

Status of Higher Education in Pakistan: Underlying Issues and Prospective Strategies for Improvement

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article History</p> <p>Received: December 01, 2020</p> <p>Accepted: January 24, 2021</p> <p>Keywords : Quality Of Education, Economic Development, Policies, Human Resources, Curriculum, Politics</p> <p>DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5498264</p>	<p><i>Education is a leading driver in reshaping society, human capital formation, political stability, and the economic development of a country. In Pakistan, higher education is referred to as post-higher secondary schooling and is delivered by higher education institutes (HEIs), both in a public and private capacity, which includes degree colleges, universities, and degree awarding institutes. HEIs impart a diverse range of educational programs in life sciences, engineering, and social sciences, etc. Graduates passed out from these institutes provide their services to strengthen society, the government, and the economy of the country. However, the efficiency of these contributions towards overall national development is strongly linked with the quality of education the graduates receive from the HEIs. HEIs can produce productive, skilled, and competent graduates if they can deliver standard and quality education which depends on their financial resources, faculty resources, conducive environment, education-delivery-system, and policies. This review attempts to highlight major challenges associated with higher education in Pakistan and discuss prospective strategies to overcome the underlying challenges.</i></p>

Introduction

Education is a driving force in reshaping individual behavior, society, governance, politics, and the economy of a country. It has an influential role in human capital formation and strengthening the economy of a country and thus serves as a key force in national development (Idris et al., 2012). It has been well acknowledged that education has a significant impact on raising the standard of lives of individuals, communities, and population as a whole, empowerment, human capital formation, and socioeconomic development (Michaelowa, 2000; Seetanah, 2009; Bhardwaj, 2016). The role of higher education is, even more, pronounced because it provides skilled, knowledgeable, and professional individuals who can utilize their potentials to contribute to the social, moral, cultural, and economic development of their countries.

Pakistan, a developing country in South Asia with a population of more than 200 million, is blessed with various natural and human resources. To utilize the services of large human capital in a populated country like Pakistan, the provision of knowledge and skills to individuals is extremely necessary which can be achieved through education. The formal education system of Pakistan comprises primary, middle, high, higher secondary, and university levels (Ashraf & Hafiza, 2016). Besides formal education, there are several other educational programs such as religious education, vocational and training education, etc. which are delivered through different mechanisms and institutes. Higher education generally begins after 12 years of schooling and leads to graduation. There are many public and private higher education institutes (HEIs) that provide higher education to students in a diverse range of academic disciplines. The HEIs include degree colleges, universities, and degree awarding institutes.

Since the creation of Pakistan, efforts have been made to establish HEIs to provide quality education to people who can make a positive impact on the national economy and achieving national goals. This is because higher education gives knowledge, skills, and competency to individuals who can compete in society, contribute to social and economic development and bring about reforms in policies, governance, and politics of the country. However, efficient utilization of knowledge, skills, competency, and professionalism of graduates in national development can only be achieved through the quality of education they receive from HEIs. Several factors are involved in improving or deteriorating the quality of higher education. Availability of financial resources, infrastructure, trained teachers, efficient education delivery system, educational curricula, policies, the interest of stakeholders, and conducive environment for learning are some of the key factors which influence the quality of higher education. In Pakistan, the higher education sector is faced with multiple issues which range from lack of budget or limited resources, bad governance, outdated curriculum, inappropriate policies, to political interference and lack of interest of stakeholders (Haider, 2008; Akhtar & Kalsoom, 2012). This review

aims to streamline the significance of higher education in Pakistan and pertaining issues that hinder the quality of higher education. Prospective strategies for improvement are discussed.

Significance of Higher Education: Agent for Social and Economic Development

Education in general and higher education, in particular, have a significant impact on personal behavior, society, culture, politics, government, and the economy of a country. Higher education provides knowledge and skills to individuals which leads to the creation of a productive workforce. The knowledgeable and skilled workforce then brings about reforms in their lives as well as in the lives of others, which consequently reform the society, improve the political system, contribute to empowerment, develop critical thinking, achieve national objectives, and strengthen the economy (Fig 1). According to Singh (2001), the role of higher education is to train people and provide them skills that can affect specialized social functioning. Haveman&Smeeding (2006) noted that the American public considers that colleges and universities can impart a positive influence on social mobility and can promote the possibility of motivation for success in society. Furlong & Cartmel (2009) illustrated that higher education is one of the many influential factors in reforming and stabilizing social justice in the UK. Huang et al. (2009) established a clear correlation between higher education and social capital development. Cochrane & Williams (2010) highlighted the role of higher education in social development and they argued that social and cultural transformation is strongly linked with higher education. Many authors have acknowledged the role of higher education in social transformation, and social stability because it provides intellectual capital which serves as transforming agents in society (Reddy, 2004; McMahon, 2009; Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). Marginson, 2016).

Higher education produces a skilled workforce that brings momentum in all aspects of life. Mason et al. (2009) attributed the role of higher education in the outcome-oriented labor force in different domains. Holzer(2015) considered that the purpose of higher education is to teach and produce a workforce suitable for fitting into specialized jobs. Bound et al. (2019) noted that universities serve as a supply source for producing skilled workforces who can utilize their knowledge and skills for the betterment of livelihood.

The impact of higher education on political systems and governance has been long acknowledged. According to Grapragasem et al. (2014), higher education provides excellent opportunities for producing good policymakers who can influence the governance and decision-making capacities of a nation. Proper policies are derived by learned and knowledgeable individuals which contribute to government functioning and improving the political process of a country (Hillygus, 2005). Political participation of individuals and their awareness about the political system may serve as reforming agents in politics which adhere to higher education in many terms. Empirical studies suggest that higher education correlates with political participation (Persson, 2015). Higher education has also reshaped political opinions, changed the political culture and political democratization in many countries (Benavot, 1996; Bratton et al., 1999; Weakliem, 2002). In many studies and reviews, political competency, reforms, and sophistication has been interrelated to higher education and intellectual brainstorming which provide input to the political system for making it refine, democratic, and appropriate according to the needs of society (Benavot, 1996; McAllister, 1998; Dassonneville et al., 2012; Hooghe et al., 2015; Coleman, 2015).

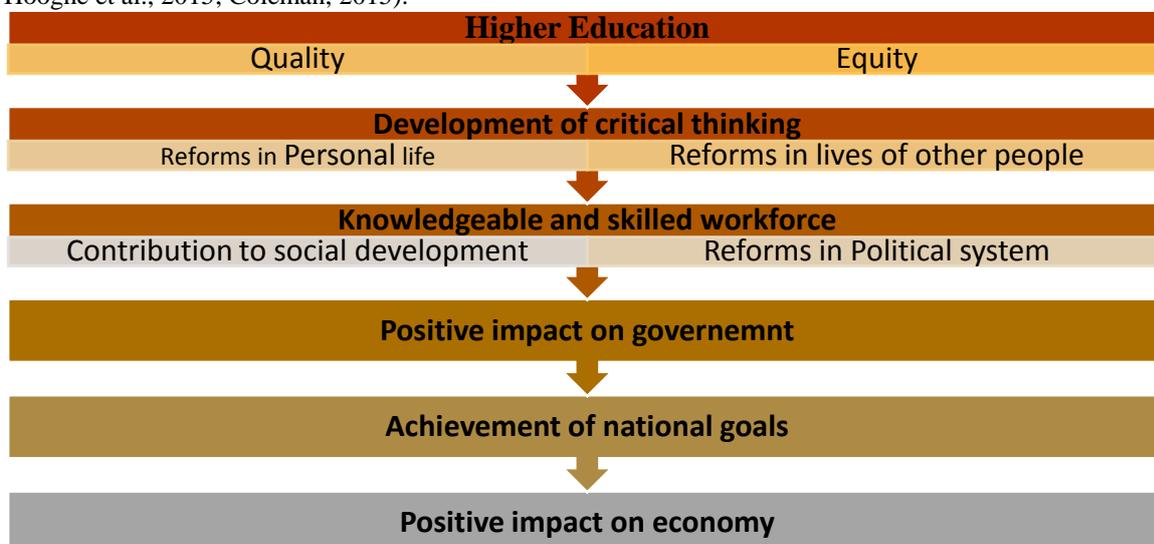


Fig. 1: A graphic presentation of the role of higher education on social, political, national, and economic development

The stable and strong economy of a country is necessary for prosperity and national development. Higher education has been recognized throughout the world as a stimulating agent for attaining sustainable economic

growth because it tends to transform the traditional economy into a ‘knowledge-based economy by providing a systematic knowledge-based mechanism, promote economic trade and cooperation among organizations and countries, and provision of opportunities to individuals (George, 2006; Marginson, 2010; Sum, & Jessop, 2013). Higher education delivers a sophisticated and research-orientated mechanism to the economic system of a country which on knowledge-based principles and those mechanisms design a roadmap for sustainable economic development. In poverty reduction and accelerating economic growth, higher education plays an instrumental role (Bloom et al., 2014). Empirical reports suggest that higher education provides skilled professionals and workforce which serve as driving forces for fostering economic growth. Lin (2004) presented that example of Taiwan’s economy about higher education. The author outlined that higher education had a positive impact on industrial development and the economic growth of the country. Gyimah-Bremponget al. (2006) stated that higher education contributed to an increase in per capita, human capital, and economic growth in African countries. A comprehensive analysis covering the years from 1972 to 2005 revealed the relationship between higher education and long-run economic growth in Pakistan (Chaudhary et al., 2009). Huang et al. (2009) established a positive correlation between higher education and the economic growth of China. Similarly, Bloom et al. (2014) also identified that higher education was necessary for boosting the economy of Africa. However, without the acquisition of the required cognitive skills, as noted by Hanushek (2016) only the production of more graduates has little effect on the economic growth. Thus, the quality of higher education delivered to graduates is more important than the quantity in improving the economic growth of a country.

Pertinent Challenges in Higher Education in Pakistan

At the time of independence, there was only one university in Pakistan, the Punjab University but in the succeeding years, several other public and private universities were established in the country (Shakil, 2019). As of 2016-17 data due to successive efforts of the government, the number of public and private universities reached 185 while the number of degree colleges (public and private) was recorded as 1431 (Anon., 2018). In Pakistan, higher education starts after the successful completion of grade 12 and it is delivered by HEIs. There are several HEIs (colleges, Universities, and degree awarding institutes) both public and private sectors which offer a range of education programs completion of which lead to graduation. Public sector HEIs are funded mostly by the government while private institutes run on their revenues although many of them receive funding from the government and non-governmental organizations. In 2002, the higher education commission (HEC) was established to provide funding to HEIs and to promote research activities with a mission of strengthening the knowledge-based economy (Shakil, 2019). The role of HEC in promoting higher education, research activities, and capacity building of HEIs in the country is acknowledgeable, still, the higher education sector is challenged with multiple issues which serve as hindering factors in achieving the intended outcomes in terms of quality of education and graduates.

One of the pre-requisite for the proper functioning of educational institutes is their capacity building to strengthen and raise the standard of higher education in a way to compete with international standards which require a substantial financial investment. Budget allocation to higher education in the country is unsatisfactory due to several reasons. Unfortunately, spending on education in Pakistan is significantly lower than in developed countries of the world which may either be due to the unstable economic situation of the country or due to negligence from the stakeholders. Even in comparison to South Asian countries, budget allocation to higher education in Pakistan is unsatisfactory. Data presented in Table 1 shows that monetary spending on education in Pakistan in terms of % GDP exhibited fluctuations from 2003 to 2017 (World Bank report). During 15 year period, the maximum % GDP was observed in the year 2007 while the minimum %GDP was recorded for the year 2011. Comparing the education expenditure with other south Asian countries, results depict a discouraging picture. In Afghanistan, which is less developed than Pakistan, the % of GDP expenditure on education is higher than Pakistan. The highest expenditure during 15 years was recorded for Nepal (16.03-25.50%) which exhibited an almost steady annual % GDP for education. The situation in Bhutan is also encouraging where the %GDP ranged between 11.03 and 26.35. According to the Institute of Social and Policy Sciences, in 2018-19 the government allocated 980 billion rupees to the education sector while the average annual spending on education is about 2.4% of the GDP which is significantly lower than the international standard. These figures are for the whole education sector from which higher education may receive a small portion. Limited allocation of budget to higher education serves as a limiting factor in the development of HEIs. Higher education has a direct or indirect impact on GDP and other macroeconomic indicators; therefore provision of funds and resources to HEIs is significantly needed for producing the quality of higher education and producing competent graduates (Pouris&Inglesi-Lotz, 2014). The provision of a lower budget to the higher education sector in Pakistan depends on multiple factors. Firstly, the low budget allocation indicates that the government and policymakers do not prioritize education. Secondly, poverty and unstable economic conditions of the country are important determinants in funds allocation to the higher education sector. The current and further increase in the population of the country also has an impact on the distribution of budget among different sectors.

Besides deficient allocation of finance to higher education, several other issues are also directly or indirectly involved in affecting HEIs and the quality of higher education in the country. The availability of appropriate infrastructure plays a central role in facilitating the dynamics of higher education. HEIs need classroom facilities, laboratories, libraries, and scientific equipment to carry out the teaching and learning process. Inappropriate or insufficient infrastructural material would lead to ineffective teaching and learning processes which will affect the desired quality and outcome of HEIs. Bad governance and incompetent administrative setup in HEIs are other key factors in degrading the performance of HEIs and the quality of higher education. Akhtar & Kalsoom (2012) identified several issues related to governance in universities and they highlighted that disputable, inconsistent and incompetent governing bodies in HEIs often create problems in institutes that affect the quality of education. Outdated curriculum, inappropriate national education policies, insufficient number or lack of training institutes for teachers, less developed faculty, and lack of international collaboration of HEIs are some pertinent issues that profoundly affect the functioning of institutes and the quality of higher education in the country.

Table 1. A comparison on public spending on Higher education (percent of GDP) among different countries in South Asia

Year	South Asian countries							
	Pakistan	India	Bangladesh	Sri Lanka	Nepal	Bhutan	Maldives	Afghanistan
2017	14.54	---	---	14.50	17.10	24.04	---	15.66
2016	15.06	---	11.42	17.73	19.13	26.16	11.28	16.21
2015	13.19	---	---	10.95	16.99	26.35	12.89	12.51
2014	11.30	---	---	10.82	18.28	17.82	10.35	14.47
2013	11.51	14.05	13.82	9.42	17.57	16.17	13.91	14.10
2012	11.04	13.99	15.59	8.39	17.44	---	12.83	10.36
2011	10.92	13.56	16.79	9.11	17.98	11.29	11.71	16.05
2010	11.86	11.83	---	8.61	16.03	11.03	12.46	17.07
2009	12.06	11.19	14.03	8.27	19.87	14.14	15.63	---
2008	14.10	---	17.82	---	22.23	15.02	12.62	---
2007	15.45	---	18.15	---	21.15	---	12.75	---
2006	15.29	11.69	17.34	---	25.50	---	13.35	---
2005	13.78	11.21	---	---	22.29	22.85	13.02	---
2004	11.23	11.20	15.95	---	21.61	18.70	19.48	---
2003	---	12.41	16.68	---	21.31	---	20.35	---

Source: World Bank; --- data not available

Prospects for improving the quality of higher education

Although there is no specific definition of the quality of higher education, however, it can be linked with competency, professionalism, and knowledge of the graduates. According to the US Department of Education, quality of education refers to its effectiveness in achieving national goals primarily excellence in social, academic, and national domains (Ullah et al., 2011). Since higher education is imparted at HEIs, their strengthening can lead to improvement of quality of higher education which can equip graduates with skills, knowledge, and academic and professional competency. To achieve the goals of attaining standard quality of higher education, HEIs require financial resources, infrastructure, good governance, administration, academic leadership, trained faculty, research environment, updated curricula, and collaborative linkages with international HEIs (Fig. 2).

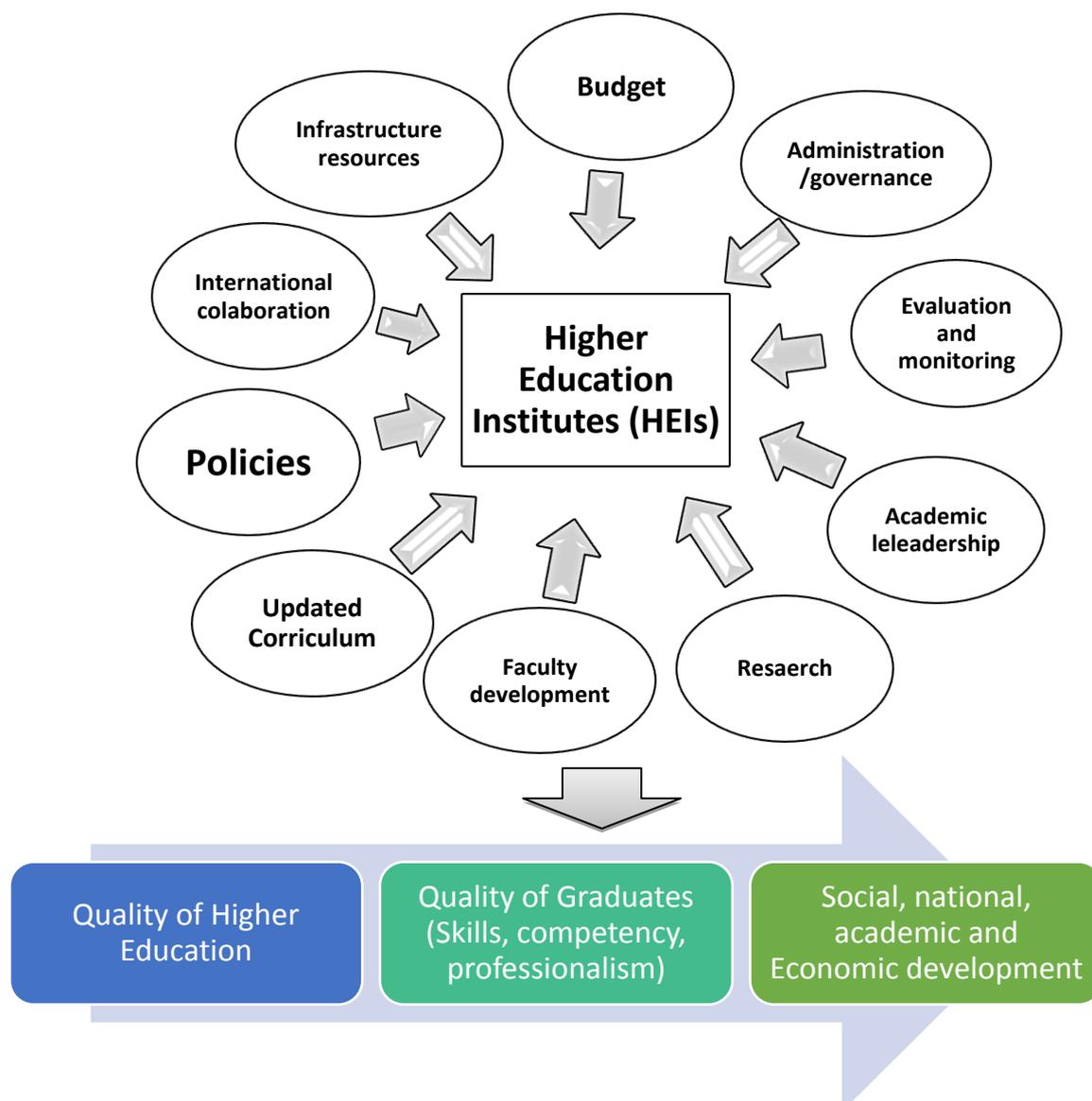


Fig. 2: Illustration of the factors affecting HEIs and the quality of higher education

Increase public spending on higher education

Financial policy, political stability, strong economic environment, and priorities of the government for allocation of budget to a particular sector are the important elements towards the growth and development of that sector. Unfortunately, the economic conditions of Pakistan, turmoil in the political system, and the priorities of stakeholders in improving the strengthening higher education sector serve as major barriers. Ahmed & Javed (2017) emphasized that the education and health sectors of Pakistan are important determinants in national development and recommended that the government should allocate the maximum budget to these sectors on a priority basis. Provision of adequate funds to higher education can be achieved by rational cutting public expenditure on developmental and non-developmental projects and allocating the cut portion to higher education. Every year the government spends a huge amount on unnecessary visits of political leaders and government officials on foreign visits. Minimizing public expenditure on such visits can create room for more budget shifting to the higher education sector. The prevailing situation in corruption in the country also directly or indirectly affects the quality of education. Strong efforts are necessary to prevent corruption in different sectors. Preventive measures on corruption can lead to a reduction of gaps in public spending from which the education sector can draw benefits. Reduction in the size of federal and provincial ministers and cabinet members can save a substantial amount of money that can be allocated to higher education.

Infrastructure development of HEIs

One of the leading factors in increasing the efficiency of HEIs and making them capable to improve the quality of higher education is the development of their infrastructure which cannot be achieved without

sufficient financial resources and the keen interest of policymakers and the government. A conducive environment in HEIs is a prerequisite for the learning and teaching process, which can be achieved by the availability of suitable infrastructure of the educational institutes. Public sector universities and degree awarding institutes are facilitated by HEC to develop their infrastructure according to the needs of national educational objectives; however, besides tremendous efforts, many HEIs lack basic infrastructural facilities. The situation in private HEIs is even more worst because they consider education merely as business and little concentration is given to improving their infrastructure. Infrastructure development of HEIs is the responsibility of both the federal government as well the provinces after the 18th amendment. Federal and provincial governments can improve the quality of education by financing HEIs to strengthen their infrastructure. The government must provide basic facilities, lab equipment, libraries, and modern technology to HEIs. Tsinidou et al. (2010) observed that the availability of infrastructure, libraries, equipment, and technical assistance to teaching staff and students improve the performance of HEIs and the quality of education.

Faculty development

Qualified, skilled, and professional teaching staff have a significant impact on the quality of education. According to Kamel (2016), the role of faculty development is a basic necessity for enhancing the teaching and learning process, and quality of higher education. Haider (2008) reported that the lack of properly trained and skilled faculty in HEIs of Pakistan negatively influences the quality of higher education. McLea et al. (2008) supported the faculty development for attaining professionalism, excellence, and quality enhancement of higher education and they linked faculty development with the availability of resources. Gaff & Simpson (1994) and Lewis (1996) highlighted the role of faculty development in raising the quality of higher education. The authors suggested substantive measures to continuously develop faculties of HEIs which could lead to quality improvement of teachers, students, and education. In Pakistan, HEC has assumed the task of developing teaching faculty through various programs. Through the faculty development program, the higher education commission provides scholarships, both indigenous and foreign, to enhance the quality of education. In private sector HEIs, faculty seems less developed and skilled than public sector institutes. Similarly, at degree college levels, faculty development has been largely ignored. Therefore, HEC and government need to address faculty development at HEIs on a priority basis.

International collaboration and promotion of research environment

Institutional collaboration in a globalized world is necessary for sharing of knowledge and expertise. Linkages of HEIs in Pakistan with international universities and organizations can enhance their capacity to deliver quality education by adopting modern approaches and knowledge sharing. Mehling&Kolleck (2019) asserted that collaboration (whether individual or institutional) yield positive results in terms of advancing scientific knowledge, expertise, technological innovation, and efficient utilization of resources which lead to improved quality of higher education. In Pakistan, HEC tries to establish linkages of indigenous HEIs with foreign universities. More efforts are required to strengthen the international collaboration among HEIs as it will introduce them to new ideas and effective techniques for delivering standard and updated education. Research activities are vital components for raising the standard of higher education and technological advancement. According to Khan & Khattak (2014), research plays a significant role in the development and fostering of the economy. Research thoroughly investigates the underlying problems systematically and tries to find out the solution to the problems. Promoting the research environment in HEIs is important because intellectuals and researchers in different domains can work out roadmaps to national development.

Administration and governance

Proper administration, good governance, and capable academic leadership have a profound effect on the functions and delivery of quality education of HEIs. Usman (2014) identified several issues regarding administration and governance in public and private sector universities and noted that those issues harmed the quality of education. Akhtar and Kalsoom (2012) also pointed towards the role of governance of HEIs on the quality of education. Generally, it has been observed that the constitution of the governing bodies and administrative setup of public sector HEIs in Pakistan is influenced to some extent by political interference, and merit is rarely followed which leads to biased academic decisions and consequently compromises the quality of education. It is strongly needed that transparency and merit be observed during assigning governing bodies and administrative setup to HEIs. Due to the complex nature of HEIs than business organizations, the role of good governance in these institutions is manifold because it provides a set of principles, directions for quality assurance of education, and engagement of stakeholders (<https://www.boardeffect.com>). Zaman (2015) categorized governance into three domains: political governance, economic governance, and an institutional dimension of governance. He found that good governance increases the efficiency of education. Giving the examples of Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, Azmeh (2017) also pointed towards the role of good governance in improving the quality of higher education and bringing stability to HEIs.

Policies and curricular revision

Policies regarding higher education determine the future directions and outcomes of HEIs. Policies framed according to national objectives if properly implemented can yield desired outcomes in terms of the quality of higher education and enhancing the efficiency of HEIs. According to Beerkens (2018), evidenced-based policies promote the quality of higher education. He stressed continuous assessment of previously designed policies for higher education and suggested modifications where pitfalls are identified to assure the quality of higher education. In Pakistan, since its creation efforts were made to formulate national education policies (NEP) and since 1947 up to 2017, nine NEPs i.e., NEP 1947, NEP 1959, NEP 1970, NEP 1972, NEP 1979, NEP 1992, NEP 1998-2010, NEP 2009-2015, AND NEP 2017-2025 have been devised which unfortunately are either revised forms of each other or they have not been implemented in their true spirit (<http://educationist.com.pk>). Drastic reforms in the educational policies particularly those which are concerned with higher education are recommended to cope with the deteriorating situation of the quality of higher education in Pakistan. The curriculum is another important document that is concerned with providing a framework for the execution of education. It is an academic plan designed in a social and cultural context and is influenced by several factors (Fagrell et al., 2020). An updated and well-designed curriculum for a particular program is the core element in determining the quality and future outcomes of education. Fayyaz et al. (2014) proclaimed that most of the curricula in the Pakistani education system are outdated and do not fulfill the required international standards. Ali et al. (2012) emphasized that the introduction of innovative components in the curriculum is a routine practice in the developed world; however, in Pakistan, little attention is paid to curriculum innovation and the country mostly relies on old and outdated curricula for its education system. Curriculum revision is necessary to make higher education more qualitative and comparable to international standards. This can be achieved by sharing knowledge with advanced countries and gaining experiences from those HEIs which have an updated curriculum.

Conclusions

In Pakistan higher education (post-secondary schooling) is delivered by higher education institutes e.g., universities, degree awarding institutes, and degree colleges. It holds an important position in the country's social, political, national, and economic reforms. Graduates who are skilled, and well-learned can devise national policies in different developmental domains. Skills and intellectual abilities are strongly linked with the quality of higher education. Compared to advanced countries and even some developing countries, the status of higher education in Pakistan in terms of quality is not satisfactory. Several factors correspond to the low quality of higher education. They are limited allocation of budget, inappropriate infrastructure, untrained less developed faculty, governance issues, flaws in educational policies, lack of international collaboration among higher education institutes, hurdles in research and creativity, and neglect from the stakeholders. To raise the standard and quality of higher education comparable to developed countries, we propose the following recommendations:

1. Increase in the allocation of budget to the higher education sector
2. Provision of updated infrastructure (physical, technical, and informative)
3. Resolving governance and administrative issues by strictly the following merit
4. Restriction of political interference in HEIs
5. Establishment of collaboration with international HEIs
6. Promotion of research culture in HEIs
7. Monitoring and evaluation
8. Reforming educational policies
9. Revision and updating national educational curricula
10. Faculty development

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