

DAWN

Expat Pakistani talent

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The writer is author of *Governing the Ungovernable* and *CPEC and Pakistani Economy*.

THERE is little doubt the main driver of growth and shared prosperity in the 21st century is the knowledge economy. The evidence of this has already been demonstrated by Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, etc. China is embarking upon the same path. Most of these countries have invested heavily in their higher educational institutions and research establishments, sent hordes of young men and women for advanced studies particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

These young scientists have studied at top universities, worked in cutting-edge laboratories, collaborated with experts in their field and published in prestigious journals. Korea sent missions to the US and Europe in the 1980s to attract Korean scientists back home and join the academia and research organisations with hefty packages of pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits. Recently, China established the Thousand Talents programme which targets Chinese citizens who have studied at US elite universities and elsewhere. Upon their

return, they get lucrative signing bonuses, guaranteed research funding, ample technical staff and the opportunity to train younger students in their fields of expertise. Subsidies are given for housing, meals and relocation, and they are guaranteed jobs for spouses and regular trips to their home provinces.

It is no wonder that Alibaba and Tencent have become the world's largest pool of scientific talent. China's expenditure on R&D has jumped from \$9 billion in 1991 to \$409bn — closer to the US expenditure of \$485bn. It now allocates 2.4pc of GDP on R&D. According to the National Science Board, China is on track to surpass the US by the end of this year. In 2016, annual scientific publications from China outnumbered those from the US for the first time. China has also lured foreign scientists who have won prestigious prizes or made internationally recognised scientific contributions. They train and collaborate with their local counterparts in knowledge creation and sharing.

There are few incentives for highly educated youth to return home and apply their expertise here.

Against this background, what is the situation in Pakistan? There has been a serious diminution in the reservoir of our highly educated talent. In 1989/90, as many as 7,010 Pakistani students were enrolled in US universities and those from India were 26,240 ie a ratio of 1:4. By 2014-15 the disparity is simply astounding — 132,888 Indians vs only 5,354 Pakistanis, a ratio of 1:25. Most of the Indians were enrolled for advanced degrees in STEM subjects in leading universities. Faculty members and research scientists of Indian origin run into the thousands while we have only a handful of Pakistanis. In an earlier search for recruiting faculty for IBA, I found there were 250 faculty members of Indian origin teaching in the top 10 business schools in the US while we were represented by only four young women.

The Higher Education Commission started sending young Pakistanis to foreign universities for their doctorates. Due to funding limitations and the difficulties faced by our poorly prepared applicants in clearing GRE examinations, they ended up mostly in European and Chinese universities. Nothing wrong with that, but the absence of coursework and comprehensive exams do not provide the same rigour and competence as the US universities which continue to be among the world's best.

Upon their return, these students get sucked into the bureaucratic culture at Pakistani universities but the serious-minded among them still carry out their work diligently and get published in international journals. This is reflected in a large increase in the number of publications contributed by Pakistani scholars in the last decade or so. My salute to them that they do it despite facing a lot of resistance by the teacher politicians who fear they would be left behind. However, the rigid system of promotion and tenure offers no incentive for them to apply their knowledge and expertise to address some of the problems faced by the country in boosting its competitiveness. The system recognises only teaching and academic research — not application of research.

The second way to attract talent from abroad is to follow the example of China and Korea and give them flexibility in terms of time, remuneration, perks, ample resources and a conducive working environment. Our uniform basic pay scales where every university teacher is boxed in is a major hindrance in attracting expatriate talent. These scales promote mediocrity rather than creativity and innovative impulses. Even those bold enough to come back are faced with a hostile environment, in which intrigues by incumbents occupying entrenched positions in universities make their lives miserable to the extent they either fall in line or are driven back. The antiquated recruitment and promotion rules based on length of service, seniority and number rather than quality of publications, do not allow any deviations for exceptional performance and output, international recognition, etc. These rules act as a powerful deterrent to those aspiring to come back.

My experience as a member of various search committees for selecting vice chancellors shows how narrow-minded, myopic, parochial and inward-looking we have become. Let alone those working abroad, candidates from other provinces, however capable or competent, are shunned on account of political preferences. If we are

able to select individuals on merit for top leadership positions, the effect would permeate through the organisation.

Finally, there is little understanding of pay differentials between specialists and generalists within the public sector. Specialists who have gone through a rigorous and long training process and acquired expertise in their respective fields deserve to be paid many times more than generalists. As chairman, Pay and Pension Commission, I was appalled to see highly qualified scientists completely demoralised and demotivated upon comparing themselves against general cadre officers in terms of career progression, equivalence of grades and salary structure. There is a feeling that a transplant surgeon despite having trained and worked abroad should not be given a salary higher than the chief secretary.

It is time to modify our worldview and adopt a more forward-looking stance in order to compete with 200 other nations in the global marketplace. We have to therefore enable and facilitate our talented young men and women to employ their best efforts to contribute to our people's welfare. If our courts get bogged down in determining our specialists' individual salaries, who is going to dispose of 1.8 million pending cases?

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