SUMMIT 2024
Outcome Document

The "International Summit on Shaping the Future of Higher Education in Pakistan" was organized by the USAID funded Higher Education System Strengthening Activity (HESSA) in collaboration with the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan and 16 HESSA partner universities. This event marked an important step in HESSA's efforts to enhance the quality and relevance of higher education in Pakistan, especially from the perspective of enhancing the employability potential of graduates.

The Summit witnessed robust participation from international and local experts, leadership and faculty of HESSA partner universities, policymakers, industry and civil society leaders, and other stakeholders. This diverse engagement aligned perfectly well with the recently launched localization policy of USAID.

The Summit featured a comprehensive program with twelve sessions covering a wide spectrum of topics in higher education, complemented by four HESSA showcasing events. More than 50 national and international speakers shared their perspectives, contributing to insightful discussions. These sessions generated a multitude of recommendations, spanning from general insights to detailed, session-specific suggestions.

Rather than listing those recommendations individually, this outcome document focuses on conveying the key messages that emerged from these robust discussions.

The session on Positioning Pakistan's Higher Education for Tomorrow highlighted the pressing need to evaluate the readiness of the country's higher education system for current and future challenges. These challenges include rapid technological advancements, globalization, demographic shifts, generational gaps, and the demand for specialized skills. To address these challenges, the need for a reform agenda was emphasized that should empower greater autonomy to the universities. Autonomy will help the universities to respond to market needs,

address financial challenges and improve internal governance. The session emphasized that our education system should be geared to embrace technological advancements that are reshaping teaching, research, and administrative processes. Moreover, discussions stressed the significance of assessing future workforce requirements to develop innovative curricula that effectively bridge the gap between academia and industry and embed soft skills essential for cultivating successful professional careers. Lastly, fostering inclusivity within campuses and the higher education system was considered vital for empowering individuals from all backgrounds.

The session on Optimizing Faculty Workload Policies concluded that the faculty in Pakistani public sector higher education institutions face significant challenges due to the absence of clear guidelines and support systems for workload distribution and prioritization. The session examined these issues through the lens of three models each dealing with the current policies and practices in public sector universities, private sector universities, and US universities. The session concluded that to prevent faculty burnout and boost efficiency, the system should gear itself to fair distribution of tasks, robust support systems, and flexible work policies. To improve faculty workload management, the four most important suggestions emerged from discussions included: (1) developing transparent policies that clearly define teaching, research, and administrative expectations, (2) creating support systems and mentorship programs to assist faculty, (3) implementing recognition and reward systems especially to address disparities between research and teaching faculty, and, (4) utilizing technology to streamline workload management.

The session on Entrepreneurship Culture in Higher Education identified several best practices to effectively integrate entrepreneurship into higher education institutions. These, for example, called for promoting practices that fosters indigenous human entrepreneurial spirit, in addition to including curriculum reforms with emphasis on embedding entrepreneurship education across disciplines. Also, to support student entrepreneurs, the need for establishing on-campus incubation centers and hubs was emphasized. In addition to these practices, cultivating a supportive ecosystem for entrepreneurship through networking events, startup competitions, and access to funding opportunities was underscored as essential for nurturing student ventures.

The session on Cultivating Higher Education Online and Micro-Credentials in Traditional Landscapes highlighted the need for Pakistani higher education institutions to adopt online platforms and micro-credential initiatives to remain relevant in an evolving educational landscape. The session discussed the success of one of the HESSA initiatives, implemented jointly by National University of Sciences & Technology (NUST) and the University of Utah. This initiative was directed at developing a robust online education framework with flexible content delivery and technological support. It also promoted offering micro-credentials to provide industry-relevant skills and enhance graduates' alignment with market needs. The results and lessons learned from this initiative have the potential of scaling up in those partner universities that meet three conditions. First, they are willing to commit resources to support this initiative; second, they have basic minimum capacities required to embark on this initiative, and third, they are committed to shift their educational portfolio toward online skills development.

The discussions in the session on Climate Responsive Water Governance focused on how higher education programs are evolving to tackle climate and water challenges. While highlighting the need for faculty and students to adapt to new academic offerings, the session delivered three important messages. First, climate change contents should be incorporated in all degree programs. Second, it is important to develop interdisciplinary research networks across institutions because every university does not have all expertise to tackle "wicked problems" such as climate change. Third, campuses should implement sustainability initiatives to reduce their carbon footprint that may include but not limited to recycling, water reuse, renewable power, and green infrastructure etc. To this end, the session concluded that enhancing the strategic planning capacities of the universities and grant writing capacities of the faculty could go a long way in meeting these objectives.

The session on the Leadership and Governance Crisis in Pakistan's Higher Education System discussed several pressing issues. These included the unprecedented growth in the number of public sector universities, lack of autonomy to make independent decisions, unnecessary political interference, limited leadership capacities, and inadequate funding – just to name a few. The session concluded that the combined impact of these factors compromises meritocracy and academic freedom, disrupts continuity and long-term planning, degrades the quality of education and research, and results in poor governance. In addition to several suggestions for selecting quality leadership and improving the institutional governance, the session proposed the need for implementing leadership development programs to cultivate a cadre of capable administrators skilled in strategic planning, financial management, and institutional governance.

The topic of Strengthening the Industry-Academia Relationship received significant attention across various sessions, including a dedicated panel discussion on this topic. The panel emphasized the importance of these relationships in fostering innovation, enhancing economic development, and addressing the evolving needs of society. It was noted that despite this topic being a long-standing priority on the higher education agenda, progress has been slow and limited. However, several success stories within our own higher education ecosystem offer promising lessons. The session highlighted several priority areas for action including - establishing industry advisory boards, creating platforms to improve interactions between industry and academia, and promoting structured internship programs.

The session on Capacity Building Needs of Faculty in Higher Education highlighted that higher education is rapidly evolving, driven by changing demands from students, industries, and communities. Faculty roles have become increasingly complex, necessitating the acquisition of new teaching skills, adaptation to innovative curriculum developments, and the development of a blend of hard and soft skills. Universities should offer targeted training programs to help faculty transition to these new paradigms - while ensuring their continuous professional development. Such programs need to focus on high impact practices, interdisciplinary collaboration and cultivating a mindset driven by lifelong learning and adaptability.

In addition to the above thematic sessions, the Summit featured four showcasing sessions that highlighted the impactful capacity-building work done under HESSA. These sessions

demonstrated the best practices and changes already taking place at HESSA partner universities towards enhancing student support systems, fostering innovative teaching, and promoting women's leadership.   The best practices identified in these sessions have significant potential for scaling up across both HESSA and non-HESSA partner universities. The Registrars' cocreation workshop proposed three concrete steps to strengthen and sustain the capacities of Registrars and their offices. These included preparing a Manual to facilitate their day-to-day functioning, establishing a Council of Pakistani Registrars to enhance and expand the impact created by this activity, in addition to implementing some specific actions at their own universities.

In addition to the session-specific key messages, some cross-cutting themes or issues stood out across discussions in all sessions. These included the need for improving technical and management capacities of faculty and academic leaders, making education more relevant through research and curriculum updates, integrating soft skills into educational frameworks, and forging partnerships to enhance educational offerings. A few sessions pointed out the need to actively engage stakeholders in the creation and rollout of new programs. The issue of sustainability was also highlighted, emphasizing that universities are likely to face serious financial stress given budget cuts and overall financial health of our economy. Therefore, the universities should be proactive in exploring alternative revenue-generating strategies

The key messages and recommendations summarized above may not be entirely novel, but their successful implementation is now more crucial than ever. It is imperative for all stakeholders to take proactive steps to translate these insights into actionable outcomes. For instance, going forward, the HESSA leadership team must integrate relevant recommendations into its project planning for the remainder of the project duration. Similarly, the leadership and faculty of HESSA partner universities must commit to advancing the implementation of recommendations that fall within their administrative purview. The ongoing strategic planning initiative within partner universities offers an excellent opportunity to incorporate many of these recommendations into their strategies. Likewise, the HEC can play a pivotal role in facilitating the adoption of these recommendations not only within HESSA partner universities but also in driving necessary policy reforms.

As this Summit draws to a close, let us ensure it transcends being just another event. Maintaining the status quo is not viable—it will stifle the dreams of our future generations. Instead, let us champion a meaningful transformation in the education system, guided by the recommendations from this Summit and previous similar conferences. Let us also commit to embrace this journey with shared wisdom, enthusiasm, and determination - knowing that our efforts today will shape a brighter tomorrow.