

Evaluating and Proposing Strategies for Ph.D. Scholarships in Pakistani Higher Education

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Abstract:

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, established in 2002, aims to enhance the country's higher education system to foster socio-economic development. Despite the development of the HEC Vision 2025, which outlines a strategic approach to improving education quality, relevance, and accessibility, challenges persist in policy execution and resource allocation. The HEC Vision 2025 emphasizes innovation, research, and global academic partnerships but struggles with inconsistencies and insufficient funding for research and development. The paper highlights key issues including federal-provincial conflicts, inadequate investment in R&D, and the need for effective policy implementation. Recommendations for addressing these challenges include resolving devolution disputes, introducing split scholarship programs, adopting the Triple Helix model, utilizing modern technology like GIS, engaging donors and private entities, and ensuring equitable access to higher education across all regions. A strategic focus on these areas could potentially lead to significant improvements in the effectiveness of Ph.D. scholarships and overall socio-economic growth.

Key words:

Higher Education Commission, Ph.D. Scholarships, Vision 2025, Research and Development, Policy Implementation

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Introduction

The Higher Education Commission (formerly University Grants Commission) was established in 2002 with the aim of developing and improving Pakistan's higher education system, which could consequently boost both the social and economic sectors of Pakistan. Since its creation, improving the standard of education and research conducted by the organization with highly trained faculty has been a primary goal of the HEC. The HEC developed Vision 2025, a strategic plan outlining how to change the country's higher education system. By encouraging a culture of innovation, research, and entrepreneurship, the vision seeks to improve the quality, relevance, and accessibility of education. It places a strong emphasis on developing competent human resources who can address today's challenges and advance the country's growth. The HEC aims to establish Pakistan as a major player in global education and research while constructing a knowledge-based economy through partnerships with foreign entities, industry, and academia. Faculty development, improving infrastructure, updating curricula, and ensuring fair access to education for various populations are among the main priorities (HEC, 2024).

The HEC has framed many policies to translate Vision 2025 into the socio-economic growth of the country, including the HEC Graduate Education Policy, the Interim Placement of Fresh Ph.D. Policy, and the Foreign Collaboration Policy, among others (ibid.). However, the execution mechanisms still need to be established. The HEC is facing many challenges. Pakistan spends a remarkably small amount on research and development. In South Asia, less than 0.25% of GDP is invested in R&D, which is less than half of the region's already low investment levels (Rab, M., & Jones, C. S., 2015). Moreover, there is an ongoing debate regarding the devolution of powers following the 18th Constitutional Amendment that needs to be addressed to ensure equitable access to Ph.D. scholarships for all regions (The Express Tribune, 2018, December 9).

Problem Statement

There is no denying that the HEC has framed policies to ensure the equitable distribution of Ph.D. scholarships to all regions of the country and to foster

collaborations with industries in research and development. However, there is a perception among the public and educationists that these policies are not translating into the socio-economic growth of the country. Therefore, the research calls for identifying the gaps in the policies and the execution framework adopted by the HEC in this regard.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Post-18th Constitutional Amendment, is the role of the HEC effective in the fair and equitable distribution of Ph.D. scholarships to all regions of the country?

Are the linkages between academia, industry, and government productive in enhancing the efficacy of these scholarships?

Is the role of the R&D wing of the HEC effective in assessing market needs and accordingly making recommendations for Ph.D. scholarships?

SCOPE

This study analyzes the current status of Ph.D. scholarships in the country, budget allocation, HEC policies, their effectiveness regarding equitable access, skill development, technology transfer, R&D initiatives, public-private partnerships, linkages with industries, foreign collaborations, and alignment with modern world demands. The study will utilize available data from the HEC website for analysis. The loopholes and gaps in policies and execution mechanisms will be identified, and recommendations in the form of pragmatic solutions will be suggested.

Literature Review

(Pro-Pakistani, 2022, June 10) noted that in the budget for FY 2022-23, the Ministry of Finance allotted Rs. 109 billion to the Higher Education Commission (HEC), out of which Rs. 65 billion was for non-development and Rs. 44 billion was for development. Analysis indicates a mere 0.3% increase from the previous year, despite assertions of a 67% increase by the administration.

(Zia et al., 2023) described financial constraints as one of the key obstacles to the growth of Pakistan's higher education sector and suggested addressing it through collaborations with private entities, civil society organizations, or international donors.

According to (The Express Tribune, 2018, December 9), examining the language of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in detail shows that the federal government is responsible for supervising matters related to higher degrees from abroad as per Entry No. 16 (Part-I) in the Federal Legislative List (FLL), such as managing foreign scholarships and issuing equivalencies.

However, issues related to education planning and standard setting for higher education, research, scientific, and technical institutions fall under the jurisdiction of the Council of Common Interests (CCI).

(Khawar, A., Arif, S., & Gull, F., 2021) found that years of concern about the HEC's devolution might have taught us that implementation requires better planning and clearer aims, not just at the highest level. "If we have confidence that provinces can implement standards adequately, we can delegate powers to them in the spirit of the 18th amendment," stated the newly appointed head of the HEC. Therefore, having meaningful conversations with all parties involved and increasing the capacity of provincial HECs are the best ways to improve our higher education system moving forward. To prevent internal patronage politics from overwhelming the higher education reform agenda, transparency and autonomy will be crucial.

(Qutoshi, S. B., 2015) highlighted the importance of equitable access to providing quality higher education to the residents of Pakistan. He pointed out that the policy framework is a major factor, and pragmatic steps are necessary to ensure its implementation.

(Cai & Amaral, 2021) described the linkages between government, academia, and industries as the key drivers for bringing economic growth to the country. They highlighted the role played by the R&D wing of any institution in this process.

(Turi, F., & Khan, M. B., 2021) also proved that research and development are crucial components of a knowledge-based economy; hence, Pakistan is seeking a wide range of researchers with the capacity to conduct excellent applied scientific research. Reducing the gap between industry and academia can facilitate the conversion of scientific information and research into industrial output, further promoting economic growth. Regrettably, compared to other emerging and industrialized nations, Pakistan's overall expenditure on research and development is minuscule. National research and development organizations should recognize the value of R&D in light

of globalization and heightened competition and take appropriate measures to enhance their R&D initiatives.

Analysis *Situational Analysis*

Budget:

The government's modest increase of around 5.5 percent above the revised allocation of the current financial year to Rs. 97.098 billion for the education sector and services in the federal budget for the financial year 2023–24 has garnered both attention and criticism. Pakistan is ranked lowest in the region for supporting education, with public education spending as a proportion of GDP anticipated to be 1.7% for the fiscal year 2022–2023. Education activists and academics have stressed the need for more funding in the education sector to address issues and gaps in high-quality education. Since the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, the federal government has primarily focused on subsidizing higher education, with provinces taking on more responsibility for education. Accordingly, an increase over the previous year's allocation of Rs. 59.71 billion has been provided to the Higher Education Commission (HEC) under the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) for the fiscal year 2023–2024 (Pakistan Today, 2023, June 9).

According to the Pakistan Planning Commission (n.d.), the country aims to increase the number of Ph.D. scholars to 15,000, which seems quite unlikely with such a budget allocation.

Ph.D. Scholarships:

According to the HEC (2024), a total of 3,044 scholarships (1,103 foreign and 1,941 local) have been granted by the HEC under different scholarship schemes/projects over the last five years. The breakdown of scholarships (local as well as foreign) awarded is as follows:

Category	Program	Total
Local Scholarships	MS/MPhil	1048
	Ph.D.	893
Total		1941
Foreign Scholarships	MS/MPhil	81
	Ph.D.	1022
Total		1103

Discipline wise bifurcation:

Discipline	Local Scholarships	Foreign Scholarships
Agriculture & Veterinary Sciences	413	134
Arts & Humanities	185	15

Biological & Medical Sciences	231	231
Business Education	148	55
Engineering & Technology	361	371
Physical Science	288	183
Social Sciences	315	114

Trends in Public & Private Sectors:

According to HEC (2024), there is a clear increase in Ph.D. production over the years, indicating growth and investment in research and higher education within the public sector, while the numbers in the private sector are significantly lower than in the public sector. Pakistan's public sector continues to be the main producer of Ph.D.s, which is not surprising given its greater infrastructure, resources, and emphasis on research and higher education. Although on a smaller scale, the private sector is also expanding and contributing to the academic scene. Cooperation across these sectors might further enhance the nation's R&D and innovation.

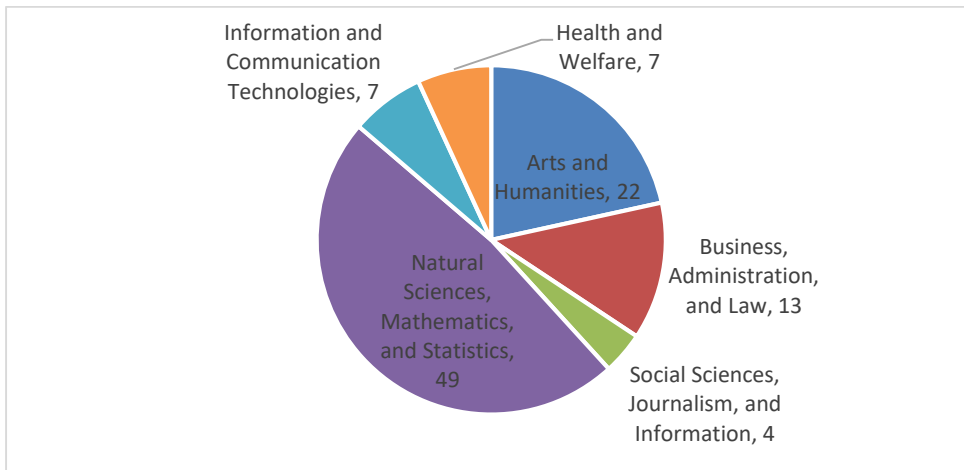
Ph.D. Faculty:

The development of human resources has consumed a significant portion of the HEC's budget since its founding, aimed at generating Ph.D. staff for universities. However, despite the increasing number of DAIs and students in the higher education sector, the overall ratio of Ph.D. faculty to non-Ph.D. faculty remains unchanged. On both national and international levels, institutions' rankings, publications, quality, accessibility, and R&D initiatives have all improved. New initiatives and continued development funding are required to increase the percentage of Ph.D. faculty compared to non-Ph.D. professors (ibid.).

Comparative Analysis of Ph.D. Enrollments in Balochistan & Federal

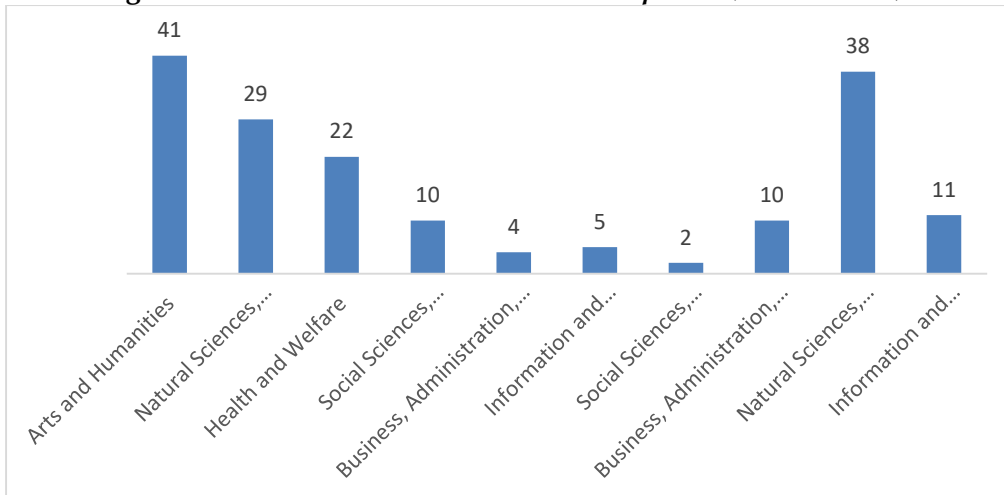
According to the data available on the HEC website for the years 2018-19, the pie chart below shows Ph.D. enrollments among female candidates across different disciplines and universities in Balochistan:

Figure 1 Female Enrollment in various disciplines (Baluchistan)



The graph below shows Ph.D. enrollments among male candidates across different disciplines and universities in Balochistan:

Figure 2 Male Enrollment in various disciplines (Baluchistan)



Source: HEC

The table below shows Ph.D. enrollments among female and male candidates across different disciplines and universities at the federal level:

Table 1 Enrolment of PhD in various disciplines

Discipline	Enrollment	
	Female	Male
Social Sciences, Journalism, and Information	595	684

Discipline	Enrollment	
	Female	Male
Natural Sciences, Mathematics, and Statistics	438	1,181
Business, Administration, and Law	295	1,023
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	169	370
Engineering, Manufacturing, and Construction	113	706
Health and Welfare	70	115
Arts and Humanities	114	255
Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, and Veterinary	51	39
Education	40	46
Services	21	79
Total	1906	4498

Source: HEC

The comparison between enrollments in the Federal and Balochistan regions shows a stark difference, proving that the HEC has failed to achieve its objective of ensuring equitable access to higher education opportunities in remote areas.

Pakistan Vision 2025:

In order to fulfill Pakistan's Vision 2025 for its national human resource needs, the Higher Education Commission conducted the National Human Resource Development Conference on October 13, 2015. There were about 150 participants from Pakistan, including academia, intellectuals, researchers, entrepreneurs, and professionals. Fields and areas of research such as social sciences, new higher education trends, physical sciences, medical sciences, engineering and technology, business education, development studies, economics, biological sciences, arts and humanities, and agricultural studies were identified as strategically important for Pakistan's development in the next ten years, considering the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. In total, 11 focus groups representing academia, industry, and R&D were formed (ibid.). However, no pragmatic steps have been taken by the Commission yet for implementation.

Initiatives Taken by HEC:

HEC has launched a new initiative aimed at training 1,800 Ph.D. candidates in potentially critical subjects identified by R&D staff, business, and academia. These scholars will complete their doctorates at prestigious universities around the globe and enhance Pakistani research and teaching standards. The program further aims to create and enhance connections

between individuals and institutions. Scholarships will be awarded based on the data submitted by candidates. The goals include developing a critical mass of highly skilled scientists and technicians, building capacity at academic institutions, R&D centers, and business sectors, and generating intellectual activity through research publications. It is anticipated that the program will boost R&D, initiate new initiatives with financial benefits, and assist in advancing technology. It will support HEC's efforts to address Pakistan's economic needs, create high standards in education, and supply skilled Ph.D. workers. The program's overarching objective is to strengthen Pakistan's research and development environment while tackling the country's economic issues (HEC, 2024).

The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan provides full-time Ph.D. candidates with a six-month research fellowship overseas with the goal of improving research quality, producing highly skilled labor, and facilitating information transfer for rapid economic advancement. The goals encompass offering educational opportunities, cultivating global cooperation, showcasing Pakistani talent internationally, and promoting the dissemination and standardization of research. The main disciplines covered in the provided data include Arts & Humanities; Social, Behavioral & Economic Sciences; Urban Planning; Climate Change and Environment; Information Technology and Telecom; Innovative Governance and Reforms; Police Sciences; Agricultural Sciences; Biological & Health Sciences; Engineering & Technology; and Mathematical & Physical Sciences (ibid.).

The mission of HEC is to support and encourage Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to prioritize research to ensure sustainable economic growth and a knowledge-based economy in the future. Universities are establishing centers for this purpose, which will operate as hubs and house all research operations under one roof, from developing research proposals to commercializing research results. These centers will be named "Offices of Research, Innovation, and Commercialization (ORICs)." To ensure the availability of well-established and fully operational ORICs, HEC has begun organizing the research activities of universities and higher education institutions. These ORICs will play a crucial role in facilitating the results of the university's research projects by offering strategic and operational assistance to research-related programs and activities. The primary goal of these studies is to transform invention – pure knowledge – into innovation – products and manufacturing methods – which can eventually improve the well-being of society as a whole. A second scholarship program was also established for the coastal regions of Balochistan, in addition to 5,000 scholarships for Balochistan and the amalgamated tribal districts. New funding has been granted for engineering and technology universities to purchase cutting-edge equipment, and the Prime Minister's Laptop Scheme (ibid.).

The Foreign Scholarship USAID Merit and Need-Based Scholarship program is funded by the US government through EAD. No negotiations are made on discipline with any donor or HEC partner agency abroad. Scholarships are awarded based on merit and placement is determined by university ranking. Scholars are required to serve Pakistan for five years after completing their studies; therefore, they are monitored regularly. The failure and absconding rate is less than 2% (ibid.).

GAP ANALYSIS

Following gaps have been identified in the policies of HEC from the study:

- Policies are generally based on an idealistic approach. No financial sustainability analysis has been conducted, even though Vision 2025 aims to increase Ph.D. numbers to 15,000.
- The policies appear to be a wish list as no strategies have been devised for the practical execution of the policies.
- While everything is documented, there is practically no involvement of think tanks and the industry sector. An "Innovation Steering Committee" was to be formed, but no information is available regarding this with HEC to date.
- Donors have not been consulted regarding the disciplines of scholarships that could address local needs as well as modern world demands.
- There is no focus on using modern technologies such as GIS for mapping or creating clusters for industrial bases.
- There is no alignment of disciplines according to regional peculiarities.
- Market demands are ignored, and there is no technology transfer.

Stakeholder Analysis

The study identifies GoP, HEC, EAD, CCI, provinces, the private sector, and civil society organizations as major stakeholders in terms of their role, influence, and power.

Stakeholder 1: HEC & Provinces

Although HEC devolution is a complex issue, disagreements between legislators, regulators, and university representatives over its implementation should be resolved immediately. Devolution is usually beneficial but requires proper procedures and structures. In Pakistan, higher education was devolved without adequate planning. Two provinces, Sindh and Punjab, have established their own HECs. The head of the HEC once stated, "If we have confidence that provinces can implement standards adequately, we can delegate powers to them in the spirit of the 18th amendment." Therefore, engaging in logical and meaningful conversations with all parties involved and increasing the capacity of provincial HECs are crucial for improving the higher education system.

Engagement Strategy:

Both parties should pursue conflict resolution through negotiations, aiming for a win-win situation. The CCI must play its role in effectively resolving the issue to build the capacity of provincial HECs and ensure equitable access to all regions, especially the marginalized areas.

Stakeholder 2: EAD & Foreign Donors

Another important stakeholder is EAD. Foreign-funded scholarships should be negotiated to align with local needs and modern world demands.

Engagement Strategy:

HEC should conduct prior research on the most in-demand fields, both locally and internationally. This information should then be used to negotiate with foreign donors through the EAD forum to allocate scholarships in the most sought-after and relevant disciplines.

Stakeholder 3: Private Entities, NGOs & Civil Society Organizations

Private entities, NGOs, and civil society organizations can also play a crucial role, as the government cannot fund all scholarship programs due to financial constraints.

Engagement Strategy:

The local community and the Ministry of Education can play vital roles in negotiating, forming alliances, and collaborating with these stakeholders.

RESULTS/IMPACTS

Although HEC is producing a reasonable number of Ph.D.s, its impact on the socioeconomic growth of the country is not evident. Simply increasing the number of scholars without addressing local needs and global market demands is not a pragmatic approach. This approach does not add value to the system; rather, the liability of unemployed scholars is a concerning sign for the country's growth. The scarcity of resources, both human and financial, hinders the development of the R&D sector, which is crucial for economic growth. Additionally, unresolved conflicts between federal and provincial governments contribute to unequal access to Ph.D. scholarships and higher education across all regions of the country.

INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

China and the United Kingdom have been selected as examples of international best practices in the field of higher education. Both countries have developed advanced research agendas that address global knowledge

contributions and local developmental challenges. The Grand Challenges initiative, launched by University College London (UCL), positions UCL as a leader in specific research fields. These Grand Challenges are designed to inspire cross-disciplinary research.

Universities in both China and the United Kingdom receive block funding grants to allocate towards self-determined projects, fostering specialization and collaboration with the private sector. China aims to allocate 2.5% of its GDP to research and innovation. In the UK, government funding is mediated through the Research Excellence Framework, which promotes research quality and provides long-term grants.

Research Councils lead research evaluation, funding allocation, and agenda-setting in both countries. They ensure competitive peer review, establish research themes, and report on research status to the government and industry. Professional associations promote peer review practices and communities of practice within specific domains. Governments establish special commissions to address particular research and innovation questions, involving academics and practitioners.

Universities and researchers undergo long-term review cycles, which allow for the maturation of research quality and institutional excellence. Leading researchers and departments receive additional support as exemplars of their disciplines. Local collaboration and networking are actively encouraged, alongside engagement with international research networks. Academic research informs government policymaking in both countries, with varying degrees of formalization and direct reporting relationships.

Conclusion

The study concludes that while the vision is present, the execution mechanisms are not pragmatically designed. The policies appear sound on paper; however, they are inconsistent with the availability of resources and the peculiarities of the region. The main challenge is the lack of coordination among different stakeholders. The conflict between the federal and provincial governments following the 18th Amendment to the Constitution needs to be resolved to provide equitable access to higher education for all regions of the country, especially the marginalized ones. Self-sufficiency and judicious investment in all potential sectors (primarily R&D, linkages with academia, and capacity building) can lead to the benefits of Ph.D. scholarships. The absence of a modern and innovative approach is why Pakistan is lagging behind other countries in socio-economic growth. Aligning research disciplines with the demands of the modern world can drive this change.

Recommendations

The 80/20 rule, which forms the basis of the Pareto Principle, states that 80% of the results come from 20% of the effort. In other words, 20% of the causes account for 80% of the issues. By focusing on these 20% major areas, 80% of the issues related to the formulation of strategies for effective Ph.D. scholarships could be resolved. Here are the major recommendations:

Removal of Institutional Fragmentation

The dispute over devolution after the 18th Amendment should be resolved immediately, considering the capacity-building issues of provincial HECs. A collaborative approach should be applied.

Key players: The CCI is crucial in this regard. It can effectively engage both parties and make informed decisions based on past data and experiences.

Introduction of Split Scholarship Programs

While foreign scholarships have set the path for higher education and fulfilled their intended goal in the short term, they lack local applicability and require greater attention to be more significant and fruitful. Split scholarship programs should incorporate both international and local elements. Students should be aware of community issues and strive to improve by traveling abroad and learning from developed nations.

Key players: The education ministry at the federal level and education departments in the provinces can address local needs. For foreign scholarships, foreign ambassadors, consulate general offices, trade and community welfare attachés, and EAD can engage in effective negotiations.

Adoption of the Triple Helix Model

This model should be adopted in its true spirit. Proper mechanisms need to be devised for this purpose. The proposed committees (like the Innovative Steering Committee) in the policies should be practically involved in the process.

Key players: The Chamber of Commerce & Industry and HEC have a primary role.

Use of Technology like GIS

Modern technologies like GIS should be used to form clusters for establishing industrial bases by determining the geographical locations where particular resources are present. Local scholarships may be offered accordingly to address the needs of specific localities.

Key players: The Ministry of Information & Technology and the Chamber of

Commerce & Industry should be engaged by the Ministry of Education in coordination with HEC.

Negotiations with Donors, Private Entities, & Civil Society Organizations

Due to funding constraints, donors, private entities, and civil society organizations should be engaged in discussions to provide human and financial resources. This can help invest in scholarships and R&D, ultimately contributing to the country's economic growth.

Key players: HEC, EAD, and community representatives can play an active role.

Ensuring Equitable Access to Opportunities for All Regions

Need-based scholarships should be encouraged to support disadvantaged segments of society. Additionally, the establishment of public or private sector universities should be prioritized in remote areas.

Key players: Political leadership, HEC, and donors are the main contributors to achieving this goal. This could be a medium- to long-term objective.

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