



A BOLD VISION FOR ISLAMIC SCIENCE

by Cristina Serra

To boost economic growth and raise a new generation scientists, Islamic countries need stronger leadership and a commitment to research, says influential scholar Atta-ur-Rahman of Pakistan.

To fulfil their aspirations for economic development and scientific strength, Islamic nations should develop a long-term strategy and triple investments in science, says Atta-ur-Rahman, the influential Pakistani researcher and educator.

In a recent interview, Rahman warned that Islamic nations risk being left behind unless their leaders re-orient

to improve education and focus on scientific research.

“The biggest challenge [in the Islamic world] is the lack of visionary leadership,” he said.

Rahman has long advocated education as a critical component in building strength and resilience, and in the interview, he said that universities too often are seen as only a collection of beautiful buildings. Instead, he argued, they should be hubs for creative minds and centers of excellence in research and training for a new generation of scientists.

“The key to a high-quality university is having a world-class faculty that can carry out pioneering research,” he said.

Rahman, a TWAS Fellow since 1985, was interviewed in Muscat, Oman, by TWAS and Omani journalists during the Academy’s 25th General Meeting in October 2014. From 2000 to 2008, he served high-level ministerial appointments and guided ambitious

◀ A university is more than a collection of beautiful buildings, says Pakistani scholar Atta-ur-Rahman.

reforms that have boosted Pakistani education at all levels. He was elected as Fellow of Royal Society [London] and awarded the UNESCO Science Prize in recognition of his research contributions in natural product chemistry.

With respect to higher education, Pakistan – and Rahman’s initiatives there – offer a valuable lesson for developing countries.

In 2002, Pakistan was facing pressure from the Taliban, which opposed science culture. At that time, Rahman was serving as federal minister for science and technology under President Pervez Musharraf. Thanks to his commitment, Pakistan launched a five-step plan for scientific development, and propelled higher education reforms that produced considerable progress in science and technology.

His efforts gave Pakistan one of the best digital libraries in the world and the world’s largest Fulbright Scholarship programme. For his contributions to seminal changes in the higher education sector in Pakistan, Rahman won the TWAS Prize for Institution Building in 2009.

Today, Pakistan is offering competitive training and creating an attractive environment to persuade diaspora scientists to return home.

“Our world is knowledge-driven,” observes Rahman. “Developing a strong knowledge economy depends on dynamic interplay among three important partners: the government, the private sector, and the universities and research centres. Only through their interaction, aimed at developing a strong knowledge economy, can a nation make rapid progress.” ■

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