I am honoured to be invited to speak at the Inaugural session of the Conference on an important subject of "State of Social Sciences in Pakistan in the 21st Century". I take this Conference as an essential part of the academic programmes of GCU which are focused on creation and transmission of knowledge through all means, including conferences, seminars, etc.

Social Sciences have been out of fashion in Pakistan for a long time, though their appeal for students was never so low as it is now. A cursory look at the education enrolment in the universities and colleges shows that only the under achievers take up social sciences for studies by choice, and the case of languages is even worse. In rare cases though a few high achievers may also opt for social sciences at University level. Furthermore, it has been so for quite sometime now and there is no visible change in this trend. This evidence should look
alarming to all those who are associated with the Higher Education sector in Pakistan.

— However, for some people this phenomenon is hardly surprising. They argue that this is machine age, and social sciences are about man; so no surprise if science and technology are up on the popularity curve, while the social sciences and arts are found trailing behind them.

— But it is also true that men and machine are inseparable parts of modern world, so a good blending of the two is essential to keep the system working – something which is missing in present day Pakistan, and needs to be addressed as a priority issue of educational planning.

— Two core questions ask for an explanation in this context: (1) how do we explain the increasing gap between the two sides (i.e. social and physical sciences) of the knowledge-equation; and (2) how long can the domestic economy sustain the tremendous costs arising on account of low quality graduates of social sciences in Pakistan?
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We now live in a knowledge society which is essentially global. It is also true that university education is the best guarantee for young people to find jobs in the global environment in which information is the key to success. So universities are designing their academic programmes to suit the market needs with a special focus on the new information systems. People prefer to go to such institutions which help in building up their skills rapidly so that they can be employed without much waiting. That is fine.

Yet, it is by no means certain that an education system in which an increasing percentage of youth strives to learn skills in a university is best suited to cope with the challenges of the 21st century. As is well known, many jobs are not "high tech" but "high touch", namely service sector jobs that do not require university education. Instead, it just requires skill-oriented education to fill such jobs. The share of such jobs in Pakistan is at present more than 42.0%; and, as a matter of fact, many jobs in the production sector do not require university education either. Even more jobs are somewhere between the high tech
and high touch. Thus, the rush to the universities for skill learning is to be handled carefully in order to avoid high social cost that higher education entails. In our view, a flexible system with a variety of educational routes to higher degrees would be better than the one that leads directly to a university degree. Such arrangements exist in all advanced countries and this is particularly suitable for a developing country like Pakistan with a large population pursuing higher education because its private cost is much lower than the social cost and an economy that is undergoing structural changes.

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It is important note that in recent years the new universities in Pakistan have started defining their goals almost entirely against the demands of the businesses. This is harmful for the universities because it prevents them from performing their primary role as agents of social change. As a matter of fact, University education should ensure cultural enlightenment, which skill-oriented programmes often lack. So it is a big challenge for the good universities to strike a balance between the demands of the business world and that of the society.
If goes without saying that scientific knowledge and technological progress open new possibilities of reaching higher living standards, though these may not necessarily ensure better quality of life. Louis Pasteur said, “Science is the soul of the prosperity of nations and the living source of all progress”. But even if science is the soul of material progress, quality of life is not just determined by the material conditions. And there is also the cultural side of life. Culture is more about the finer aspects of life: fine arts, music drama, prose, poetry and so on. Culture is activity of thought and receptiveness to beauty and human feelings. Cultural activities help in cultivating the human values, artistic abilities and humane qualities and that is what produces “men of feelings.”

Surely, sensitive persons blessed with sympathy for others would be better prepared take up new challenges of life. And to sensitize and prepare people to be ready to take on big challenges is a task the educational institutions should undertake. Persons should be strengthened by building up imagination and feelings. It would be true to say that many amongst us are governed by the weakness of their imagination.
It is this weakness which should be the paramount purpose of education to dispel.

— Bertrand Russell would have through such studies as music and poetry, science and history, provided the nourishment "upon which the better emotions grow". And I would suggest a step further. My concern is more about direction of education in our society. Education, to my mind, should be informed by two major purposes: (a) a resolving of the conflict between freedom and security; and (b) an integrating of morality and life. Thus, it would encourage an understanding that all power should be inclusive, belonging to all people equally and reflecting in its functioning their equal value. It should reveal how the individual and society are inseparable aspects of human development. In such an environment every person should be personally convinced and responsible for the impact of all he does; that things should exist for the sake of people, and not people for the sake of things. In short, university education should be concerned primarily to promote genuine democratic culture, not the textbook alone. Social sciences would have a special role in promoting this type of culture in Pakistan.
— Allow me to share the GCU experience in this regard. After gaining the university status, we seriously discussed an important question: what is the role of an old institution like GCU in the 21st century? As GCU had replaced GC, so it had to set up higher goals and accept new challenges. And what were they? A straight answer would have been: GCU should begin to fulfill demands of the economy. This kind of response is obviously influenced by the notion of making the university solely serve the market. Does it mean science and applied disciplines take precedence over humanities and liberal arts? I guess that would have been ill-advised! Education is not just confined to the sciences; it is much more. It is about lightening of fire in the minds, which is possible through exposure of students to culture, literature, music and lot more. Indeed we should instil scientific rigour in teaching and research, but we need not de-nature the subject contents and obscure the virtues of liberal studies.

— So we decided to carefully avoid the fallacy of misplaced emphasis that continues to deprive humanities in Pakistani universities of their attractiveness and their practical value. Furthermore, it is also possible for a curriculum to have a large
offering of "liberal arts" courses, but they are worthless as education if they are not taught humanistically. Universities have to act responsibly as the knowledge imparted by them leaves an imprint on the minds of generations of people and determines the future course of a society. As a unique institution, GCU has also to facilitate the attainment of egalitarian and democratic goals, which are hallmark of a mature society and attainment of this depends on the quality of the educational institutions and, in turn, on the quality of courses on offer. GC University has beautifully meshed its rich cultural traditions together with applied academic programs in physical and social sciences so that Ravian graduates become thinking men and women, steeped in our culture as well as equipped with higher level skills.

I wish to emphasize an important point that the history of university education around the world reveals the fact that everywhere it developed gradually. In the modern age, some "quick-fix" academicians believe that there aren't many lessons for the young universities to learn from the experiences of established seats of learning, that educational reforms are some kind of a chemical reaction to be triggered by a catalyst;
and that this entire process is "culture - neutral." The recent drive for expansion in the higher education sector in Pakistan appears to be influenced by this thinking and thus the lop-sided development of HE sector.

Another perceived barrier against institutional growth in Pakistan is the prevalence of policy of "guided development", from above, devoid of institution level initiatives. No matter how lofty the goals of the funding agencies may be, institutional progress has to be rooted in the universities and can not be grafted from outside. The real problem with "guided model" is that it doesn't lead to an integrated and holistic institutional development. In all known models of institutional development, positive forces take root within the organization and, thus, ensure sustainable progress.

From the perspective of subject under discussion, a policy of "guided development" is most likely to bog down a university in mundane affairs, while the real academic issues such as ensuring balanced academic planning would remain neglected. In our politico-social culture marked with tradition of compliance and compromise, universities generally tend to blindly follow the
directions from the top and in the process lose the real sense of purposeful planning. Frankly speaking, public institutions in Pakistan generally follow the path of least resistance, unmindful of the institutional and social costs of such compromises.

[4] What can we do in this situation and who should take the lead to provide what is missing in Pak HE sector at present? In my view, universities can become true agents of change in this setting for they are the real stake-holders in this case. But there is a caveat in this statement: it presupposes presence of universities with a vision for balanced development of physical and social sciences which would in due course transform them as well as the entire educational system.

In essence, I suggest that within the broad policy framework the remedial steps must be taken by each university according to its vision. As autonomous institution, every university need to adopt a proactive approach in this regard. It must seize the opportunities and act now. Gone are the days when universities were bracketed with Church because both did not accept any change. It is time that universities should not only move forward but also show innovation in what they do. Obviously, this
suggestion cuts across all disciplines and faculties, but the real beneficiary will be the social sciences which have remained by and large stagnant for a long time in Pakistan.

[5] Progressive universities should take the lead and adopt relevant and rewarding (from students' perspective) interdisciplinary courses in humanities to open a window between the worlds of physical and social sciences. A policy of synergy among disciplines would enhance individual subject's appeal as well as reinforce interdisciplinary links to the over all advantage of the educational system.

— Finally, at the students level an important issue is the quality of learning outcomes. The point is, if employers of the West are willing to recruit social science graduates, why then Pakistani graduates with similar degrees fail to be gainfully employed in the country? And why science graduates are preferred over social graduates? It appears the real decisive factor is 'quality' i.e. graduates' ability to perform well 'on the job'. Hence the core issue of quality standards across all disciplines need to be tackled by the universities and the funding agencies, including HEC.
In sum, Pakistan’s educational planners should focus on creating an environment in which social and physical sciences grow in tandem. While this is the necessary condition, quality of graduates would be the sufficient condition for cutting the costs arising on account of the low quality graduates, particularly of the social sciences, whose productivity generally does not match the requirements of modern economy.

27th March 2008