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Review**

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A Global Lens on Pakistan's Education Crisis

An Exclusive Interview with **Dr. Jonathan S. Addleton**



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An Exclusive Interview with Dr. Jonathan S. Addleton



Dr. Jonathan S. Addleton

Rector and President, Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), Lahore

Jonathan S. Addleton has seen Pakistan from more angles than most. He grew up here, attending Murree Christian School in the hills above Islamabad. He returned as a USAID Mission Director, channeling American development assistance

into a country he knew intimately. And today, he leads Forman Christian College (A Chartered University) in Lahore as its Rector, one of Pakistan's oldest and most respected institutions of higher learning.

Between those chapters lies a 32-year career in the United States Foreign Service that took him across ten countries, from the plains of Afghanistan to the steppes of Mongolia, where he served as US Ambassador. He holds a doctorate from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and an undergraduate degree in journalism from Northwestern. He has written four books and earned some of the highest honors in American diplomacy.

Few people are better placed to speak about education in Pakistan, its promise, its failures, and what it will take to turn the tide. We asked Dr. Addleton to share his thoughts on what three decades of global experience have taught him about the country he keeps coming back to.

You have worked in Pakistan through USAID, lived here as a child, and now

lead one of its oldest universities. How has your understanding of Pakistan's education challenges evolved across those very different vantage points?

That's right, I have seen Pakistan's education system from several vantage points, starting with the ten years that I spent at a boarding school in Murree; continuing with my PhD research which partly involved use of the Quaid-i-Azam University library in Islamabad; gaining a further understanding as a USAID Officer and then as USAID Mission Director when USAID supported some of the major universities in Pakistan; and now as Rector of Forman Christian College (A Chartered University) in Lahore.

The first two experiences provided a "micro" look at education in Pakistan, first as a high schooler and then as a youthful researcher accessing libraries well before the digital age. Mostly I look back at those times with nostalgia while recognizing that both Pakistan and the world have utterly changed. That said, I wouldn't mind going back in time to relive the high school experience of camping in the Murree Hills or playing football against Potha High (a public school) or Lawrence College (a private one).

The USAID experience years later was very different, providing much greater awareness for the financial and policy issues involved. From my perspective, the nationalization of educational institutions in Pakistan was a serious mistake—public and private universities should thrive alongside each other, both contributing to the development of the country.

My current experience at Forman confirms this view even more strongly.

At the same time, I realize more than ever why an assignment as a Vice Chancellor is sometimes considered "the hardest job in Pakistan!"

Your career took you across ten countries as a diplomat before academia. What does a life in diplomacy teach you about leadership in higher education that a traditional academic career might not?

I learned many lessons as a diplomat including the importance of flexibility, quick thinking, effective communications, and achieving consensus among a wide range of diverse stakeholders, each convinced of the righteousness of their position. But perhaps more than anything I learned the importance of retaining a measure of hope, even in the most challenging of circumstances.

Despite missing out on a more traditional academic career, I do think that many of the skills that are most useful in the Foreign Service also apply in a university setting. Beyond that, the ability to cross cultures and take a global perspective is increasingly important, both in higher education and in an ever more connected world. As I have observed, the fact that Forman faculty have advanced degrees from at least 21 countries benefits our students in multiple ways; we also benefit from having faculty and staff from several different countries including the US, South Korea, Germany, Australia, Portugal, and the Netherlands.

Pakistan consistently struggles with low enrollment, high dropout rates, and a stark urban-rural divide in education. As someone who has studied development across South Asia, where do you think the systemic

failure lies?

Investments in education including female education pay dividends that last for a lifetime, starting with foundational support for early education and continuing through secondary school and university. As has been noted by many scholars, over the decades Pakistan has devoted a relatively small portion of its GDP to education and health, resulting in poorer social indicators than would otherwise be the case. Arguably, such investments would have helped pave the way for a stronger economic performance as well.



USAID has invested heavily in education reform in Pakistan over the decades. From your time as Mission Director, which interventions do you believe actually moved the needle?

I served with USAID in Pakistan twice, first as a Program Officer (1985-1989) and then as Mission Director (2006-2007). That initial experience gave me a deep respect for the contributions made by my predecessors to some of the leading universities in Pakistan, ranging from the Agriculture University in Faisalabad to the Institute for Business Administration (IBA) in Karachi.

As it happens, not long after I arrived at the USAID Mission in Islamabad as a junior officer in 1985 the then USAID Mission Director to Pakistan asked me to draft a reply to a letter he had received from Syed Babar Ali about a business school he wanted to establish in Lahore. As I enjoy telling friends at LUMS and elsewhere, that reply became the first link in a long chain that eventually provided a \$10 million "seed grant" to what subsequently was called the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS)!

According to AI, USAID over the years allocated nearly \$8 billion to Pakistan's educational sector, building or repairing over 1,135 schools, training tens of thousands of teachers, and funding a number of higher education partnerships. As Dr. Kauser Abdullah Malik who teaches at Forman sometimes reminds me, USAID support for agriculture research and education trained an entire generation of Pakistani scientists who in turn played a key role in Pakistan's "green revolution." While the challenges never end, I do believe that USAID's investments in education still

stand as one of its most enduring legacies.



If you were advising Pakistan's education policymakers today, drawing on everything you have seen as a diplomat, a development professional, and a rector, what would your single most urgent recommendation be?

As mentioned earlier, investments in education—including basic education—are essential. While some of those funds should surely be directed toward improved infrastructure, what happens in those newly constructed or newly renovated buildings is even more important, underscoring the role that effective teacher training combined with financial

incentives can play in delivering a good education where it matters most—by a trained, committed, and qualified teacher at the classroom level.

As regards policy, I recognize the need for appropriate regulatory mechanisms as a key factor in establishing and maintaining standards while also providing quality assurance across the education sector. That said, I have to acknowledge that I would prefer the phrase "enabling environment" rather than "regulatory environment", noting that the former formulation is less rigid and more likely to encourage innovation and creativity across the education sector.

Finally, I might mention that Forman recently signed an agreement with the Government of Balochistan to provide a four-year Baccalaureate degree for up to 50 female teachers from Balochistan, all of whom will be guaranteed employment in that province upon completion of their degrees. Opportunities while at Forman potentially include an internship or teaching experience at Forman's Light of Hope School, a K-10 Lab School developed by Forman's Department of Education for the children of our service workers. In my view, duplicating such creative initiatives in other places and in other contexts would go a long way toward strengthening education at all levels in Pakistan.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views of the magazine, its editors, or its publishers.