

Decreasing Enrollments in Pakistani Universities: Causes and Consequences.

1. Thesis Outline

1. Introduction.

- a. Hook ✓
- b. Background ✓
- c. Thesis Statement, "A stark trend of declining enrollments across universities in Pakistan has been observed. While there are numerous factors behind the decline, it is imparting devastating consequences for national economy and progress."

2. Causes:

- (i) Fractured educational structure.
 - a. Lack of funding for universities.
 - b. Lack of accessibility.
 - c. Shortfall of teachers and difficulty in their onboarding.
- (ii) Shift in preferences: Skills over theoretical knowledge.
 - a. Curricula vs job market gap.
 - b. Rise of diploma and short courses institutes.

(iii) Outdated education model.

- a. Decades old curricula.
- b. Lack of quality research facilities.
- c. Rise of AI and shortfall of a relevant faculty.

(iv) Rising Inflation.

- a. Hike in university fees.
- b. Low capacity to pursue higher education.

(v) Migration trend.

- a. Moving abroad in pursuance of quality education.
- b. Pursuing employment opportunities abroad in the guise of study.

(vi) Agri - Universities; A case study.

3. Consequences

(i) Decline in societal intellectual capacity.

- a. Lack of political awareness.
- b. Lack of knowledge of global markets.

(ii) Closure of departments across universities.

- a. Reduced teaching opportunities.
- b. Further deterioration of research and development.

(iii) Ceased development of indigenous technocrats.

- a. Basic earning over passion and prosperity.
- b. Brain drain.

- lack of development across industries.
- limited entrepreneurship support
- b. Restained growth of per capita income.
- c. Lower grassroots engagement in political activities

(v) ~~Way Forward~~

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(vi) conclusion. ✓

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The Essay

Pakistan, since its inception has been a "hard" or "security state" rather than a welfare state. While the approach has been deterrent against the hostile neighbors of the country, its effects on indigenous sectors such as education are of major concern. With national budget accounting for less than 1% for education sector, Pakistani universities are facing a paramount decline in their enrollment. According to estimates, the varsities are facing 11-14% decline in their enrollment. The decline is, not in anyway, not the representation of youth's disinterest in education. Rather, it represents the misalignment of priorities in national policy and mismanagement of the youth bulge. There are various factors contributing to the declining enrollment in universities including fractured economic str., educational structure, shift in educational preferences, outdated education model, rising inflation, and moving abroad trends. However, The decline is setting a predicament stage of consequences such as decline in Societal intellectual capacities, closure

of departments across universities, ceased development of indigenous technocrats, and lack of progress across universities. However, the issue can be addressed by prioritizing education in national policy and budget, updating curricula, and incentivizing teaching faculty along with a few other steps.

Firstly, Pakistan has had a fractured economic and educational structure. Foremost, there is the bare minimum allocation of budget for education. While education is a provincial domain and not central, education counts for less than 1% of national budget on the whole. Education being a provincial domain also creates an "educational divide" among provinces leading to incoherent education availability and accessibility. Beyond policies, accessibility of education—particularly tertiary or university education—remains another concern, particularly for far flung areas such as in Balochistan. There are only two universities in the whole country facilitating remote education. However, their quality is contested. Similarly, with only 269 universities catering to 25 million populace, students from far flung areas move to major cities for tertiary education. But rising

university and hostel fee is making them unable to do so. Transport remains another issue in areas such as South Punjab and Balochistan. It has been recently surfaced in decades that CM Balochistan launched school buses for students. Such issues prevail not only for students but also for teachers who have to commute long distances. The

dilemma gets manifold with issues such as low wages and female-centricity of teaching department, while the former is simultaneously bound by patriarchal restrictions. Hence, the education sector has to undergo many layers of reforms to make higher education more accessible.

Secondly, people find a huge gap between what is taught at universities and skills required in job market. There is a growing shift in preference of skills-based education over theoretical knowledge requiring a meager percentage of attendance and marks to get the degree. Forged degrees also make higher education worthless in the eyes of people. Those who can afford simply buy the degree, meanwhile building their careers. Such trends have given rise to diploma and short courses institutes which in return

are devaluing higher education and degrees. ~~Driven by the need and desire for practical skills, people retreat to such courses which can help them land some white-collar job soon after the course completion.~~ Also, people find such diplomas and courses much more affordable than long and hefty degrees. So, ~~degree versus job market gap is~~ another factor contributing to the decline of ~~enrollments~~ in universities.

~~Thirdly, building upon the previous argument, is outdated education model. This includes decades old curricula, lack of quality research facilities, and rise of AI and shortfall of relevant apparatus.~~ Curricula across universities in Pakistan is not only outdated but ~~also theoretically confined.~~

It lacks integration of practical insights and ~~relevance~~ making it difficult for people from diverse educational backgrounds to digest and learn. ~~This outdatedness is coupled with lack of quality research facilities.~~

Uptill 2022, it was necessary for BS students to carry out some sort of research in order to graduate. However, in 2022 the necessity was replaced with optionality of ~~final year project in place of research,~~ further deteriorating

the quality of both education and graduates. While the initiative might have been taken with the goodwill of increasing the number of graduates, but it seems to have backfired - as every shortcut without structural reforms does. For example, in 2019 the enrollment figure was 7 lac, whereas in 2023 it was reported to be below 6 lac - after making research optional - by the Economic Survey of Pakistan. Similarly, while information technology has been on rise for some time now, the sudden rise of AI also has jolted the education sector with no relevant apparatus. Even the teaching faculty of the field has either got their relevant degree from abroad or has learned AI skills from through some short course. Also, a very few number of universities is offering degrees in the most in-demand field.

Therefore, outdated education model is also jeopardizing the university enrollments.

Fourthly, rising inflation is also contributing to the decline in enrollments across universities in Pakistan. Owing to the weak economy of the country, the national education budget has decreased from 111 Billion Rupees to 8109 Bn, on one hand, and on the other hand inflation is hitting people

hard. This has resulted in lower funding for universities which are now unable to meet their expenses. To cop up with the situation, universities are either shutting down their low enrollment campuses/departments, or are opening new departments ^{in addition to raising their fee} which fall outside of their speciality. Similarly, common people hit by inflation are now unable to ~~send~~ afford higher education for their children. For example, in conversation with Dawn, a mother from Narowal stated that despite her son scoring good marks in intermediate has joined a local factory as they are unable to afford his university fee. Henceforth, higher education crisis in Pakistan is being exacerbated by its weak economy and rising inflation.

Fifth, owing to numerous factors including socio-political, economic, and educational, the migrating abroad trend is on its peak in Pakistan. The migration is driven by both economic and educational motives. Study visas and Scholarships such as ERASMUS and DAAD offer a much affordable suit to follow in the pursuit of both quality education, and employment and lifestyle. However, the intent to pursue the suit may vary with some leveraging it to access

global job markets while others in an attempt to hone their academic and research skills. Hence, Pakistan's youth while ditching its own universities, is filling up the foreign universities.

Relevantly, agri-universities and the decline in their enrollment can be taken into account to better understand the issue in the context of above stated causes. Pakistan is an agrarian country and most of the students come from rural-agricultural backgrounds. They pursue their education mostly in agri-universities such as Arid Agriculture University with the vision of modernizing agriculture on their farmlands. However, a recently conducted study finds that such farmlands consist comprise less than 12 acres of land which is insufficient for affording higher education. The situation is aggravated by natural disasters such as floods which ruin crops and agricultural yield, significantly reducing their economic output. Similarly, the fertilizers and pesticides dealers have now started acting as direct sellers, marketers, accountants etc and hence companies no longer hire for such positions creating a degree-job vacuum gap in the arena. Ultimately, students

are no longer pursuing the agricultural education at the previous scale, resulting in a decline in enrollment in agri-universities.

The essay has elaborated the causes of decline in university enrollment in Pakistan along with a case study. Now, it will illustrate the consequences of the decline.

It is reportedly said that nearly about 4% of Pakistani populace reach upto university level. While the numbers reached their ~~sky~~ highest in 2019, they are again falling significantly. Such dilemmas come with their repercussions such as decline in societal intellectual capacities. Universities are said to be places where, beyond theoretical knowledge, students hone their social skills and political knowledge. They get to have a fair idea of the outside world and how things work. Students void of such exposure might have limited intellectual development. For example, due to their limitation to their small familial or business circle, at max, they might not ~~get~~ get aware of their political rights. Similarly, their world-view might be restricted to their home-work-home

routine and not beyond that. This also creates a lack of recognition of indirect or subtle injustices and reinforcement of stereotypes at Societal level. Hence, universities' declining enrollment signals not only intellectually void citizens but also weaker social fabric unaware of its rights and potential.

Another obvious consequence of the decline is closure of departments across universities. With some departments - particularly of arts and humanities domain - having lesser to no demand, and others - such as IT and AI - having peak demand but no apparatus, universities are forced to retreat to the closure of several departments. Lack of funding is another issue behind it. ~~Recent~~ The consequence has already started manifesting itself, as several departments have been closed down owing to low enrollments in universities such as in DIT Khan. Such closures may ~~eradic~~ lead to complete ~~a~~ backdrop of arts and humanities related subjects with skills-based subjects dominating the educational arena. This will ultimately lead to limited research across the domains of

sociology, govt and others, leading to limited development across the sectors.

Also, if students, instead of pursuing higher education, retreat to making both ends meet with low paying jobs, there may be a shortfall of technocrats across industries. Pakistan is already facing the crisis of technocrats across industries such as mining. With natural reserves ~~counting~~ estimatedly valued at \$3 Trillion, the state is unable to leverage it owing to the lack of experts and other relevant apparatus. The dilemma can extend to the other sectors, if situation prevails. Similarly, students pursue such diplomas and courses which equate for Intermediate or Bachelor level of education, but with much less money and time. While such courses produce ~~pro~~ industries related personnel, they do not stay in the country. They pursue such courses so that they can move abroad to countries such as Dubai with sponsorship or job in hand. These factors together lead to a decline in university enrollments which may ultimately lead to little to no development of indigenous technocrats.

With the lack of technocrats and industry experts, there can be no indigenous industrial growth. The country would ought to depend on foreign direct investments solely for industrial development. This would lead to limited economic activities such as entrepreneurship. For example, Pakistan's industrial landscape is dominated by only two industries; real estate, and food industry. No other industry is operating at such a large scale as these two. The reason behind it is that these industries are majorly led by middle to middle mediocrity educated personnel and do not require formal education. Hence people find it easy to build their careers in these industries unlike other developed countries where certification is required even to operate as a realtor. If the declining enrollments prevail, the trend will also prevail with a few sectors hegemonizing the industrial landscape and curtailing the industrial diversification and hence any improvement in per-capita income.

It is necessary to curtail the declining enrollments in Pakistan universities across Pakistan.

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~~higher literate and educated class~~
~~can enhance the chances progress~~
~~towards socio-political and economic~~
~~stability. To do so, the fractured~~
~~education structure must be repaired.~~

As a former Punjab University professor
said, "The current decline in
enrollment is an indicator of the
deep educational fracture that
prevails in the country".

~~Educational~~
~~share in national budget must be~~
~~enhanced and universities must be~~
~~adequately funded. More universities~~
~~must be opened, particularly near~~
~~remote areas and villages. Societal~~
~~thought thinking of "degree for~~
~~employment" must also be changed.~~
More employment opportunities should
also be created so that students

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~~can afford their tuition fee while~~
~~working part-time. Such measures~~
~~along with other structural reforms~~
~~must be taken to prevent the declining~~
~~rates of university enrollment.~~

Conclusively, the declining
university enrollments is a dilemma
that can exacerbate other dilemmas
of Pakistan. While education sector
remains neglected in national policy
and receives insufficient
funding, such negligence can lead

to dire consequences. From already pertaining brain drain and lack of technocrats to hindering the future diversification of industries, the decline poses severe constraints on the national developments. Hence, structural reforms should be taken to address the issue.