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EDITORIAL

# Tier-2 Cities Deserve World-Class CS Education Too

*A public university in Sukkur — a city most of Pakistan's own tech sector could not place on a map — now has 132 PhD faculty, AACSB accreditation, and a THE global ranking, while the country's other tier-2 cities are still waiting for their turn. The gap isn't inevitable. It's a choice nobody in Islamabad or Lahore has had to make yet.*

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## Introduction

The 2026 QS World University Rankings by Subject placed 35 Pakistani universities across roughly 180 entries — a genuine sign of progress, and one worth taking seriously. Look at where those universities actually sit, though, and the pattern is unmistakable: the highest-ranked institutions remain heavily concentrated in Islamabad and Lahore, with universities in Peshawar, Multan, and Bahawalpur described in the same coverage as only "gradually emerging." That phrase — gradually emerging — has been true of computer science education outside Pakistan's two or three biggest cities for as long as I have been teaching it, and it is long past time to ask why "gradual" is the ceiling we've accepted.

A student who scores well enough for computer science in Multan, Sargodha, Bahawalpur, or Sukkur today faces a real choice most students in Lahore or Islamabad never have to make: study locally, in a department that may have a handful of PhD faculty stretched across every specialization from databases to machine learning, or leave home entirely — often the family's first choice, not the student's — for a campus three hundred kilometres away that can actually offer a functioning AI lab and professors who publish in venues anyone outside Pakistan has heard of. That is not a minor inconvenience. It is a sorting mechanism that quietly decides, years before graduation, who gets access to a genuinely competitive computer science education and who gets access to a diploma with the same title on it.

> ***"A city most of Pakistan's own tech sector couldn't place on a map built a globally ranked computer science department. The excuse that it can only happen in Lahore or Islamabad just ran out."***

## The Proof That It Isn’t Inevitable

Sukkur IBA University is the counterexample every tier-2 city administrator should be studying closely. Founded in 1994 in a mid-sized Sindh city with none of the built-in advantages of a provincial capital, it is today the only public-sector, AACSB-accredited university in Pakistan, carries a Times Higher Education global ranking in the 601-800 band, and runs 132 PhD faculty on campus with another 68 pursuing doctorates at top-ranking universities abroad. Its computer science department launched a BS in Artificial Intelligence in Fall 2025 and now runs active research in industrial IoT, explainable AI, and 5G. None of that happened because Sukkur has some

natural advantage Multan or Sargodha lack. It happened because one institution decided, deliberately, that a smaller city's students deserved more than a "gradually emerging" education.

FAST-NUCES offers a second, complementary model: rather than concentrating its computer science brand in one flagship campus, it deliberately built out six campuses spanning Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore alongside Multan, Peshawar, and Chiniot-Faisalabad, extending a single quality standard and shared curriculum across cities of very different sizes instead of treating smaller cities as an afterthought market. A higher education consultant interviewed on the QS rankings put the underlying lesson simply: location matters less than strategy. Universities outside the traditional hubs can compete by building a few deep international partnerships and developing genuine niche expertise, rather than trying to be a smaller, underfunded copy of NUST or LUMS.

## What the Gap Actually Costs

Sukkur IBA's own numbers point to the mechanism that made this possible, and it wasn't luck: roughly 70 percent of its students receive financial assistance, and the university runs a network of thirteen community colleges specifically to reach students from under-resourced districts of Sindh before they ever reach a university admissions form. It built a talent pipeline instead of waiting for talent to arrive fully formed. Most tier-2 city universities in computer science do the opposite by default — they compete for whatever students didn't get into a bigger city's programme, rather than actively cultivating a regional pipeline the way Sukkur IBA has spent three decades building.

The cost of not replicating this compounds nationally, not just locally. Every talented student who leaves Sargodha or Bahawalpur for Lahore because the local computer science department can't offer a real machine learning lab is a student whose eventual career, whose remittances or reinvested earnings, and whose mentorship of the next generation of local students all leave with them. Regional economies that could be anchored by a strong local tech graduate base instead export their best talent to the same three cities year after year, deepening exactly the concentration this magazine has already documented in AI research, fintech infrastructure, and government IT capacity. A country cannot build a genuinely national digital economy on a genuinely regional talent pipeline.

## What's Next?

HEC's funding formulas and faculty-recruitment incentives currently do little to correct this — a PhD graduate weighing offers has every financial and career incentive to choose Lahore or Islamabad over Multan or Sukkur, and nothing in the system meaningfully changes that calculation. A serious response would mean location-weighted faculty incentives that make a tier-2 city posting genuinely competitive rather than a fallback, HEC funding formulas that reward the kind of niche specialization strategy that worked for Sukkur IBA rather than uniform baseline funding that leaves smaller departments permanently under-resourced, and formal mechanisms — not just goodwill — for flagship universities to co-develop faculty and curricula with tier-2 partners the way FAST-NUCES has done across its own multi-campus network.

I teach computer science in a tier-2 city, to students who are every bit as capable as their counterparts in Lahore and who deserve every bit as serious an education. What Sukkur IBA has proven, over three decades and against genuinely long odds, is that geography was never the real constraint — institutional will and sustained investment were. Pakistan does not lack a template for building world-class computer science education outside its biggest cities. It lacks the national commitment to fund and replicate the one template that already works, in more than one city at a time.

**About the Author**
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