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The University behind China's Rise: Lessons for Pakistan



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China's economic rise is usually explained through factories, exports, infrastructure and state planning. That explanation is not wrong. But it is incomplete. Behind China's industrial strength stands another institution "the university".



Chinese universities have not remained limited to classrooms and degrees. They have become part of the country's innovation system. They train engineers, scientists, managers and researchers. They support industrial upgrading. They produce patents, research, startups and technical expertise. They work with firms, local governments and research institutes. In many sectors, they are directly connected to national development. This is where Pakistan needs to look carefully. The important lesson is not that Pakistan should copy China. It cannot. The political system, institutional culture and economic scale are different. The real lesson is that China treats higher education as an economic instrument. Pakistan still treats it mostly as a social sector. That difference matters.

China invested in universities with a clear purpose. Its leading institutions, such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, Zhejiang University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University, are not only symbols of academic prestige. They are part of China's innovation machinery. They produce high-level talent for advanced manufacturing, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, energy, transport, digital platforms and defence-related technologies. They also help connect research with industry. This did not happen through slogans. It required policy direction, long-term funding, institutional discipline and links with economic priorities. China built programmes to strengthen elite universities. It created research parks and innovation zones. It encouraged universities to work with companies. It linked science and technology policy with industrial policy.



Pakistan has not done this seriously enough. Pakistan has many universities. It has a young population. It has talented students. It has English-language capacity. It has a large diaspora. It has public and private institutions across provinces. But these assets are not organised as a national innovation system. They are scattered. Universities produce graduates, but the economy does not absorb many of them productively. Research is often written for promotion, not for problem-solving. Industry often does not trust universities. Government often funds higher education without asking what strategic capability it is building.

The result is visible. Pakistan has expanded higher education, but it has not converted higher education into economic strength.

China’s first lesson for Pakistan is strategic focus. No country can build excellence everywhere at once. China selected priority fields and invested in them. Pakistan needs the same discipline. It should identify a few national priorities where universities can make a real contribution: agriculture technology, water security, renewable energy,



public health, artificial intelligence, climate adaptation, textiles, minerals, logistics and education reform. Each priority should be linked with selected universities. Funding should follow performance and relevance. Every university should not pretend to be world-class in every field. Some should become strong teaching universities. Some should become regional problem-solving institutions. Some should become research-intensive centres in carefully chosen areas.

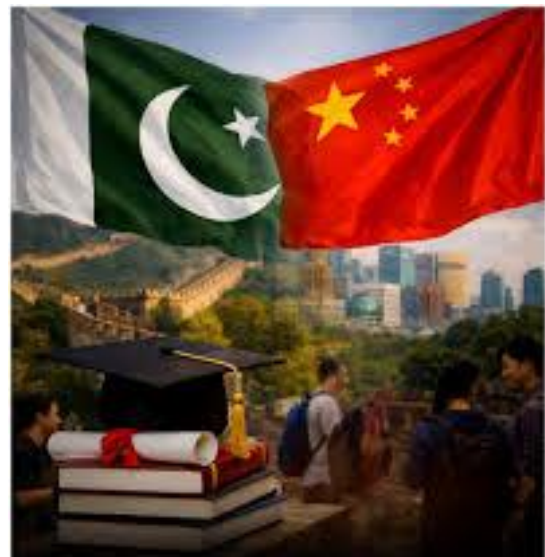
The second lesson is the university-industry relationship. In Pakistan, this phrase is repeated often but practiced weakly. It usually means seminars, memorandums and photo sessions. China’s experience shows that real linkage is different. It means joint laboratories.



It means industry-funded PhD projects. It means student internships designed around real technical problems. It means technology transfer offices that actually work. It means faculty being rewarded for patents, prototypes, policy solutions and commercialisable research, not only journal articles. Pakistan's promotion system also needs reform. Publications matter, but impact should matter too. A researcher who develops a low-cost agricultural technology, a public health tool, a school improvement model or a local climate solution should not be treated as less serious than someone who only publishes for academic points.

The third lesson is regional innovation. China's strongest cities are not strong because they have universities alone. They are strong because universities, firms, investors and local governments operate in the same ecosystem.

Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Hangzhou show how talent, capital and research can reinforce one another. Pakistan can apply this at the provincial level. Lahore can connect universities with AI, health sciences and education technology. Faisalabad can link higher education with textiles and agri-tech. Karachi can focus on logistics, finance, ports and the blue economy. Peshawar can connect universities with health, minerals and



regional trade. Quetta can focus on climate resilience, mining and border economies. This requires provincial higher education commissions, chambers of commerce and universities to work beyond ceremonial engagement. Each region should ask one practical question that what economic problem can our universities help solve?

The fourth lesson is doctoral education. China uses doctoral training to build national capability. Pakistan often treats the PhD as a route to university employment. This is too



narrow. PhD research should be linked with national problems, public institutions, firms, laboratories, schools, hospitals and communities. A thesis should not be the end product. Expertise should be.

This also matters for Pakistan-China relations. CPEC should move beyond roads, power plants and ports. It should develop a knowledge corridor. Pakistani universities need joint research centers with Chinese institutions. They need faculty exchanges, doctoral partnerships, technology training and applied research around agriculture, energy, water, transport, public health and industrial productivity. This would make cooperation more strategic. It would also help Pakistan learn from China's innovation ecosystem from inside, not from a distance. Pakistan does not lack universities. It lacks a serious higher education strategy connected to economic transformation. China's example is useful because it shows that universities can become engines of development when they are given direction, resources and responsibility.

Pakistan's challenge is clear. It must stop seeing universities only as degree-producing institutions. It must start treating them as centres of national capability. That shift will not solve every economic problem. But without it, Pakistan will keep producing graduates for an economy that is not ready to use them.