



AURORA: IBA KARACHI IS CELEBRATING 70 YEARS. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY WERE ITS LANDMARK MOMENTS?

S. AKBAR ZAIDI: IBA Karachi was established in 1955 – supported by Wharton (University of Pennsylvania) and subsequently by the University of Southern California, and in the sixties, it started offering degrees in business administration. In 1994, IBA was given autonomous status whereby it was able to give its own degrees – before that, they were given by the University of Karachi. This is when we began to diversify. In 1995, we started a computer science programme and in 1997 a social science programme, and we have expanded ever since. In 2021, the old Institute of Business Administration was reframed as IBA Karachi, and we set up three schools – the School of Business Studies, the School of Mathematics and Computer Science, and the School of Economics and Social Science. And now in 2025, we have just received accreditation from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). This is a huge quality enhancement certificate that puts IBA Karachi at the level of the 1,035 best universities in the world, including Harvard, London Business School, INSEAD and Stanford Business School. It reflects quality assurance, affirmation and recognition.

A: What are the criteria to receive this accreditation?

SAZ: It is a process that takes three to four years. It means opening the institution to scrutiny and evaluation; whether you are teaching properly, the student-to-teacher ratio, the quality of

the faculty and the student body. It means ensuring we reach the standards required for AACSB certification.

A: What are the benefits of this accreditation?

SAZ: It is a game-changer. It is like getting the academic Oscar. It is a recognition of our quality and output. It will allow us to access these 1,035 schools in terms of exchange programmes and curricula and to send our students to better universities and help them get better jobs when they graduate.

A: IBA Karachi recently entered into a collaboration with the Stanford Life Design Lab. What exactly is this programme?

SAZ: Basically, it is about the way one thinks about and addresses problems on a personal and work level. The idea was proposed to us by Junaid Aziz, an IBA alumnus who teaches at the Design Lab in Stanford. I visited the Lab and it is a very strange place. There is no classroom per se and it is very interactive. We have entered into a collaboration with Stanford and in December last year, Bill Burnett, the Executive Director of the Stanford Design Lab and Junaid came to Pakistan to run a number of courses and workshops. Forty-two members of our faculty also took the Design Your Life course online, and this semester we are offering the course to our students. It is about pedagogy and bringing problems to do with the world into the classroom. Basically, it is about the individual, his or her role in society, what matters to them and about thinking about the world in an interactive way. It's about psychology, marketing, management, problem-solving, reflection and social skills. In a nutshell, it teaches one to deal with the world. Next semester we will offer more classes and take it to the private sector; a number of companies have expressed an interest in the course.

A: Given how quickly the world is changing, what are the subjects that interest IBA students the most?

SAZ: Our computer science department and faculty is very, very good. They are doing robotics and AI amongst other things. Two years ago, we started a data analytics programme. There is a huge demand for data analytics and we are now starting a course called business analytics – how businesses are run and how to think about them in terms of the future. Of course, all marketing, management and accounting courses have an AI component in them. We are integrating technology in almost every course. Take history for example; what is a digital archive? We are also hoping to start a course on digital humanities. The other popular programme is psychology. Dozens and dozens of students want to study psychology. To answer your question, AI, data analytics, business analytics and psychology are the new emerging fields at IBA.

A: Why the interest in psychology?

SAZ: Anxiety and stress have become a big concern among kids these days. Three years ago, we started a wellness centre at IBA with trained therapists, psychologists and a psychiatrist who sit on campus. Students go there with issues about their domestic situations; about their parents, their fears and apprehensions. Covid has also contributed to their anxieties – and this continues to be a global problem. Then there are concerns related to climate change. There is a lot more anxiety than there was before. This is an anxious generation and our students are also part of that. They want to understand what is happening and psychology offers an opportunity to do so. In August, we are starting a Master's in psychology – the undergraduate programme is not enough and people say we want to delve further in order to understand and to cope. Pursuing the degree may not help you solve problems, but it helps to understand what the problems are.

A: How does IBA manage to keep up-to-date with the pace of change that underpins anything to do with AI? Can you even set a course outline that remains relevant for the entire academic year?

SAZ: Everything is affected by AI; our textbooks are becoming less and less useful. No one writes a book on the internet anymore; everything has changed before you end chapter one. I don't think any university in Pakistan, or in many other places in the world for that matter, is current in terms of what is happening – even the Ivy League universities. The question is how quickly we can catch up. In Pakistan, we are obviously not going to be at the level of a lot of the very good universities.

A: Why not?

SAZ: Pakistan does not have the infrastructure. We are not even on X. We are way behind. A recent global internet survey puts Pakistan as one of the worst countries in the world for internet access. India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal are way ahead. I don't think we will ever get to a stage where we are where Singapore or Malaysia or Turkey are. Or where many countries in the Global South are – and certainly not where India is. One of the reasons we will always be behind is because of the ecosphere we work in. We are not internet-friendly. The Middle Eastern countries, despite censorship, are doing much better because they realise that this is where the world needs to go. That technology is going to drive the world. As a country we are not doing enough – science and technology are hardly recognised.

A: Looking to the future, what should IBA Karachi be striving for?

SAZ: Better quality education. We are very good, but we can and should improve.

A: How?

SAZ: Better faculty members who can ensure our students are qualified to get into the best universities in the world. As a primarily undergraduate university, our goal must be to ensure

that our students get admission to the best universities of the world. Our students are getting into Oxford, Cambridge, Berkeley, Stanford or Princeton – something that was not happening earlier. Young Pakistanis are striving to do better so that they can get admission abroad and this trend is going to continue. Furthermore, now that we are AACSB accredited, we should be able to take IBA global, and I am very particular about internationalisation. We hired seven foreign faculty members in the last year. They live and teach here; it's not online. I want to attract better faculty with more exposure. People who are dealing with issues such as AI and climate change at a much more practical and advanced level, and I want that knowledge to come here and be given to our students. We also need to expand our infrastructure. I am here only for another two-and-a-half years; my second tenure comes to an end in 2027, and someone else will have to take that over. The idea is to make IBA larger. The ambition is better quality students, better quality output, better quality teaching, better quality faculty, and better quality infrastructure.

A: Is there an ambition to expand within Pakistan?

SAZ: I don't think that is a good idea. Karachi has 30 million people, and we can only take in 1,200 students a year. People go to Harvard and Princeton from all over the world, and if we are of that quality, people will come from all over the world to us. Harvard is not going anywhere. NYU went to Singapore, Yale went to Singapore and the Middle East and closed down. My ambition is to make the IBA an even better university and let people come here. We get students from Gilgit-Baltistan, Sindh and Balochistan. Our financial aid to students is about one billion rupees a year, which is phenomenal. About 30% of our students receive financial aid. We can expand that. We need to do all this better and more in tune and integrate with the world.

A: How is IBA supported financially?

SAZ: IBA has its own finances. It comes from the students, our endowment fund and contributions from our alumni. We also receive some money from the Sindh government. We are a public sector university, and a lot of people forget that. In fact, IBA Karachi is a very good example of how the public sector can work. We have our own board of governors. The chief minister is our patron – he is the head of all universities in Sindh – but we are not dependent on the Sindh government financially. One reason why IBA does so well is because it is financially autonomous.

A: Does IBA have a vice chancellor?

SAZ: I am the vice chancellor.

A: You are appointed by the government?

SAZ: I am. I was selected through an ad process.

A: Recently, the media reported that the government was considering appointing vice chancellors drawn from the bureaucracy rather than academia. What is the rationale behind this?

SAZ: The quality of education in Pakistan is very poor, even at a higher level. There are 264 universities in Pakistan, of which maybe 15 or 20 are good, a lot of them are average and most of them should be closed down. They were established for political reasons... "I need one in my district. I need one in my constituency," and so forth. There is a crisis of leadership in the universities. I think the governments in Sindh, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa believe that administrators and civil servants are better trained and more competent to run the universities. I don't think that is the case, but I also think there is a crisis in academia. We don't have good academics who can lead universities, and this is a problem that needs to be addressed by attracting better academics from abroad or from Pakistan and giving them autonomy. A lot of good academics don't want to run universities; they prefer to concentrate on their research.

A: Do you see the quality of higher academia in Pakistan going down or up?

SAZ: Very much down.

A: Why?

SAZ: One, the universities are not autonomous financially or intellectually or in terms of what they would like to do. Two, of the 264 universities we have, many don't have good quality facilities or faculty. There is a major crisis in higher education in Pakistan like there is in primary and secondary education. Most universities are dependent on the Higher Education Commission, and the federal and provincial governments. Only a handful of universities, such as IBA Karachi, Dow Medical College, FAST, NED, NUST and UET in Lahore, are financially autonomous although they are public sector universities, and they are run on professional lines and offer quality education. However, they cannot cater to the millions who want to enrol and this is why I am talking about expansion. The solution lies not in creating more universities but in concentrating on quality, merit and autonomy. Let's fix the universities that we have; support and expand them and offer better education.

Dr S. Akbar Zaidi was in conversation with Mariam Ali Baig. For feedback: aurora@dawn.com