

Multiplier Effect

How one Pakistan university's outreach helps students in the country's most remote areas break barriers

By [Meredith Barnett](#)
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Credit: LUMS

In 2019, **Waqas Haider** delivered the valedictory address at LUMS. As a student at the Lahore, Pakistan, university, Haider navigated his economics and management classes, served as president of the Amnesty International chapter, and launched his own nonprofit.

Haider was the first person in his small village, Basti Dhupsari in southern Punjab, to attend college.

What set Haider on this path was the **LUMS National Outreach Program**. It's a comprehensive recruitment and support initiative that LUMS built to help students like Haider overcome geographical, economic, and social barriers to education.

Educational challenges in Pakistan are deep and begin early for many. According to **UNICEF**, 22 million children in Pakistan aren't enrolled in school. The country has gaps in literacy and educational attainment along geographic, socioeconomic, and gender lines. Scarce school funding, insufficient facilities, and low educational participation for girls have been persistent challenges.

It's the fifth most populous country in the world, but only 9% of Pakistan's population is enrolled in tertiary education, according to **UNESCO**—compared with 36% in Indonesia, which has a similar population size.

LUMS, a private university of more than 5,000 students established in 1985, set out to address these layers of barriers.

"We wanted to make LUMS a truly national university," says Nuzhat Kamran, director of advancement. "We were getting extremely talented students, but they were coming from a specific segment of society. We wanted to expand the scope, and reach out to 150-plus cities, towns, and villages across the country to find talented students—students who would never dream of coming to a university."

Kamran knew firsthand the value of a college degree: She was a member of LUMS's inaugural graduating class. After coming on board at LUMS as a staff member in 1999, she led advancement at the institution from the get-go.

She and a founding team of staff members launched the National Outreach Program in 2001. The approach is intensive, and massive in scope: The university dispatches teams of staff across the country to personally visit



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dozens of schools in remote towns and villages. Staff work with local schools to identify promising students—some of whose families make less than US\$300 per month, says Kamran—and invite students to Lahore for two weeks of coaching to take an entrance exam and extra training in basic science.

From there, if students meet the university's merit requirements and gain acceptance, they receive funding for tuition, books, boarding, and living expenses. But LUMS built in support beyond the financial, too: Students are partnered with a mentor, an older student who is also part of the program, to help them transition to university life. LUMS also offers coaching in both written and oral communication.

So far, 1,300-plus students have participated in the program. Some have gone on to pursue doctoral degrees around the world, launched careers in finance or data, or returned to LUMS as faculty.

In 2005, the program accepted its first two female participants. Despite improvements in the last several decades, access to education continues to be a challenge for Pakistani women, especially in rural areas. In some regions, more than half of girls never complete primary school—a product of intersecting challenges like poverty, child labor, gender discrimination, and violence, according to [Human Rights Watch](#). Today, 30% of the LUMS National Outreach Program participants are women—and that's a number staff are working on increasing. So far, female graduates have gone on to work in rural development, anti-corruption policy reform, finance in London, and more.

The program is funded primarily by alumni and corporate donors. In July 2021, LUMS launched a giving campaign called Give a Day to LUMS, challenging alumni to give a day of their earnings to the school—some of that supporting the National Outreach Program.

Ultimately, the program has far-reaching ripples of impact, says Kamran.

"To my mind, the best thing about the NOP is its multiplier effect. These students are role models for their families, for their communities," she says. "Some are the first ones in their family to acquire university education. Once they've been here, they want others (their sisters, or brothers, or cousins, or community members) to come."

Many, she says, start social enterprises to help their communities or other students. Haider, for instance, started a youth development organization called Chiraagh (Urdu for "light" or "lantern"). And though the program's participants share a common need for support, they're also diverse, points out Kamran. They bring with them to LUMS's 100-acre campus "such rich cultures, traditions, languages. They add so much value to the learning experience at LUMS for all the students," she says.

LUMS's work with the National Outreach Program garnered a 2021 [CASE Platinum Award](#) in Best Practices in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Judges suggested that it could be a model for organizations and universities globally, if institutions are "willing to be intentional and make the financial investment" in reaching out to underrepresented learners.

About the author(s)

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