

Why No Pakistani University Is in the QS Top 300 and What Must Be Done

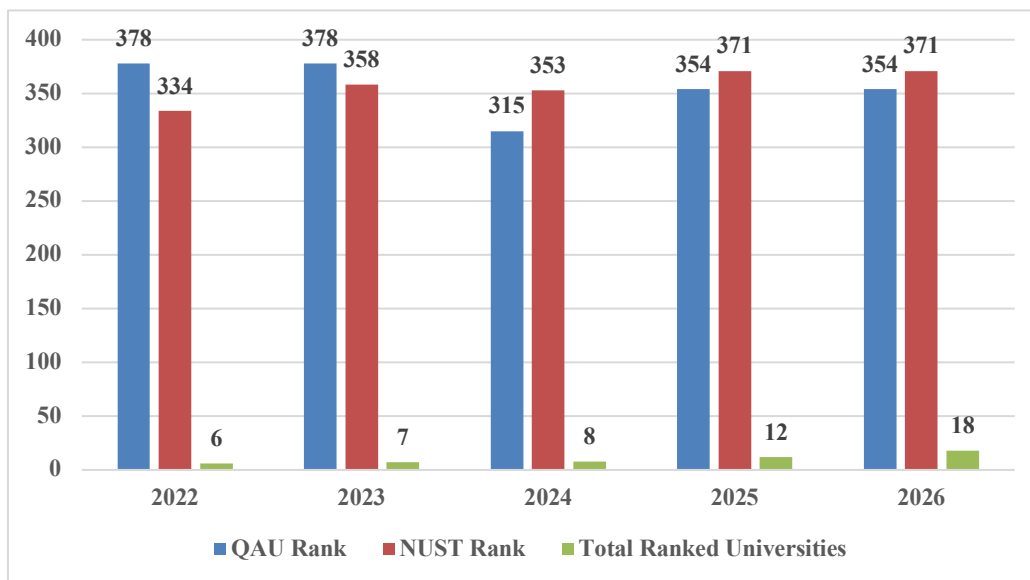
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In the recently released QS World University Rankings 2025, no Pakistani university has made it into the top 300, a sobering but unsurprising verdict on the country’s deteriorating higher education system. While regional neighbors like India (IIT Bombay, #150), Iran (Tehran University, #400), and even Bangladesh (Dhaka University, #800) continue to ascend, Pakistan’s top institutions Quaid-i-Azam University (~315), NUST (~350), and Punjab University (~550)—are slipping further behind (QS Rankings, 2025). This decline is more than a symbolic failure; it threatens Pakistan’s research credibility, graduate employability, and global competitiveness. At the heart of this crisis lies chronic underinvestment: in 2025, higher education funding dropped to just 0.8% of GDP, one-fifth of the UNESCO-recommended minimum, with a staggering 30% decline in actual spending compared to 2023 (Education in Pakistan, 2025; Economic Survey, 2025). Compounding this is a severe lack of research output, poor citation indices, and an inability to link academic programs to national development priorities. Faculty shortages, an exodus of academic talent, underfunded PhD programs, and minimal postdoctoral training further erode institutional strength.

Figure 1: QS World Ranking of Pakistani Universities (2022-2026)



Equally troubling is the lack of global collaboration, few foreign students, negligible exchange programs, and weak research linkages, which render our universities isolated and inward-looking. Many campuses lack digital libraries, basic research labs, and reliable IT infrastructure, while opaque governance,

politicized appointments, and outdated quality assurance mechanisms paralyze institutional reform. Yet perhaps the most corrosive issue is the overt complacency of national leadership and university administrators, who treat rankings as external distractions rather than critical performance benchmarks. There is a pervasive culture of indifferent rhetoric without reform, announcements without follow-through, where mediocrity is normalized and excellence is neither demanded nor rewarded.

If Pakistan is to reverse this decline, it must launch an ambitious, state-backed Top 300 Mission to elevate its leading universities, modeled on global success stories like Malaysia's Sunway University, which climbed 120 QS ranks in three years by hiring international faculty and forming high-impact research alliances (QS Rankings, 2025). Key reforms must include tripling the higher education budget to at least 2.5% of GDP, linking HEC funding to measurable performance outcomes, internationalizing 10 flagship universities, launching targeted research excellence grants, and overhauling governance to foster transparency, autonomy, and accountability. University rankings are not cosmetic; they influence foreign investment, shape graduate mobility, and define national credibility in the knowledge economy. The continued absence of Pakistani universities in the top 300 is a national failure, but it is also an opportunity. With political will, policy coherence, and a rejection of complacency, Pakistan can still transform its universities into global contenders. But the clock is ticking, and the world will not wait.

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Disclosures: None

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