

REFORMING EDUCATION AND THE EDUCATED

Shafqat Ali Shah *
Former Federal Minister

The purpose of education is to prepare you for the challenges ahead. You are amongst the few and most fortunate ones citizens of Pakistan to have had the opportunity to earn a degree, a tool that will make your chances of greater prosperity and well being more assured than the majority of your fellow citizens of your age who do not have such luck, In our country, as in any other country, education is a blessing and good education is a blessing with a premium.

It saddens me to say that a vast number of Pakistani children and young adults grow up without education and end up in relative darkness arising out of ignorance. These unfortunate youth are unable to go to college or school; they barely survive without a job, without hope. Their poverty denies them a level playing field of opportunities, although they have innate talent and potential. But many of them live without electricity, clean water, and three square meals a day or good health.

Pakistan's literacy rate is barely 50% and that too when the definition of literacy is confined to the mere ability to sign one's name. In our neighborhood a country like Sri Lanka has a literacy rate of over 90%. It is a sad reflection of Pakistani governments' poor priority setting over the past five decades during which investment in human resources and education is lower than other sectors. The fact that education is crucial for our country's strength and the well being of our people is overlooked. We have been giving lip service and setting lofty goals for education. Unless Pakistan spends at least 5% of its budget on education and development of human resources over the next seven to ten years we are going to be strolling, not walking briskly or running in this revolutionary age of globalization and rapid technological advance of the 21st century.

* Excerpts from address as key note speaker at the 2004 convocation of the PAF-Karachi Institute of Economics and Technology

The requirement is not just of funds for the betterment of education but also for a drastic change in the institutional makeup of our government's management structures that look after the field of education. There is a drastic need for reform and action. The stark differences between the public and private sector institutions are there for all to see. Witness the privately run institutions such as Beacon House and City School systems, the Lahore University of Management Sciences and the Aga Khan University and those that are run by the government. Indeed, the efforts of the non-governmental and private individual groups in this sector are commendable. The model of public and private sector

co-operation here at PAF-KIET is a success story that needs to be emulated. It also demonstrates that when government organizations put their minds and hearts in ventures such as this or other institutions, positive results can be achieved

Pakistan is an extra ordinary country with abundant natural resources and extremely dynamic people. This is a country that has the potential to become one of the leading nations of the world but there are also some fundamental shortcomings. Amongst thee shortcomings are our low educational standards and weak educational systems. As soon as the government, with an honesty of purpose, refocuses its thrust in this direction there is no reason why Pakistan cannot move by leaps and bounds on the path of rapid progress and prosperity

As young and energetic citizens entering the real world you have joined an elite group of “educated” Pakistanis. This position also places a special responsibility on your shoulders not only to yourselves, your parents and loved ones but also to the community and the country. With this degree you are equipped to achieve extraordinary things. You have two tiered challenges ahead of you. At one level you have to cope in the highly competitive globalized world of the 21st century. In this age of ever changing technology nothing short of innovative thinking and hard work will ensure relative success in what ever you do.

Many of you will pursue higher studies, and perhaps work and live, abroad. It will be a tough experience for you as Pakistanis. As you are aware our acceptability abroad is wafer thin therefore your task will be so much more difficult. But do not be discouraged by this; commit yourselves to giving your best and you will succeed. At the same time, I believe that your place is here in Pakistan and this is where you must return after the completion of your higher studies. For those of you who intend to stay and work locally or do business. I submit that whatever you do, it should be done with humility, integrity and hard work. All in all I believe that since your parents, your teachers, your friends and your country have helped you achieve what you have therefore there is a debt you are carrying. And this has to be repaid sometime or other. So please stand steadfast in your commitments to yourselves, your families, the community and the country.