

Crisis in Academia: Declining Student Interest in Universities

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The Essay

There once lived a boy named Adeel in a bustling city - hard working, ambitious, and deeply responsible. Despite his determination, Adeel could not complete his higher education. Belonging to a middle class family, the soaring university fees proved to be beyond his reach. Adeel's struggle is not unique; it echoes a quiet but growing academic crisis in Pakistan, and declining interest

of students' in universities. Education has always been an anchor of human progress, driving social mobility, national development, and global competitiveness. However, in Pakistan, the academic system is marred by inefficiencies and systemic weaknesses. With only handful of universities ranked globally, low research output, low education enrollment, and youth migration due to lack of trust in local universities. This crisis has lead to the decline in students' interest in universities. Several factors have contributed to this trend which includes; incompetent faculty, the rise of digital disruption and online alternatives, the spread of e-degrees with limited market value, socio-political instability disrupting campus environment, and lack of research and innovation culture. Together, these factors erode the students' interest in universities. Yet, solutions exist to revitalize students' interest in universities which requires aligning curricula with industry needs, offering financial aid, investing in digital infrastructure, and strengthening accreditation mechanisms to ensure quality education. This essay will assess the academic crisis in Pakistan, explore the causes behind the declining interest of students' in universities, and propose practical measures to restore the relevance of universities in Pakistan.

To begin with, ⁱⁿ understanding the academic crisis in Pakistan, the foremost

issue is the lack of globally ranked universities in Pakistan, despite being the fifth most populous country in the world, has only a handful of institutions recognized internationally.

According to the **QS World University Rankings**, only three Pakistani universities make it to the top 1000: **Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU)**, **National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST)**, and **Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS)**. The absence of strong global presence diminishes Pakistan's ability to compete in the international academic arena and weakens the credibility of its higher education system. Thus, the scarcity of globally ranked universities stands out as a leading factor that escalates the academic crisis in Pakistan.

Moreover, the academic crisis in Pakistan is further exacerbated by the low enrollment rate. According to the **Higher Education Commission (HEC)**, the gross enrollment ratio in universities is **only around 13%**, compared to the global average of **38%** and more than **50%** in advanced economies. This stark disparity highlights the limited accessibility and inclusiveness of Pakistan's higher education system. Hence, the dismal enrollment rate stand as a critical driver intensifying the academic crisis in Pakistan.

In addition to this, the negligible research output significantly aggravates the academic crisis in Pakistan. A strong research culture is the backbone of higher education, driving innovation, knowledge creation, and global recognition. Pakistan lags behind in this area. Weak funding, lack of collaboration with industry, and minimal incentives for faculty have left universities focusing more on degree distribution than on research. Thus, the poor state of research further escalates the academic crisis in Pakistan.

Similarly, youth migration from the country due to lack of trust in universities, has led to the academic crisis in Pakistan. According to the **Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (2022)**, more than **765,000** educated youth left Pakistan in a single year, many seeking opportunities in universities across Europe, North America, and the Middle East. The exodus of skilled students, often referred to as the **brain drain**, depletes Pakistan's talent pool and creates a vicious cycle: the departure of top students reduces academic competitiveness at home, which in turn encourages more youth to leave. Thus, widespread youth migration underscores the lack of faith in

Pakistan's higher education system, which intensifies the academic crisis.

These pieces of evidence underscore the critical factors that establish academic crisis in Pakistan, offering a brief yet an urgent overview of the issue. This analysis below will now explore why the students' interest in universities is declining.

The first and foremost reason behind the declining interest of students in universities is incompetent faculty and outdated curricula. According to the **Higher Education Commission (HEC)**, only **36%** of university faculty members in Pakistan hold a PhD, far below international benchmarks where 70% of teaching staff in reputable universities are doctorate holders. Equally, problematic is the outdated curriculum, which is often disconnected from the modern job market and industry demands. Thus, the twin problems of incompetent faculty and outdated curriculum critically undermine the quality of higher education, eroding student interest in universities.

Secondly, digital disruption and the rise of e-degrees have diminished student interest in traditional universities, leading to academic crisis. In today's digital age, students increasingly find online learning platforms more flexible, affordable, and skill oriented compared to conventional degrees. Platforms such as

Coursera, edX, and Udemy provide globally recognized certifications and even full-fledged degree programs at a fraction of the cost charged by local universities. For instance, Coursera now hosts over 124 million registered learners worldwide, with around 15000 students from Pakistan enrolling in programs offered by top universities like Stanford and **Harvard**. Students, therefore, prefer global digital platforms that promise practical skills and international recognition. Hence, digital disruption and the growth of substandard e-degrees are key factors discouraging students from pursuing university education.

Thirdly, social and political instability further contributes to the decline of students' interest in universities. Campuses, instead of serving as safe havens for learning, often become centers of unrest in Pakistan. Student union clashes, political interference, and administrative negligence disrupt academic calendars and create an environment of fear. According to the **Dawn Report in 2022**, violent clashes between student unions in several public universities led to disruption of nearly **40%** of scheduled classes in certain institutions. Thus, persistent social and political unrest on campuses stands as a major factor driving students away from universities.

declining their interest in higher education. Fourthly, the outdated curriculum irrelevant to market needs has eroded student confidence in universities. According to a British Council **2021 Report**, employers in Pakistan identified a 47% skills gap between what graduates learn and what industries require. For example, while global economies are shifting towards digitalization, data sciences, and artificial intelligence, many Pakistani universities continue to rely on curricula designed decades ago. This mismatch leaves graduates struggling to secure meaningful employment and discourages new students from investing time and money in such outdated programs. Thus, the irrelevance of curricula to contemporary market needs stands as central driving factor which leads to declining interest of students in universities.

Not only this, but the lack of innovation culture and research further aggravates the decline of interest in universities. Globally, universities thrive as centers of innovation, but in Pakistan, most institutions function merely as degree distribution bodies. According to **Scopus (2022)**, Pakistan contributes a meager 0.37% of global research publications, a figure far below neighbouring India, which contributes over 6%. For students, this absence

of a vibrant research culture translates into limited global opportunities for creativity, discovery, and professional growth. Thus, the lack of innovation culture and research not only diminishes the academic quality but also discourages students from pursuing higher education within Pakistan.

Additionally, the mushroom growth of low quality universities has declined the students' interest in universities. The commercialization of education has allowed many institutions to prioritize revenue generation over academic excellence. According to reports, more than 25 new private universities were established alone in 2023 ~~also~~, yet a majority lacked proper accreditation. These institutions often operate like degree mills, producing graduates whose qualifications carry a little weight in the job market. As a result, students are skeptical of investing years of study into universities that fail to provide ~~either~~ employability nor intellectual growth. Thus, this mushroom growth of local universities directly contributes to the declining interest of students in pursuing university education. Lastly, the rising financial burden on students has declined their interest in universities. Higher education, once viewed as a ladder of social mobility, has become increasingly

in accessible for many families in Pakistan. Tuition fees in private universities often range between PKR 150,000 and 300,000 per semester, while even public sector institutions regularly raise their fees to cover operational costs. Alongside this, students bear additional expenses of accommodation, transport, books, and technology; all of which place a heavy strain on middle and lower-income households.

As a result, many students either choose not to enroll or drop out midway due to financial constraints. Thus, the mounting financial burden is one of the most visible factors behind the declining interest of students in universities.

The above discussion highlighted the main indicators of why students' interest in universities is declining. However, to overcome this growing trend, several strategic suggestions can be put forward to enhance ~~also~~ revive students' interest in universities and to curb the growing academic crisis in Pakistan, as discussed below.

Firstly, the curriculum should be aligned with industry needs to strengthen the interest of students' in universities. By revising curricula to incorporate emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, data sciences, renewable energy, and entrepreneurship, and coupling them with internships and industry partnerships, universities can restore students' trust. International models like

Germany's dual education system illustrates how industry-academia alignment directly enhances employability, making higher education more appealing and relevant.

Secondly, financial aid and scholarships must be expanded to make universities accessible and appealing to the students. Countries like United States and Turkey have demonstrated how comprehensive financial aid systems significantly improve enrollment and retention rates. Thus, making education affordable is critical to sustain students' interest in universities.

Thirdly, investing in digital infrastructure while regulating online learning is essential to sustain student interest in universities. The modern knowledge economy demands that universities embrace technology, yet, Pakistan still suffers from limited digital resources, outdated labs, and inadequate internet connectivity. To counter this, universities must integrate digital tools into classrooms, expand virtual libraries, and upgrade IT infrastructure. Countries such as Estonia and Singapore have shown how strong digital ecosystems can enrich traditional learning without displacing universities. Thus, balanced investment in technology alongside regulation of online learning can reinvigorate confidence in higher education.

Lastly, strengthening

accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms is vital to restore student trust in universities. Many universities operate without proper faculty qualifications and accreditation, yet continue to produce graduates with degrees that carry little market value. To reverse this decline, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) must enforce stringent accreditation standards, transparent audits, and continuous quality checks across all institutions. International models such as the UK's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) demonstrate how robust monitoring can safeguard academic standards and student confidence. Thus, rigorous accreditation and accountability are indispensable to strengthening student interest in higher education.

To conclude, the academic crisis in Pakistan is not merely an educational challenge but a structural flaw undermining national development. These crises have led to a trend of declining students' interest in universities, driven by factors such as incompetent faculty and outdated teaching methods, digital disruption and e-degrees, socio-political instability, irrelevant curricula, lack of research and innovation, mushroom growth of low quality institutions, and the rising financial burden on students. Left unaddressed, this trend threatens to weaken Pakistan's human capital, accelerate brain drain, and erode global competitiveness. However, this crisis and declining interest of

Students is not in ever sible. Student interest in universities can be strengthened through strategic corrections such as aligning curricula with industry needs, offering financial aid and scholarships for deserving students, investing in digital infrastructure while regulating online learning, and reinforcing accreditation and monitoring of institutions. If pursued with vision and consistency, these reforms can transform higher education into a true engine of national progress. Hence, Pakistan stands at a crossroads: either allow its academic decline to perpetuate mediocrity or seize the opportunity to build universities as centers of knowledge, innovation, and hope for future generations.