

**Higher Education System Strengthening Activity (HESSA) Project  
International Summit on Higher Education and Workforce  
Development in 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Islamabad Communique on Higher Education  
Summary of Summit's Proceedings**

1. The Higher Education System Strengthening Activity (commonly referred to as HESSA Project) and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan organized an International Summit on “Higher Education and Workforce Development in 21<sup>st</sup> Century” from 30<sup>th</sup> Nov to 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec 2023 at the Marriott Hotel, Islamabad. This Summit marked the beginning of HESSA policy dialogue series for improving the quality and relevance of higher education in Pakistan. This document presents the summary of the Summit, including key conclusions and recommendations emerged from the Summit’s proceedings.
2. The Summit was attended by eminent national and international experts who explored challenges higher education systems are facing both globally and in Pakistan for strengthening the university level ecosystem and expounding the role of higher education in addressing mega challenges like climate change, digitization and on-line education, sustainability of HEIs, pandemic, unemployment and poverty, students’ and faculty well-being, and aligning education to rapidly evolving market needs.
3. The participants reiterated that our education system suffers from issues of quality, social impact, governance, technology integration and resources, in addition to trends that shape the ecosystem within which higher education institutions exist and function.
4. In all sessions, the experts held candid discussions on the state and quality of knowledge already developed; identified the gaps and opportunities; and deliberated about the feasibility of possible solutions to define the way forward. The Summit generated a long list of valuable recommendations--but what follows is a summary of most important key messages or takeaways emerged from each of the five thematic sessions.
5. The first session on “Aligning Higher Education to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Needs” discussed how key megatrends such as demographic shifts in student population, climate change, technological advances, changing workforce needs and so forth are not only reshaping the society but are forcing higher education systems to do business differently. Participants pointed out that our education system has not kept up pace with the rapidly evolving needs and emerging challenges. The gaps exist both at policy formulation and implementation levels. Key recommendations emerged from the discussion included:
  - a) Developing higher education policy and programs that are interdisciplinary in nature, incorporate sustainability as a key consideration in problem solving, and mainstreaming entrepreneurial skills to equip the workforce to solve local challenges.

- b) strategizing a process for reforming the curriculum and research agendas to match up with the emerging workforce development needs and national socioeconomic development priorities.
- c) The anticipated skills requirements are going to be complex, and shortfall cannot be addressed through formal education only, emphasizing the need for a new regime of education. The new reality of the future may be--increased emphasis on obtaining skills rather than pursuing degree. The universities need to prepare themselves to meet this reality, and one way to do this is to offer high quality but flexible on-line education in parallel to the traditional methods.
- d) There is a need to explore and provide more flexible pathways for upskilling and reskilling of those who want to advance their careers in line with the evolving demand. This objective can be met by advancing micro-credential offerings as this approach offers flexibility in terms of scope, volume, time, and cost.

6. The discussions on the second theme “Making Universities Sustainable and Relevant to Society” focused on three major points. First, how to sustain the quality of educational programs or stay relevant to the market needs despite being short on funding? Second, what resource mobilization strategies could contribute to bridging the financing gaps? Third, what makes campus sustainable beyond the consideration of financial sustainability. Participants noted that our strategy of enhancing access to higher education by opening new campuses and offering new programs has not met with success because expansion was not market driven while quality was also compromised, and several of the newly introduced programs were not sustainable. Key messages emanated from the discussion included:

- a) The universities must look for new and innovative ways to mobilize resources. In this regard, building partnerships with the industries and communities, setting up endowment funds, freeing up capital from non-productive uses, and strengthening alumni engagement could make notable contributions.
- b) Developing and implementing an effective institutional development strategy consisting of elements such as creating modern facilities, improving resource planning and automation, investing in and incentivizing the faculty, and engaging right mix of stakeholders.
- c) Engaging strong business and renowned academic thought leaders on the Universities’ governing boards will help in leveraging private sector participation in reforming curriculum and research agenda, and subsequently attract private sector funding.
- d) The higher education leadership and stakeholders should look beyond the issue of financial sustainability and start exploring initiatives that will make the campuses socially and environmentally sustainable. This trend of expanding access without due consideration to quality should be discouraged.
- e) The universities must take caution on several elements including but not limited to increasing tuition fees, undirected entrepreneurial pursuits, trainings not aligned with the national priorities, and compromising on quality.

7. In the session on “*Strengthening the University-level Ecosystem*”, the participants shared experiences and best practices for ensuring vertical integration and horizontal coordination of university vision and its communication to different functional layers of the university. The experts noted that in view of the increasing share of youth in Pakistan’s population, a concrete plan is needed for their education and engaging them in productive economic activities. The plan should encompass actions for enriching faculty development programs, alleviating resource constraints, improving stakeholder engagement, and affording political commitment. The following key messages emanated from the discussions.

- a) Develop and implement capacity building programs for the university leadership and faculty at different levels so that all parts of the system simultaneously graduate to the next level.
- b) Hiring and retaining best faculty and scholars will be critical to improving the institutional stature of the university, though this will entail instituting incentives for rewarding good faculty both in teaching and research.
- c) The traditional leadership recruitment criteria should be revisited, with increasing emphasis on having individuals with proven leadership qualities rather than candidate’s academic credentials. This however does not mean that the academic strengths of an individual be ignored.
- d) The universities should create a niche for themselves as to the areas in which they wish to excel (for example, teaching or research or skills development, or entrepreneurship etc.) in line with their vision. This will help them connect to the right stakeholders and creating jobs for their graduates.
- e) The universities should launch programs and initiatives to address the issues of mental health and well-being, financial aid, and on-line education, including career counselling for students at entry level.
- f) The universities should implement actions to mainstream EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion) in their institutional development policies recognizing that implementing such policies take long time but, to start with, efforts could be directed at raising awareness about the importance of this issue within the Pakistani context.

8. The fourth session discussed different pathways to improve the quality of higher education and highlighted the gaps in existing accreditation system. The role and effectiveness of accreditation bodies also came under focus. In addition to discussing the quality and accreditation-related challenges, the experts shared international best practices which might be relevant to Pakistani context. Key messages emerged from the discussion included:

- a) The education sector (policy and regulatory bodies, universities, accreditation bodies etc.) should simultaneously work on different pathways to improve the value of degree—and this may involve engaging employers in curriculum design and reform, improving the accreditation organization and processes, enhancing faculty capacities in teaching and research, and embracing technological innovations etc.
- b) The job market message to the higher education system is that the graduates entering the workforce pipeline are not equipped with a good mix of hard and soft skills. While making the education market-driven, an increasing emphasis should be

placed on mainstreaming soft skills such as verbal communication, writing, problem solving, and critical thinking in the curriculum.

- c) The accreditation helps in improving the quality and accountability of the programs, but these processes are often lengthy entailing substantial costs. It will also require strong coordination among different offices and programs at the university level. The universities should assess worth of these efforts in terms of cost-benefit analysis.
- d) The accreditation bodies need to strengthen their own capacities, standards, guiding frameworks, and inspection processes to ensure that the programs they assess and approve follow criterion in line with international best practices.

9. The fifth and final session was devoted to exploring linkages between higher education and climate change adaptation. The need for integrating climate change in higher education was emphasized at different levels especially in curriculum and teaching pedagogy. The experts highlighted the need for more interdisciplinary research and knowledge both on the prediction side and on the adaptation front. Regarding research on adaptation, it was noted that so much had been going on—but all on ad-hoc and piece-meal basis. A national baseline picture is missing as to the state of current adaptation level vis-à-vis what are national needs. The participants endorsed the need to remain engaged at global level discussions on issues such as climate justice and loss and damage fund, but these efforts should not distract us from what needs to be done urgently on the national front. Key recommendations coming out of the session included:

- a) Assessment of institutional capacities is required to advance adaptation efforts—and this assessment may vary from policy institutions to research centers to local communities.
- b) On-going climate-related research efforts are too scattered and deserve guidance from the stakeholders and policy makers about the future scope and course of action.
- c) Consolidate all adaptation-related research undertaken in Pakistan to establish what is worth scaling up and how, identify gaps in adaptation knowledge, as well as define future adaptation roadmap.
- d) Undertake climate profiling of vulnerable geographical pockets to advance adaptation planning and prioritizing actions to safeguard livelihoods and assets at risk.
- e) Universities should lead from the front in addressing adaptation and resilience issues through teaching, research, and local community service rather than waiting to seek guidance or support from the Ministry of Climate Change or Higher Education Commission. It will make sense to implement incremental solutions as they become available rather than waiting for the perfect solution to emerge.

10. In addition to the above suggestions, the following four issues or actions were touched upon in almost in each session. The participants emphasized the need to make progress on these while reforming or upgrading the higher education policy as and when it happens.

- a) Many of the policy and research questions discussed in different thematic areas are interrelated, and, if developed and pursued together, these can form a critical mass with many synergies. This might be possible by reimagining the Pakistan Higher Education Commission vision 2025, which in any way will be reaching its terminal date in two years' time.
- a) While some issues regarding higher education landscape in Pakistan will need to be addressed in their own specific context, there are others which bring with them opportunities in the form of investments, new technologies, partnerships, and high resource-use. Therefore, it will be important to direct efforts towards capitalizing on these opportunities.
- b) Everything does not need to start from scratch. A wealth of knowledge about best practices in sustainability, resource mobilization, forming successful partnerships, and alumni engagement already exist. An important next step will be to institutionalize the process for internalization of best practices by pairing well performing universities with those which need help.
- c) The proposed policy, curriculum reform, and research agenda is vast and complex. Commitment from the government is vital, but insufficient on its own. Wider stakeholder engagement and commitment is needed to translate this agenda into action.

11. To advance the implementation of above noted recommendations, the participants urged the HESSA project to initiate a policy dialogue series in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders to inform and educate the higher education related policy formulation process. The need for moving such events to provincial levels was also underscored—so that larger group of universities and associated academic fraternity could benefit from the knowledge sharing opportunities these events bring with them.

12. Results to be achieved as result of the implementation of above actions will serve as the building blocks for the organization of next HESSA Annual Summit planned for December 2023.