Books

Nadeem Ul Haque, Mahboob Mahmood, Shahbano Abbas, Ali Lodhi. *The University Research System In Pakistan*. 2020. 200 pages.

The *University Research System In Pakistan* is a thoroughly researched work, providing an extensive discussion on the state of university research in Pakistan. It highlights problems being faced by researchers and compares them with global research practices. The authors recommend reforms at the institutional level, the type of research funding, the metrics of measurement, and the adaptation and promotion of a research culture that provides incentives for teamwork and mentorship for the new entrants in the industry.

Research on the barriers and possible solutions is vital for quality and problem-oriented research that produces products that can compete with global research. The authors give a diagnosis of the problems of the research in Pakistan by identifying key problem areas and their possible solutions. We can sum up the purpose of the book as follows:

> "*The rapidly changing world has brought new challenges requiring innovative and problem-solving research. Pakistan's university research system lacks the essentials required for competing in the modern world. Therefore, the situation necessitates exploring where the problem exists and what can be the possible solutions*".

The book posits that the Higher Education Commission (henceforth, HEC)[1] has no doubt done a remarkable job and has improved Pakistan's university research and teaching by giving incentives, funds, technical support, and faculty training programs in the world's leading universities. However, there have been some bad incentive schemes that have led to poor results.

The lack of quality research on the subject has also been one of the reasons our research system has been unable to provide solutions to local problems. As is discussed below, the authors maintain that the "bias" of the HEC towards physical sciences has also been a reason that we have not been able to produce good social science researchers. Therefore, this book has filled a gap in the literature on the subject and has also been a comprehensive document presenting solutions to the problems identified.

The book presents detailed statistics and is rife with a visual display of infographics. The authors have capitalised on the already existing data by making the data narrate a holistic story of the research industry of Pakistan, its dynamics, and the often neglected role of universities. But at the same time, the book's text is enriched by the solid

---

[1] The regulatory body of higher education in Pakistan, headed by a chairman. It replaced the University Grant Commission, which was its predecessor.

foundations provided by a key informant and expert interviews with whom the book has referred to as "stars of the industry". The methodology of the study, therefore, is a fusion of qualitative methods and quantitative visual tools. The authors provided credible evidence from a sample based on the number of participants in the study. It included 181 participants who either participated in interviews or focused group discussions. Fourteen academic and research institutions have been a part of this study.

In the sample, 28 percent were professors, 17 percent were associate professors, 19 percent were assistant professors, 11 percent were lecturers, and 25 percent were in the 'others' category. The sample is representative, and the views and opinions of the experts have indeed provided meaning to the statistics and the other indicators of the industry; their views have been the lens through which the research's problems are viewed, and certain solutions are recommended. The sample could have been more representative if it had included students with research degrees.

The research system in Pakistani universities has come a long way. This journey has not been easy, and the HEC has played a significant role in acquainting the Pakistani teaching institutions with the research practices. However, there exists considerable room for improvements and reforms. Research in Pakistan needs a culture of mentorship, collaboration, and availability of funds. The young entrants do not have a mentor to look up to. The total number of professors is estimated to be 6,300, while new entrants in the industry are estimated to be around 39,000, which means that for every professor, there are lecturers. These seven lecturers require mentorship, guidance, and support. Still, this considerable ratio shows that we do not have enough seniors to guide the lower lot. As a result, we do not have quality research capital in terms of human resources, and quality research products that could be sold.

The problems are not just limited to this as there is yet another big area of concern that the authors have pointed out which has resulted in disincentivising good research, and that is "teamwork". The HEC has made it an incentive to work solo. The book quotes Sohail Naqvi (Haque et al., 2020) as saying that research is teamwork and that only teams can produce good research. Research never takes place in isolation (exceptions aside). However, as the book points out correctly, we do not have a "teamwork culture." In a team, the members can put in their effort based on their expertise, and thus, quality research is produced.

Teamwork, good teams, and collaboration in producing quality research need funding. Therefore, funding is also an area of concern when it comes to the diagnostic approach adopted by the book. Access to a wider donor market is needed to facilitate. The study points out the heavy emphasis on agriculture research, for which funding has been provided by educational institutions with specialised agriculture departments or by some government bodies. There is a dearth of research avenues. Pakistan's research spending has decreased even in the agriculture sector by 23 percent, while in other countries, the share has grown. For instance, it has increased in Malaysia, India, and China by 87 percent, 82 percent, and 119 percent, respectively. Although agriculture is a promising area, still the private sector involvement in funding agriculture research is very low.

Pakistan does not fund universities as it should have done. We agree with the authors as data shows that universities spend more on infrastructure than on research. This finding is also supported by other studies, such as (Moborkosheva 2015),[2] which reported that

[2]Muborakshoeva, M. (2015). Impediments to enhancing research within universities in developing context: the case of Pakistani universities. *Journal of International and Comparative Education (JICE)*, 1-13.

Pakistan's research faces the problem of a shortage of funding available for research. Furthermore, there are also issues of disbursement, inefficient use, and corruption at the university level

The lack of funding is also reflected in another connected problem of overemphasis on physical sciences. This finding of the publication under review is also supported by many other studies, such as Moborkosheva (2013), who quotes Junaidi (2014) figures that in real terms the research funding had decreased by 11 percent when accounted for inflation in 2014.[3]

The book sheds light on the funding of research from another angle as the authors give an emphatic defence in favour of their argument that there should be a public-private partnership model. Another aspect is the incentives for social science research relevant to the local context, as this has been a major gap in our research analysis. Both of these findings in the book are in line with certain studies on Pakistani research systems such as Moborkosheva (2015).[4]

The authors opine and present the emphatic case that in the current HEC model, more than the required weight was placed on the "number of publications" rather than the quality of those publications. This imbalance has resulted in poor-quality research.

Research in Pakistan is a euphemism for several publications. It is not to say that number of publication do not matter. It is undoubtedly one of the measures, but other important factors should also be included in the measurement, such as the gap the research has filled, its impact factor, its relevance to the Pakistani context, and most importantly, the research should justify the cost.

The book presents a well-informed critique of the HEC's overemphasis on several publications as a criterion for promotions from Associate professors to Professors and the ranking of universities. This is an issue in the country. For example, there are quantitative criteria for promotions, such as several publications. If an academic has a certain "number "of papers in HEC-recognised journals his/her requirement for promotion is almost complete. For each paper, there are points rewarded. The Paper of sole authorships is given more weightage and importance; hence, HEC, in the effort to promote research, has created some perverse incentives. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in many cases, low-quality sole authorship is given preference over a quality piece written by a team of two or three.

However, this is a problem in the global research industry. Some studies, for instance, Ioannidis et al. (2014) indicate that over-emphasis on quantity leads to poor quality and erroneous research. Other studies that criticise the ranking or assessment of research include Ioannidis et al. (2007),[5] which does a critical appraisal of university ranking systems that are in use globally. While taking support from Van Raan (2007)[6] that the number of publications as a measure is extremely skewed and is, therefore, an unreliable indicator of "quality of research."

---

[3]Junaidi, I. (2014). Education budget decreased despite promises. *The Dawn*.

[4]Muborakshoeva, M. (2015). Impediments to enhancing research within universities in developing context: the case of Pakistani universities. *Journal of International and Comparative Education (JICE)*, 1-13.

[5]Ioannidis, J. P., Patsopoulos, N. A., Kavvoura, F. K., Tatsioni, A., Evangelou, E., Kouri, I., ... & Liberopoulos, G. (2007). International ranking systems for universities and institutions: a critical appraisal. *BMC medicine*, *5*(1), 1-9.

[6]Van Raan, A. F. (2005, June). Challenges in ranking of universities. In *Invited paper for the First International Conference on World Class Universities, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai* (pp. 133-143).

In terms of findings, the book gives a very informative, detailed analysis of the university research system. It has been a result of handwork as suggested by the 14 participating institutions and the 181 experts, including Professors and researchers. And as discussed above, most of the results align with other domestic and international research.

The book is a unique and important document as it attempts to diagnose the problems and impediments faced by the Research Industry in Pakistan. The prescription offers to inform the recommendations if bought by the policymakers, we can expect a positive shift in the research in Pakistan. The extensive survey, the relevance of the sample, and the literature review testify to the quality of the findings. The gap filled by this book also points out the fact of how neglected this area has remained. This book is a must-read for all those who want to investigate what is wrong with our research.

Fida Muhammad Khan and
Aqeel Anwar Chaudhry

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics,
Islamabad.