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## Debating the Eurocentricity of Pakistani Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation of higher education in Pakistan within the broader context of colonial legacies and neoliberal globalization. It argues that the establishment of the Higher Education Commission (HEC), inspired by World Bank and UNESCO prescriptions, marked a decisive shift towards corporatization and market-oriented reforms. Initiatives such as the Tenure Track System, standardized curricula, quality assurance mechanisms, and the prioritization of global rankings have reinforced dependence on Western epistemologies, often at the expense of addressing local contexts and needs. The pursuit of “excellence” has come to mean validation from Western institutions, further entrenching the coloniality of knowledge. Drawing on scholarship from postcolonial and critical education studies, the article highlights how Pakistani universities have been restructured as service providers in the global knowledge economy. Ultimately, it contends that the HEC’s reforms, far from fostering intellectual autonomy, have deepened academic dependency and limited the transformative potential of higher education.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Coloniality of Knowledge, Neoliberal Globalization, Quality Assurance, Western institutions

### Introduction

Higher education in Pakistan has always been shaped by forces larger than itself—colonial inheritances, global power structures, and the country’s own anxieties about “catching up” with the modern world. When Pakistan came into being in 1947, the state inherited not only the administrative structures of the British Raj but also its knowledge systems and educational traditions. These structures were never fundamentally reformed. Instead, local elites occupied them and continued to reproduce the same colonial hierarchies of learning and authority. As a result, education in Pakistan began its journey already tethered to ideas, norms, and practices that had little to do with local contexts.

Over the decades, the influence of global institutions deepened this dependency. During the Cold War, American modernization agendas left a deep mark on Pakistani academics, embedding Anglo-American traditions into teaching and research. Later, in the era of neoliberal globalization, institutions such as the World Bank and UNESCO offered new blueprints for reform, framed around the idea of a “knowledge economy.” Pakistan, eager to be part of this global shift, adopted these prescriptions with little critical reflection. The creation of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in the early 2000s symbolized this new phase—presented as a bold reform, but in reality, reinforcing corporate and Western-centric models of knowledge production.

What followed was an increasing corporatization of universities. The introduction of the Tenure Track System, the push for research grants, the imposition of standardized curricula, and the rise of quality assurance mechanisms all tied the academic enterprise to Western epistemologies and metrics of success. Pakistani scholars found themselves compelled to publish in Western



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journals, write in academic English, and conform to international rankings, often at the cost of addressing local social, cultural, and political realities.

This article explores how higher education in Pakistan has become captive to western standards of education. It examines how structures like the HEC, while claiming to modernize the system, have instead entrenched dependence on Western intellectual traditions. By tracing this trajectory, from the colonial period to neoliberal globalization, it seeks to highlight the ways in which universities have been transformed into sites of global competition rather than engines of local problem-solving. At stake is not just efficiency or institutional reform, but a deeper question of intellectual autonomy: whose knowledge counts, and for whom is it produced?

### **Contextualizing Pakistani Higher Education**

The discipline of social sciences in Pakistan began on a very small scale after the country's independence in 1947. At that time, the University of the Punjab was the only university in the new state, and it had just nine teachers in its social sciences departments. Over the following years, however, the situation gradually improved. By 1963, the number of teachers working in social sciences across emerging universities had increased significantly to 222. Among these, 62 individuals had earned PhDs, and a majority of them, around 81 percent, had obtained their doctoral degrees from universities in the United States and the United Kingdom (Haider & Ali, 2015). This foreign exposure shaped the orientation of Pakistani academics. During the first two decades of independence, because of Pakistan's close alliance with the United States during the Cold War, the country's scholars became deeply influenced by the American agenda of modernization. As a result, both their teaching methods and ways of producing knowledge became heavily rooted in Anglo-American traditions (Zaidi, 2002). In the early 1970s, the government created the University Grants Commission (UGC) to regulate and supervise universities. The UGC was designed to guide higher education by ensuring that academic growth was connected to national development goals. However, instead of simplifying the system, it added another bureaucratic layer on top of the existing provincial and federal administrative structures. This made governance of higher education more complex. At the same time, the UGC played a central role in shaping the content of teaching and research, thereby exerting significant influence over the direction of social sciences in Pakistan.

When Pakistan gained independence in 1947, it inherited the institutional framework and administrative machinery that had been built by the British colonial state. Instead of dismantling or critically reforming these inherited systems, the local political and bureaucratic elites stepped in to occupy them. Rather than transforming the underlying structures of knowledge and governance, these elites largely preserved and sustained them in their original form. As a result, the country's educational policies continued to be shaped by a vision rooted in colonial and Orientalist ideas of education (Naseem, 2010). In other words, instead of developing an indigenous framework for learning and knowledge production, Pakistan's education system carried forward the intellectual legacy of colonial rule.

The bureaucratic structures that Pakistan inherited did not simply organize administration; they also played a role in regulating how knowledge was produced and what subjects could be critically studied. Any attempt by social scientists to deeply interrogate themes such as colonialism, sovereignty, or the role of the state would have posed serious challenges to these foundations. Such inquiries could have exposed the enduring influence of colonial power relations and questioned the legitimacy of the postcolonial order. For the local elites, whose authority and privileges were directly linked to these inherited systems, such questioning was potentially destabilizing. Therefore, the continuation of colonial discourses in education served as a mechanism of control, ensuring that social sciences did not become a space for radically challenging the structures of power on which elite dominance depended.

The persistence of English as the dominant language of knowledge and higher education in



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Pakistan further reinforced the elitist character of education. Instead of being a tool for broad social empowerment, education became a privilege accessible primarily to a small section of society. Those who received their education from prestigious Western universities, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, were placed at the top of the social and intellectual hierarchy. This hierarchy could be seen in several layers: at the peak stood diasporic intellectuals based in the West; below them was the national elite educated in Western institutions; beneath them were English-speaking students trained in Pakistan's national universities; and at the bottom was a vast disenfranchised population that remained excluded from the realm of higher education altogether.

The aspiration to join the national elite and, by extension, remain connected to global intellectual and professional circles was immensely strong. Evidence of this can be seen in the mid-1980s when nearly 8,000 Pakistani students were enrolled in undergraduate programs in the United States alone (Hashmi, 2001). This trend highlighted not only the fascination with Western institutions but also the perceived prestige and social mobility attached to foreign education. Consequently, instead of critically asking what knowledge should contribute to society and national development, the dominant concern became how closely Pakistan's higher education could mirror Western epistemological traditions. Interestingly, even segments that resisted Pakistan's educational structures often did so because they believed local institutions failed to properly replicate Western standards, rather than questioning the reliance on those standards themselves.

### **Neoliberalism and Higher Education**

With the rise of global neoliberal policies in the late twentieth century, Pakistan's higher education system also came under scrutiny. The University Grants Commission (UGC), which had long been responsible for regulating higher education, was increasingly seen as outdated and ineffective. It was unable to meet the country's growing economic demand for a skilled labor force and for human resources capable of supporting modernization and industrial growth. As a result, policymakers and international organizations began to call for the replacement of this old, bureaucratic structure with a more dynamic and responsive education system. In this context, UNESCO and the World Bank jointly organized the Task Force on Higher Education and Society in 1999. The task force was charged with studying the state of higher education in developing countries and providing policy guidelines for its improvement. Its final report, titled *Higher Education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise*, was released globally and officially launched in Pakistan in February 2001. The report emphasized the crucial role of higher education in economic development and global competitiveness. It stated that "the quality of knowledge generated within Higher Education institutions, and its accessibility to the wider economy, is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness" (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000).

The report later became the foundation for the establishment of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan. It connected the push for greater university enrolment to the demands of the emerging "knowledge economy." According to the report, many graduates in developing countries were poorly prepared to compete in the global market because of the weak quality of higher education (Qadir, 2013). The World Bank strongly promoted this idea of the "knowledge economy" and supported what would eventually be called "academic capitalism," where education is treated as an economic investment. UNESCO, however, emphasized a more human-centered approach, viewing knowledge as part of culture and national development, and as a responsibility of the state. Importantly, the report did not try to bridge these two opposing perspectives. Instead, it presented a hybrid discourse shaped by neoliberal ideas, urging public universities to operate as if they were part of a competitive market. This mix of ideas did not remain only in theory; it appeared in practice as well, as universities worldwide increasingly



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adopted market-oriented behaviors. Over time, the neoliberal framework advanced by the World Bank became dominant, reshaping universities into “stakeholder” institutions and turning knowledge centers into service providers (Halvorsen, 2016). Beyond influencing national policies, the World Bank also reshaped higher education in the Global South through initiatives like “centers of excellence,” giving it direct control over how knowledge institutions were organized. Its joint projects with UNICEF further promoted an education model focused primarily on market needs. Scholars such as Gruber and Scherling (2020) argue that this approach produces a narrow, market-driven form of knowledge that has a colonizing impact, especially on developing countries.

The Pakistani state, long aligned with Western norms, ideals, and institutional models, drew direct inspiration from the World Bank and UNESCO’s report as it sought to secure a stronger role within the emerging “knowledge economy” (Qadir, 2013). Motivated by this global framework, Pakistan moved quickly to establish its own Task Force on Improvement of Higher Education in Pakistan (TFIHE). The official report of this task force openly acknowledged that its creation was directly linked to the UNESCO-World Bank initiative, showing how international recommendations shaped national policy. The Pakistani Task Force brought together a group of leading educationists and senior administrators who were regarded as highly influential in shaping the future of higher education. The committee was jointly chaired by Syed Babar Ali, the founder of the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), and Dr. Shams Kasim-Lakha, the president of the Aga Khan University (AKU). Their leadership gave the task force both credibility and authority, as both institutions were already recognized for their excellence and innovation in Pakistan’s academic landscape. After months of deliberations, consultations, and drafting, the task force submitted its final recommendations to the President of Pakistan in 2002. These recommendations were not only accepted by the government but also laid the groundwork for far-reaching reforms that would reshape the direction of higher education in the country, marking a decisive turn toward integrating Pakistani universities into the global framework of the knowledge economy.

The establishment of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan marked a decisive shift towards a more corporate and capitalistic model of managing knowledge and higher education. What had previously been described as “intellectual captivity”; the uncritical adoption of Western epistemologies, now took on an institutionalized form with clear boundaries and structures. The HEC was assigned a mission “to facilitate institutions of higher education to serve as engines of growth for the socio-economic development of Pakistan”(Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, n.d.-a). In practical terms, this meant that the commission was responsible for overseeing and evaluating the performance of universities, allocating financial resources, creating stronger ties between academia and industry, and designing curricula that aligned with broader national development goals. This transformation ushered in an era of corporatization in which universities were no longer simply centers of knowledge, but organizations required to meet specific development targets modelled on international templates. The World Bank played a central role in defining and dictating many of these targets. One significant example is the Higher Education Development in Pakistan Project, initiated in 2019 as a \$400 million World Bank-funded program and implemented directly through the HEC. Under this initiative, six major research grant schemes were introduced: the Rapid Research Grant (RRG), Grand Challenge Fund (GCF), Local Challenge Fund (LCF), Technology Transfer Support Fund (TTSF), Innovator Seed Fund (ISF), and the Centers of Excellence (COE) grants. These funding programs were explicitly designed to address pressing socio-economic challenges in Pakistan by fostering collaborations between universities and industry. However, while such initiatives aimed to promote local development, they also required that research and innovation be framed within the priority areas identified by the World Bank. In this way, the project reinforced and validated the universalist stance of Western epistemologies, positioning them as



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the primary lens through which local issues could be analysed, understood, and solved.

As a result, the production of knowledge in Pakistan, which ideally should have been grounded in local or national contexts, became increasingly dependent on and confined within Western epistemologies (Sajjad, 2020). The central objective of higher education shifted toward producing a large number of PhDs in order to fill faculty positions, while the pressure to increase the volume of publications among university staff overshadowed concerns about the quality of research. At the same time, the introduction of global university ranking systems pushed the HEC into an endless pursuit of “excellence,” where success was measured by how many Pakistani universities could secure positions in international rankings. Here, excellence came to mean validation by Western intellectual standards, accreditation systems, and norms.

### **Higher Education and Quality Assurance**

The Quality Assurance scheme introduced by the HEC was designed by directly borrowing and imitating academic practices from the Global North. Its official mission is to “integrate the concept of quality assurance in higher learning with enhanced levels of international compatibility through capacity building” (Riaz & Qureshi, 2023). In this context, “international compatibility” refers to aligning Pakistan’s higher education system with globally standardized practices and policies, which largely take Western institutions as the benchmark of academic excellence. By doing so, the scheme inadvertently reinforces and reproduces global inequalities within education (Shahjahan & Morgan, 2016). Likewise, capacity-building initiatives carried out under the banner of the “global knowledge economy” often work to standardize the unequal exchange of knowledge and human resources, ultimately consolidating existing hierarchies in the international system of higher education. Within Pakistan, these initiatives are institutionalized through the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) of the HEC, which envisions transforming the country into a “knowledge economy” (Riaz & Qureshi, 2023). As part of this structure, the QAA requires the establishment of Quality Enhancement Cells (QECs) within universities. These QECs are tasked with monitoring and assessing both academic progress and administrative practices, ensuring compliance with the strict benchmarks and standards issued by the HEC and QAA. Functioning as intermediaries, they transmit directives from the QAA to universities and report back on performance indicators, thereby creating a system of constant evaluation and surveillance. While framed as a pathway to raising standards, such mechanisms largely reproduce international models that privilege Western educational frameworks over indigenous needs and contexts.

The managerial and corporate orientation of the QAA is evident in the language it employs to describe the improvement of quality in higher education. For example, the QAA highlights its commitment to quality assurance by emphasizing activities such as “conducting rigorous assessments of QECs’ performance against the assigned annual targets” and pledging to “evaluate the effectiveness of QECs in driving quality enhancement initiatives” through methods like “reviewing documentation, analyzing data, and conducting site visits to gain comprehensive insights into each institution’s progress” (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, n.d.-b). Such language frames education within a corporate logic of accountability and measurable outputs. In this way, knowledge is approached as a commodity within the “global knowledge economy,” where quality is reduced to quantifiable outcomes that conform to Western benchmarks, rather than being understood as innovation contextualized to local or national needs. Through the QAA, the HEC not only dictates how knowledge should be evaluated but also indirectly sets the limits of what kind of knowledge is recognized as valid. This process consolidates the coloniality of knowledge by defining both the epistemological frameworks and institutional structures of higher education in ways that reproduce Western models. As a result, quality assurance in Pakistan has become a competitive field marked by what Naidoo (2016) describes as a “competition fetish,” where universities are ranked and stratified into elite



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institutions producing “high-quality” education and others relegated to “low-quality” mass education (Shahjahan & Morgan, 2016). However, as Shahjahan and Morgan argue, prevailing definitions of “quality” and “excellence” originate from epistemically privileged sites of knowledge in the Global North, rendering them, in many cases, irrelevant or unsuitable for local and regional contexts.

The introduction of the Tenure-Track System (TTS) in 2004 by the newly established HEC played a critical role in further aligning Pakistani social scientists with Western epistemologies. The TTS was promoted as a mechanism to “entice more qualified faculty and incentivize exemplary performance... culminating in a single, high-calibre, competitive system for faculty recruitment, retention, promotion and tenure” (Sabir, 2023). However, its framework was directly borrowed from the Tenure Track Statutes of the University of New Mexico’s faculty handbook and transplanted into Pakistan’s education system without critical adaptation to local conditions. Importantly, the TTS did not replace the earlier Basic Pay-scale System (BPS) that had been used under the UGC; instead, the coexistence of both systems created a sharp divide between two classes of academics. Faculty on the TTS became “elite intellectuals,” enjoying greater incentives and prestige, while those on the BPS remained “common intellectuals” with limited recognition. The requirements of the TTS proved especially damaging for the social sciences. Promotion within the track was tied to stringent performance-based criteria. For example, in order to move from assistant professor to associate professor, scholars were required to publish ten papers within six years, specifically in journals ranked in the HEC’s X or W categories. These categories were themselves modeled on the ISI index and Journal Citation Reports (JCR), both of which have been widely criticized as colonial mechanisms that reinforce Western dominance in knowledge production (Beigel, 2014; Shin, 2007). Within Pakistan, however, the situation was particularly dire: across all social science disciplines, there were only a handful of journals in the X category and none in the W category. Consequently, social science academics were forced to publish in Western impact factor journals, located abroad, and required to write in academic English. Coupled with the accelerated publishing pace mandated by the HEC, this system pressured scholars to reproduce Western epistemic frameworks, often sidelining local issues and contexts, simply to avoid delays in peer review and editorial acceptance.

In both the promotion of social science faculty and the evaluation of doctoral research, “experts” from so-called “technologically advanced countries” are given a decisive role. For example, in matters of faculty promotion, the HEC requires universities to establish panels composed exclusively of “eminent international academics and researchers in the relevant area,” drawn only from technologically advanced nations. Similarly, in the case of PhD examinations, the HEC mandates that every dissertation be reviewed by at least two scholars holding doctoral degrees from these academically advanced countries (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, 2021). In practice, these “technologically advanced countries” almost always refer to Western nations. Such rigid requirements have created a system that traps Pakistani scholars within narrow boundaries. They are compelled not only to follow Western epistemologies but also to conform to Western academic “standards” of legitimacy. This pressure has left social science researchers in Pakistan disenfranchised, forcing them to produce knowledge *about* Pakistan through frameworks, templates, and stylistic conventions dictated by Western academia, rather than generating knowledge *from* Pakistan grounded in local contexts and epistemologies. In this way, scholarly work becomes more about satisfying external benchmarks than addressing the intellectual and developmental needs of the country itself. The result is a deeply skewed academic environment where originality and contextual relevance are sacrificed for conformity and validation by Western institutions. Unsurprisingly, this has rendered the HEC’s vision for higher education hollow, as its policies have led to the reinforcement of colonial knowledge hierarchies rather than their transformation, amounting ultimately to a profound institutional failure.



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The emphasis placed by the HEC and universities on TTS faculty members securing research grants as part of their academic activity reflects a direct borrowing from the monetization culture of Western academia. As a result, “successful” TTS scholars increasingly seek out research opportunities not necessarily to advance knowledge, but to generate income by monetizing their academic expertise. This is most often achieved through consultancy contracts offered by international organizations such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Canadian International Development Agency, Japan International Cooperation Agency, USAID, and the United Nations, among others. In this system, academic worth becomes closely tied to the ability to attract external funding rather than to produce contextually relevant scholarship. At the same time, many TTS scholars who have gained recognition or networks in Western institutions have opted to migrate abroad in pursuit of “greener pastures,” contributing significantly to Pakistan’s brain-drain crisis (Ali & Haseeb, 2021). This migration further undermines the national academic landscape, as some of the most qualified scholars leave behind an already fragile system. Despite sustained criticism from within the country, national debates about the HEC and its policies often frame the issue narrowly. The common argument advanced by Pakistani scholars is not that the system needs to be reimagined to serve local epistemic or developmental needs, but rather that the HEC has been inefficient and ineffective in elevating Pakistan’s higher education to meet Western benchmarks. In this sense, even the critique of the HEC often remains trapped within the same Western standards it seeks to emulate, perpetuating the cycle of dependency.

The uncritical adoption of Western ideas, imitation of pedagogical tools, and the centrality of Western discourse continue to dominate classroom teaching in Pakistan. This trend, rooted in colonial legacies of standardized curricula, was further reinforced by the HEC. The Commission requires curriculum revisions every three years “to impart quality education which is at par with international standards,” overseen by National Curriculum Revision Committees (NCRCs) made up of senior professors, researchers, and representatives from universities, industry, and civil society (Pakistan, 2018). A review of these standardized curricula reveals three striking patterns. First, as Khan (2023) observes, most social science programmes show little engagement with the colonial past. For instance, the 81-page International Relations curriculum for BS, MS, and PhD programmes mentions the word “colonialism” only once. Second, reading lists across disciplines are overwhelmingly dominated by Western authors, sidelining non-Western voices and reinforcing the notion of Western superiority as the primary site of knowledge production. Third, methodologies and epistemologies across social science disciplines remain firmly grounded in Western traditions. It is important to note that these curricula are not the work of a single individual but are prepared collectively by committees of experienced academics and professionals. This collective endorsement underscores the extent of what may be termed Pakistan’s “mental captivity,” where Western frameworks continue to shape intellectual horizons. Under the HEC, the educational system functions less as a space for generating contextually relevant knowledge and more as a “factory,” producing graduates for the global knowledge economy structured around inequality and exclusion.

### Conclusion

The story of higher education in Pakistan is, in many ways, a story of continuity rather than change. From the colonial inheritance of rigid knowledge systems to the neoliberal interventions of global institutions, the country’s universities have long been shaped by ideas and structures that originate elsewhere. What might have been an opportunity to build an education system rooted in local histories and social realities has instead become a process of imitation. Institutions like the HEC, despite their ambitious language of reform and progress, have largely reinforced a corporate model of education, where “quality” is reduced to metrics—publication counts, international rankings, and grant acquisitions—rather than genuine intellectual growth. Policies



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such as the Tenure Track System and quality assurance mechanisms have placed Pakistani academics in a position where they must constantly measure themselves against Western standards, often at the expense of producing knowledge meaningful to their own communities. As a result, universities risk functioning less as spaces for critical inquiry and more as factories supplying labour and research to the global knowledge economy. If higher education in Pakistan is to escape this cycle, it will require more than efficiency and it will demand courage to reclaim intellectual autonomy and imagine knowledge on its own terms.

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