

The Digital Divide of Higher Education: Pakistan's Peripheral Areas

The current COVID-19 global pandemic has reminded us of the power of modern communication tools as economic and social activity found means to continue in a virtual environment. This includes education institutions around the world, which have been able to produce young graduates, although not without interruptions, to enter a job market that is yet to define a “new normal” amid fears of an approaching global recession. Pakistan’s universities had also shown adaptability to a virtual learning space amid a national lockdown but have largely failed to recognise the country’s technological underdevelopment and resulting digital divide for its own pupils. It is safe to say that the nation’s student body has been immensely and disproportionately disadvantaged by the mismanaged overreliance on online education by the higher education sector.

University students residing in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, ex-FATA, Gilgit Baltistan and other peripheral areas have struggled to access the internet to attend online classes and subsequent examinations. Inaccessibility issues are not the only problems however: studying amid a national lockdown means potentially being more vulnerable to financial uncertainty and unstable families as well as the possibility of not having one’s own private devices like laptops/desktops. As youth currently struggle to continue higher education from households and away from access to physical curriculum and research resources, the attitude of indifference from universities has pushed matters further.

Protests have erupted across numerous cities and often lead to police arrests, the developments of which have been largely shared on social media networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Such mobilisations for drawing attention to student demands and deficits in the education system is akin to the ongoing Student Solidarity Movement that seeks to gain better representation and protection for student bodies. Such a social movement is gaining momentum in the country to re-establish official student unions and oppose an education structure that continues to operate as a set of businesses that overlook the physical, academic and legal freedoms of its students.

The lack of consideration for inaccessibility to the internet and resulting failure and delay in qualifications for students shows not only poor mismanagement on part of universities and the Ministry of Federal Education but also the deficient digital infrastructure in the country as a whole. Only 35% of the Pakistani population has access to the web and despite demands for infrastructure development, the federal government and Supreme Court have lagged in making decisions and accommodations for digital investment in the country's peripheral regions. Such negligence by the current as well as preceding governments shows how urban cities like Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi have been prioritised at the cost of building infrastructure elsewhere at the national level. Moreover, the police breakdown on the recent protests is also evidence to the authoritarian-style governance towards the youth populace whose present and future ambitions are secondary to ensuring law and order. This is true for the federal government's priority for national security as well, as decisions to refuse internet access in places like Balochistan and Gilgit Baltistan have been justified on the basis of securing these regions from terrorist activity. Again, Pakistan's civilian population has had to bear the brunt of the country's fragile security situation, and this time it has specifically hit its crucial student demographic.

As students, institutions and the government struggle to address this digital divide, Prime Minister Imran Khan, with deep inconsideration for the looming negligence towards university students, has claimed the use of the internet to be problematic for the education and training of the youth. While such a claim is well-intended and helps remind us to regulate society's harmful use of the web, it largely overlooks the present nature of the education crisis that is based in the very reality that most of the population already suffers from a lack of digital access. To further restrict the internet would only bring further problems for young Pakistanis that seek learning and professional opportunities online.

With a state narrative that remains insensitive to its students at the most crucial time of their academic journeys, combined with the ineffective and indifferent response of the Ministry of Federal Education and individual institutions, the country will fail to realise its short as well as long term goals of economic and social progress. If Pakistani state and society hope to realise the country's untapped potential and escape its dependency on foreign aid and loans by

diplomatic partners and international organizations like the IMF and World Bank, it must address its current education crisis as one that is intimately intertwined with the economy's future performance.

Currently the youth forms the largest proportion of Pakistanis and should be accommodated in an inclusive manner for both Education and Economic policy approaches. The current demands of official recognition of student unions is a helpful starting point so student bodies can better negotiate their terms at a university, city, provincial and federal level. Student unions also have the potential to create industry links specifically catered to the training of university students and new graduates to improve their skills, work experience and overall employability – a dynamic structure that will be beneficial if realised. As for those specifically disadvantaged by the pandemic and digital divide, further opportunities to appear for examinations in the coming months is a viable and fair option to be implemented in universities. Lastly, employment processes in professional institutes and businesses should develop a more flexible and sensitive criteria for the hiring process of fresh graduates that have been affected by the unique situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such inclusive policy approaches would specifically benefit the country's peripheral areas that are already in dire need of productive, innovative and more youthful professionals to encourage local development. If the government and education sector hope to see waves of youth actualisation and economic progress, it is better in their interest to accommodate student's physical and academic wellbeing in current periods to ensure a turnout of young professionals that contribute positively to Pakistan's economic growth and social progress.

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