

University education By Benazir Murad

# Universities in Pakistan: a sorry state

The status enjoyed by public universities some 20 years ago has dwindled. Today these institutions of higher learning although churning out students in vast numbers it is believed that the degrees awarded here are not worth the paper they're printed on. There are sev-

eral reasons for this change which range from the unprofessional attitude of its academics to the general decline of the education system. This has led to distress within the student community who understand the challenges they face internationally and at home.

There are several issues that emerge as students who enter with the hopes of a bright future, con-

front dark realities on campus. This, they believe has weakened their prospects of a bright future as due to this, preference is given to students with degrees from abroad. According to a student who spoke on conditions of anonymity, "The job market does not need people with degrees alone. They look for people who possess skills that come only from a thorough under-

standing of the subject." This is the basic reason why most students prefer to pay steep course fees to private institutions rather than study at state-run universities. Also the fact that students at these universities are hardly exposed to practical works is another impediment that dashes all hopes of students studying there.

Although the government has

taken some measures to better the standard of education in Pakistan, yet it fails to satisfy the student's learning needs that would help them come up to international standards in order to compete in the international market. This according to experts is due to its primary structure. According to Mohsin Khan, a final year student, at the Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro, "The quality of education at the university, does not come up to international standards." He blames the University administration that accommodates students with lower grades who usually have influential relatives or are able to get a seat on the basis of self-finance for this. This, he asserts is unfair to hardworking students who come on merit.

At the Master's level submission of a thesis is required to get a degree. However, according to most students due to lack of proper guidance and guidelines they are never clear of what methodology to apply and what resources to use. This has led to instances of plagiarism, which is considered an academic crime in the West. According to a student who passed out from Karachi University just recently and who spoke on conditions of anonymity, "The blame lies with the teachers who without conducting appropriate checks approve students' work as authentic." She cites her own example in which she states that since she was not given any guidelines for her project from her supervisor and had no idea of what she's supposed to do, she opted to copy the work of a senior student. "The best part is that I scored well," she adds.

There have also been instances in which students who sat for a viva were asked to respond in writing if they were unable to express themselves orally. This was revealed by a University of Sindh student who does not wish to disclose his name. These incidents spell-out the ignorance that teachers boast of. Although there

are several programmes that aim to educate teachers to cope with the challenges of teaching, yet they are not very successful in Pakistan and so they resort to age old methods of teaching which invariably emphasise the rote method of learning, thereby killing any spark of creativity that a student might exhibit.

"Education seems like a burden", says Mujtaba Surhio a final

access to latest developments in their field that would bring them at par with students of private institutions in Pakistan. Similarly, Amjad Hussain, who is in his final year of Analytical Chemistry, Sindh University, voices his concerns, "With lack of proper practical work in labs, no up-to-date information and updated course material we are hardly in any position to compete

be given opportunity to polish their skills through internships. "Sadly there are very few organisations that are willing to take interns." She blames the university administration of not doing enough to secure the opportunities needed to give students a bright future.

But Ikramullah who studied at the department of Anthropology at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad has something different to say, "We cannot solely criticise public universities of not doing enough to secure students a bright future, in my opinion both private and public university students have

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year student of the Department of Anthropology at the Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

"Since teachers are unable to guide students, their lectures end up confusing us," Mujtaba claims that at the end of the year students hardly have any knowledge of the subject.

He asserts that it is imperative that the syllabus at these universities is updated regularly so that students at these institutions have

in the local job market."

According to Beenish Masroor, a BBA student at the University of Peshawar, "When we graduate from these institutions, we attain degrees the authenticity of which cannot be challenged. However, the reason why I feel that we cannot find jobs is lack of avenues to implement our knowledge." She asserts that in addition to knowledge attained from books and documents it is important that students

to toil hard to get jobs".

Having recognised serious flaws in the system of education pursued by public universities, it is no surprise that the scope of its students is narrowed. It is thus imperative that the government make serious effort to correct these flaws and through its policies ensure that the education system in the country is strengthened thereby giving students' equal opportunity at all levels. ■

View from Islamabad By Khawar Ghuman

## What is the government doing?

The education sector like many others is experiencing the heat of the economic crunch in the country. Federal Minister for Education, Mir Hazar Khan Bijarani, in an exclusive interview with *Dawn*, talks about the initiatives taken by his government in these hard times to provide access to education across Pakistan. He also mentions the plans envisaged by his government in the new education policy

to improve the education standard here.

**KG:** What steps are being taken by your ministry to spread education throughout the country?

**MHKB:** The government is working on the new education policy which is based on three principal decisions.

**KG:** What are those decisions?  
**MHKB:** First is the government's commitment to promote its Education For All Programme; every possible step would be taken to ensure that all children of school going age are in schools. For this, the government is working on a package of incentives especially for parents of school

going girls.

The second is the training of teachers. Over the years, this aspect of education has been greatly ignored. The country does not possess adequate facilities to train teachers. Those available are based on outdated training manuals which have nothing to do with present day education. This is why the government is paying special attention to teachers training. Moreover, the salary structure of school teachers would be revised. This however, due to the present economic meltdown, is not possible right away.

Third is the availability of functional schools in every nook and corner of the country. According to a survey conducted by the previous government more than 8,000 schools were non-functional due to a variety of reasons. However, as a result of the initiatives taken by the present government, 2500 to 3000 of these schools have begun to function, the rest would soon follow suit.

**KG:** How in your opinion is this possible?

**MHKB:** For this we would need the collaboration of teachers, parents and civil society. However, the best way to ensure that schools become functional is that teachers are posted near to where they live. This would not only improve their attendance rate significantly, but it would also make them accountable to the local population.

**KG:** The curriculum plays an important role as an outdated one gets students no where. What is your government doing regarding this?

**MHKB:** The ministry is paying due attention to curriculum development which should be ready by the time of the commencement of the new academic year in April. So far the curriculum wing had developed a curriculum of 29 subjects.

**KG:** We see that the education sector in Pakistan lacks uniformity, especially in the case of commencement of the academic year. What is the government doing about that?

**MHKB:** The new academic year, which earlier differed in various parts of the country, would begin in April throughout Pakistan. Similar steps are being taken to introduce a sense of uniformity on the examination side, so that matriculation and intermediate level examinations are held simultaneously in the country. Furthermore, steps are being taken to standardise the method

of examination in all matriculation and intermediate boards which would help create a level playing field for students throughout the country.

**KG:** What do you have to say about the government's spending on the education sector which had been dismally low — less than two per cent of the GDP — in the country?

**MHKB:** In a recent speech Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani, committed to allocate four per cent of the GDP to education in the budget for the next financial year. However, I am pushing the government to raise the figure to five per cent. All of this however depends upon the financial health of the country, which at present is quite precarious. There is no contending that health and education are the two most important sectors and need more attention than all others. The present government is highly committed in this regard and is doing all in its power to improve it.

**KG:** What about the Higher Education Commission (HEC) which is currently facing deep cuts in its budgetary allocations?

**MHKB:** The government could hardly do anything about this. However, the ministry has ensured that scholarship holders who are currently studying at various foreign universities would receive uninterrupted stipends. The government has for now frozen all future scholarship schemes offered and managed by HEC.

**KG:** What do you think about the quality of higher education in the country vis-à-vis other countries?

**MHKB:** Yes, there is a long way to go to get to that level. However, the government is taking every possible measure in this regard. The government is continuing with the Higher Education Commission (HEC) that was set up by the previous government. We need to improve our university education to make its graduates more competitive in the jobs market where they have to face a cut throat competition.

**KG:** But isn't it true that in order to pursue its market economy policy, the government is investing more in the private sector than in public social sector?

**MHKB:** Again, it is the persistent economic meltdown which is damaging the image of the present government. How could a democratically elected government ignore social sector vis-à-vis private sector. The government is absolutely clear that social sector needs more money than any other. However, at present we have a dearth of finances to do this. ■

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