

Covid-19 and the national education policy

The focus should be on improving learning and nurturing critical thinking instead of attendance

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The formulation of the National Education Policy 2021 is a challenging but important task for the current government. When the unprecedented school closure due to the pandemic challenged the conventional education system globally, governments looked to researchers to present ideas to improve learning access. In this regard, the consultative process for developing a new policy is undeniably important in bringing a positive change to Pakistan's education system. Given this, we propose reformative actions that can change the current system's landscape.

First: how to get greater convergence in educational outcomes nationwide?
Second: what innovative topics would be useful during the consultative process to develop a final action?

Concerning the convergence in educational outcomes, the focus should be on improving learning and nurturing critical thinking instead of attendance. The policy should reform the overall assessment system to judge core competencies instead of rote learning. For instance, Pakistan has 22 million out-of-school children, yet those attending feel the effects of a low-quality education system. Children in Pakistan can expect to complete 9.4 years of pre-primary, primary, and secondary school by age 18. However, the quality-adjusted learning is only 5.1 years: a learning gap of 4.3 years.

Meanwhile, inequality in opportunity remains endemic due to access, quality provision, funds allocation, and infrastructure in the education system. Hence, the current policy should be based on “access, equity, quality, affordability and accountability” for greater convergence in areas left behind.

Regular teacher training is important for discipline, lesson planning, classroom management, and content knowledge. Therefore to advance skills and knowledge, teacher development modules, workshops and free online courses from Coursera and edX, etc. should be compulsory. Besides, there should be training for education sector administrators to improve their skills/supervisory standards for efficiently undertaking duties. E.g., governance protocols should be framed such that school principals or area directors are accountable for improvement in the performance of pupils, staff and school’s financial outlays.

Regarding absorption capacity, unemployment among graduates is higher due to the mismatch between the education imparted and labour market requirement. Still, enrolment in Pakistan’s technical and vocational sector is low despite high demand for skilled workforce. Therefore, the policy should promote flexible, professional options between formal and technical schools. Technical education would not only decrease pressure on the labour market, but increase employability in the domestic and international markets. Lastly, it is time to bring uniformity in the curriculum and the education system. There are public schools, madrassahs, low-cost private schools, and schools for the elite. We should end this strict dichotomy.

Concerning innovative ideas, we should examine the digitalisation of education and scaling up successful educational innovations to improve education access and quality. There is no disagreement on the importance of digital services and online technology platforms to keep children learning. However, technical solutions exacerbate existing inequalities in educational outcomes. The policy should rely on existing evidence about what type of structures would improve distance learning in Pakistan. Besides, we need to plan forward as technological platforms for online teaching are still in their infancy. We need to be flexible as there are specifics not yet realised about online teaching experiments.

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