

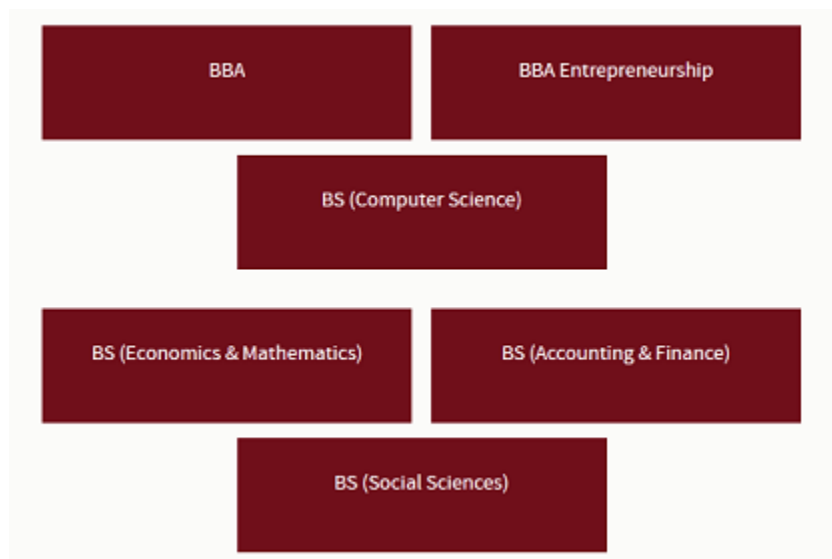
Liberalizing Higher Education in Pakistan

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In contemporary Pakistan very real tensions exist between the perceived aims and needs of higher education and the administrative bodies formed to regulate them. The state of higher education in Pakistan took a distinct downward turn during the military rule of Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988), when the goal of higher education was starkly defined and reified into discrete technocratic hierarchies. Utilitarian disciplines like engineering, medicine, and business established supreme dominance as the vocational goals of a university education while the social sciences and humanities – which were developing powerful new theoretical models across the border in India – were left to languish.

Over the last decade a push to (re-)establish higher education models designed around the liberal arts approach has blossomed, particularly in Karachi – Pakistan's commercial and cosmopolitan metropole. These programs are either newly instituted, e.g. IBA (2013) and Habib University (2014), or under development for implementation in the near future, e.g. Agha Khan University's planned M.A. in Social Sciences (projected 2017). These institutions join LUMS, Pakistan's flagship university in Lahore, which though not expressly pursuing the liberal arts ideal has established programs with breadth distribution requirements akin to those found at many small liberal arts colleges in the United States.

But such institutions and their programs – which still represent only a small fraction of the 173 universities or degree awarding institutions recognized by Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC) – face numerous obstacles in the successful implementation of an educational model that has become wholly foreign to Pakistani education experience. Chief among these, perhaps, are the disciplinary hierarchies that have overrun public understanding of the purpose of higher education. Tellingly, even IBA – which has been a leader in this movement – has perhaps unintentionally underscored this hierarchy on their website describing their undergraduate programs¹:



¹ See <https://iba.edu.pk/UndergraduatePrograms.php>

Another key challenge faced by such organizations is the regulations defined by technocratic governing bodies like the HEC, which still define "learning" through mechanical calculations counting the number of hours spent being lectured at by a faculty member.

Nevertheless, the introduction of a more liberal higher education – one that challenges students to read more broadly, think more deeply, and explore beyond the boundaries of disciplinary categories – is a welcome trend in Pakistani higher education. What remains to be seen over the coming years is whether or not such movements towards liberalizing education will take root in the face of social, cultural, and bureaucratic ideas of the aims of university study. Only time will tell, but it is hoped by those who locate themselves within this movement that the development of even a small cadre of well-trained, broadly educated natural and social scientists returning to and remaining in Pakistan may be sufficient to demonstrate the value of such an education by deepening the values of egalitarianism, critical thought, and free inquiry.