to deal with the challenges of this shift and a blended version of educational and learning mechanisms will be required to ensure interactive learning, quality education, effective and up-to-date assessment procedures to maintain the pace and quality of education in all spheres of knowledge-sharing and practices.

This change in pace of education may affect the global education system, on the one hand, however, on the other, developing economies would be the most affected societies who will bear the loss of quality and uninterrupted services to their students and scholars.

Pakistan transformed its educational system in the beginning of the 20th Century by replacing the University Grants Commission with the Higher Education Commission (HEC). Under this HEC umbrella, higher education has rapidly synchronised its learning systems with the international education systems by adopting the BS and MS scheme of studies. Yet, there are a lot of gaps in matching quality, teaching methodology, assessment techniques and research methods to equip young students and scholars with the global standards of research and education. During the past 20 years, there has been a mushroom growth of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan, which expanded their circle of accessibility to many potential undergrad and graduate students. However, quality could not be improved during this period.

Following the rapid increase in the HEIs, many gaps have been highlighted, including quality check at the entry level, teaching methods of the semester-based education system, the autonomy and authority (or lack thereof) of young and relatively less experienced faculty, content delivery methods, gaps in learning and knowledge assessments and administrative issues of newly established universities and institutions. Above all, the culture of research-based assessments has been compromised - a natural phenomenon of shifting from an annual education system to the semester system, which has a number of pros and cons itself. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced the need for another transition towards distance education, which is beyond the capacity of Pakistan as well as other South Asian universities and HEIs. More specifically, following are the key challenges faced by the existing educational system in Pakistan given this health crisis:

1. Universities do not have experience of distance and virtual education system, except the Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) and the Virtual University.
2. The Information Technology (IT) infrastructure does not exist and support distance and virtual education.
3. Faculty has not been trained to impart knowledge and education through distance learning mechanisms and mediums.
4. There is no structured mechanism to conduct online quality assessment of students to gauge his or her actual capabilities.
5. The administrative and logistical systems for online administration have a number of lacunas and may need sufficient time for revamping and up-gradation.
6. Primary and secondary institutions are not producing quality students who can perform at university level. To have academically strong students, basic education also needs to be improved.

Pakistan's entire education has been disconcerted because of the COVID-19 pandemic and a number of directionless or ambiguous policy decisions are being taken in a rush which may lead to social and educational chaos in the years to come. Our educational policymakers need to take serious steps for education with a holistic approach.

Although the HEC is putting efforts and all public and private sector universities are trying to streamline higher education, an integrated approach and internal institutional harmony is perhaps missing among the provincial and public-private institutions. The demand-driven approach is also missing among HEIs, inter-ministries consortiums are either missing or ineffective due to which universities are producing graduates without any direction, planning and policy.

To build back a better, purposeful and research-based quality education system in Pakistan, an academic policy research centre which focuses on short- and long-term educational policies' and reforms as per national and international needs so that our universities may feed the world with quality human resource, was felt. For this purpose, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute and Pakistan's largest and most experienced university in distance and non-formal education, i.e. Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) joined hands to establish Consortium of Universities as an educational research policy think-tank to deal with such issues of higher education institutions. This think-tank was launched in September 2020 under the name '*Council for the Advancement of Sustainable Policy on Educational Research (CASPER).*' The Council has more than sixteen members so far representing think-tanks and universities. This is a joint venue of SDPI and AIOU to professionally address the serious issues related to quality higher education and assessment. The Council is apolitical and will strictly focus on education and research issues. Under its aegis, a **Consultative Workshop of Vice Chancellors** from all provinces, including Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir has been called to discuss university education, teaching methods and quality assessment in the light of COVID-19 and beyond.

Panel Organiser

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