
CHALLENGES AND ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

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No nation can attain sustained economic and social progress without the backing of an “informed human capital. It is pertinent for an emerging economy like India, which is endowed with the second highest human resource in world, to derive the demographic dividend of this potent resource. Primary and secondary educations are not sufficient for human capacity building. It is higher education which lends the knowledge to understand and implement innovative techniques for economic progress. Higher education acts as the sharpener which adds edge and insight to make the human resource globally competitive and efficient. This paper makes an attempt to look at the changing dynamics of higher education, focusing on the challenges to it in present times. The 21st century is marked by a paradigm shift in education that has resulted both in threats and opportunities. It has brought new challenges and an opportunity for higher education. The challenges ahead are multifaceted and multidimensional. Though the data show a massive growth in the number of students’ enrollment in colleges/universities, holistic view reveals that still only a meager of the total population has access to higher education. Globalization and privatization are imposing new challenges but the nations are still entangled in solving the basic problems of accessibility to higher education for all.¹ In the wake of the transition from elitist to mass education, universities worldwide are under pressure to enhance access and equity, on the one hand, and to maintain high standards of quality and excellence, on the other.

In order to promote economic and industrial development in a country, the essential requirement is the capacity to develop skilled manpower of good quality in adequate number. The system of Indian Higher education is the second largest in the world which fulfills the educational needs of millions of students who come from different sections of the society because it is the student community that can help to generate healthy academic atmosphere in institutions of higher learning.² According to population projections in 2014 nearly 144 million of India’s population will be between the age-group 18 to 23-the target age group for Higher Education. At the beginning of India’s independence, there were 20 universities and 591 colleges while students enrollment at the tertiary level of education was 0.2 million. After independence, the growth has been very impressive. India now possesses a highly developed higher education system that offers facility of education and training in almost all aspects of human creation and intellectual endeavors. India’s higher education system is the third largest in the world after China and United States in terms of enrolment. However, in terms of the number of institutions, India is the largest higher education system in the world with 26455 institutions (504 universities and 25951 colleges). This means that the average number of students per educational institutions in India is lower than that in the US and China.³ The education commission set up in 1964 under the chairmanship of Dr. D.S.Kothari (Kothari Commission) had recommended that government should spend at least 6% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on education. However, in over 50 years, we have been able to achieve only half the target. The Knowledge Commission additionally recommends an increase of at least 1.5% of GDP for higher education out of a total of at least 6% of GDP for education overall.

National University of Educational Planning and Administration has pointed out that “The investment required in higher education is more than 9 lakh crore if we want to achieve 30%

GER. This includes the cost of setting up more institutes, infrastructure and salaries. In China, government spends more than 1.5 per cent of its GDP on higher education while India spends less than 0.5 per cent. According to a provisional survey on higher education released on September 28, 2012 has pointed out that the Gross enrolment ratio in India stands at an estimated 18.8 percent, with Other Backward Class recording a respectable 27.1 percent. Enrolment ratio among Schedule Caste students in contrast stood at 10.2 percent and 4.4 percent in case of females. Similarly, enrolment ratio among the teaching staff was more under OBC at 23.3 percent as compared to 7.4 percent among SC category and 2.9 percent in Schedule Tribes category. The first 'all India survey on higher education' for 2010-11 also said 19,249 foreign students were pursuing education in India and 6,842 of them were female students. According to Ernst & Young, in the last decade, the number of universities in the country grew at a CAGR of 7.5% as against the 4.7% growth observed from 1951-2001. The number of colleges has grown at a CAGR of 11% in 2001-2011 as against 6.1% during 1951-2001. However, salient reason for the discrepancy between Chinese and Indian educational performance is the absence of the state from higher education in India. During 2005-06 period, around 52 per cent of Indian student accessed higher education in private colleges, compared to less than 10 per cent in China. China has grown its higher education sector primarily with the help of universities, which number more than 2300. India has around 600 universities but they have more than 33,000 affiliated colleges.⁴ This is the largest number of affiliated colleges in the world, and is 10 times more than that of China. The majority of these universities and colleges in India are private and do not receive financial support from the Indian government.

India, like many other developing countries, has not paid adequate attention to it. There has been a strong tendency in the country to neglect higher education, focusing rather exclusively on elementary, more particularly, and primary education. While a major positive outcome of the 1990 Education for All conference in Jomtien, Thailand, was that elementary education received the somewhat serious attention of the national government, culminating in the passing of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), it has had an undesirable effect on other levels of education, particularly higher education. It was widely felt that the goals related to elementary education could be achieved only if there was a cap on the expansion of secondary and higher education. As a result, higher education was either ignored in policy planning exercises or special measures were initiated to reduce the intensity of public efforts in it, or both. Many public policy and plan documents, including the *Economic Surveys* the finance minister's annual budget speeches and debates and discussions on policy issues in education were confined to literacy and elementary education, ignoring higher education. Given the national, or even international, commitment to elementary education, the government felt that there was no way it could continue to support secondary and higher education on the same scale it used to earlier. To justify its stand, it declared in the 1993-94 Annual Report of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, "The higher education system in the country is now sufficiently developed to meet the nation's requirements. The unmet demand for higher education is not considered economically viable."

PRIVATIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Another very important development in the early 1990s was the introduction of neo-liberal economic policies that heralded an era of laissez-faireism in higher education, which facilitated the growth of the private sector, often at the cost of public higher education. The absence of a clear, coherent and explicit long-term policy perspective on higher education in India and a vision for its development have been the hallmark of Indian education in the last quarter century. So much so that having no policy on higher education has itself been the policy.

The neo-liberal policies that included stabilization and structural adjustment required a drastic cut in public expenditure across the board, including on higher education. These policies set the tone for sweeping reforms in higher education in India. Higher education was defined as a “non-merit good” that did not deserve to be financed by the State.⁵ Over last two decades, a rapidly growing Indian economy has led to a huge demand for an educated and skilled labour force. To meet the manpower needs of a dynamic economy, not surprisingly, private enterprises have cropped up to complement public educational institutions, plagued as they are by capacity constraints. In fact, over the past few decades, it has been the private sector that has really driven capacity creation in Indian higher education. Private presence in higher education got a fillip starting the mid-1980s, coinciding with the reducing investment by Government of India and the states. In 2001, when private unaided institutes made up 42.6 per cent of all higher education institutes, 32.8 per cent of Indian students studied there. Privatisation of higher education is especially noticeable in higher education professional courses such as engineering and Master of Business Administration (MBA), where majority of the institutions offering such programmes have been established by the private sector. So much so, the share of private institutes in the field of pharmacy and engineering is more than 90 per cent. These statistics show that private education players are the norm rather than exception and that privatisation of higher education is now an irreversible trend in India. Critics who argue that education is a social good and should remain exclusively in the hands of the government will find it hard to disagree that given the scale and complexity of Indian higher education challenges, the government on its own cannot single-handedly tackle all the issues. This is not to say that privatisation is the panacea to all of India’s higher education problems. In fact, this phenomenon has brought about its own set of issues and challenges.⁶ Yet, the fact that India has a burgeoning youth population that sees education as a ticket to prosperity, coupled with declining education spending by the government, translates into a great demand for private higher education.

However, confusion remained as to whether privatization was good or bad. From even a quick look at several documents of the government – plan documents, policy documents and other statements – one can note several confusing statements being simultaneously made. The government was found saying “yes” and “no” very often, almost simultaneously. For example, the government stated that privatization was good, but not commercialization; therefore, privatization would be allowed but not commercialization, although they are two sides of the same coin and are based on the same principle – of making and maximizing profits. By definition, the private sector is for profit, and it is not possible, either theoretically or empirically, to make a distinction between the two. Further observations then found that privatization was not necessarily desirable, even from a market perspective; however, private participation had to be encouraged, without making any clear distinction between private participation and privatization in education. At another point the government stated that private participation was also not desirable, but that we should encourage something along the lines of a public private partnership. The confusing statements continued: privatization of higher education was good and needed to be encouraged; commercialization was not bad, but profit-making in higher education should not be allowed.⁷ Therefore, it was emphatically stated that profit-making private educational institutes were not to be permitted, that educational activities motivated by profit have no place at all in society. Private providers, in the interest of maximizing profit, have every incentive to ‘minimize costs’ by compromising on the quality of education provided in their institutions.⁸

ACCESS AND EQUALITY

Today the world economy is experiencing an unprecedented change. A paradigm shift has been noticed in higher education now a day. Consequently, access to higher education has increased to certain extent but not sufficiently. The access to higher education is measured in gross enrolment ratio (GER), which is the ratio of persons enrolled in higher education institutions to total population of persons in age group of 18-23 years. The access to higher education depends upon the socio and economic conditions and cultural realities of communities and politico-administrative set-up of the country. Access to higher education has attracted the attention of policy makers, planners and political leaders in India. Under the planned development of India the provision of state funds is stressed to promote higher education under different five year plans. It is understood that the provision of state funds will increase access to higher education to general masses. These steps have certainly increased the access to higher education in the country; however, the weaker sections of the society have lagged behind.⁹ With the implementation of OBC reservations in the central education institutions, it is hope that inclusion will be taken forward. The twin issues of inclusion and equity need to be given due importance while making policies for expanding access to higher education. Thus, several social, economic and political reasons seem to act as constraints to access and equity in higher education in India. Enhancing social access as well as to bring equity in quality of higher education is still important in the country.

QUALITY OF EDUCATION

Quality in higher education is another burning issue which can be ensure through regular review of the functions of the institution either through self assessment or through outside agencies and by accrediting the institutions. The expansion of higher education over the years has also resulted in educational malpractices which exist in the form of capitation fees being charged by the private institution at the time of admissions and various other charges imposed upon the students. This calls for suitable assessment and accreditation mechanisms. The various regulatory bodies regulating higher education have constituted autonomous bodies for monitoring quality standards in the institutions under their purview e.g., NAAC, NBA, AB, DEC etc. But, the quality norms of such councils are not comparable with international standards to a certain extent and the enforcement process is not stringent. Quantity and quality of highly specialized human resources determine their competence in the global market. According to a recent government report two-third of India's colleges and universities are below standard. India's highest-quality institutions have severely limited capacity. In order to increase the supply quality should be maintained.

RESEARCH AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Research in higher education institutions is at its lowest ebb. There is an inadequate and diminishing financial support for higher education from the government and from society. Many colleges established in rural areas are non-viable, are under-enrolled and have extremely poor infrastructure and facilities with just a few teachers. A series of judicial interventions over the last two decades and knee-jerk reaction of the government – both at the centre and state level and the regulatory bodies without proper understanding of the emerging market structure of higher education in India has further added confusion to the higher education landscape in the country. There is an absence of a well-informed reform agenda for higher education in the country. A few efforts made now and then are not rooted in the new global realities based on competition and increased mobility of students and workforce.

FINANCING OF HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the most important things that have to be noticed is the issue of financial constraints

regarding higher education before the government. Expenditure on education in general and on higher education in particular by the government, is one of the parameters to judge the quality in education for any nation. In India, higher education has received less attention in terms of public spending than other levels. The Twelfth Plan (2012-17) has chosen an approach to promoting private capital in a manner that will allow profit generation.¹⁰ It is not feasible for India to make massive state investments in research and development that produced research led universities in the west such as MIT, University of California, Berkeley in the US or University of Cambridge in Britain.

SUGGESTIONS

With a view to develop the all-round personality of the students, the educators must adopt the latest teaching methods and techniques of analysis prevalent in advanced countries like USA and UK. This implies a more effective and meaningful tutorial system, use of case studies as illustrations of actual situations, more essay work, heavy reliance on library assignments, seminars, access to computer system, and lesser reliance on the prosaic lecture methods. Ideally, all teachers should be research workers so that the spirit of their research, enthusiasm and inspiration spill over in their teaching. A teacher conducting research remains updated in his subject area and has the advantage of research for the benefit of students and this would improve his teaching skills. Promoting research by the teachers is very much essential and enough resources should be earmarked for the same.

In modern society, where knowledge increases at a radical pace, a transformation in the educational system is called for. Higher education is no more taken as concerned primarily with the imparting of knowledge or preparation of finished product, but with the awakening of curiosity, the development of proper interest, attitudes and values and the building up of essential skills such as independent study and capacity to think, learn and act. There are so many people in various parts of country which are still out of reach. This is when we have emphasize more on our education programs and made our system reachable to all areas. Government has to rethink on these areas to implement more on the policies. Money also plays a vital role for the education system which needs to unique for all globally recognized syllabus and curricula. Take a look on our constitution which says that this is the responsibility of central and state government to build good education system. For that we need to have funds. But despite there was a large expenditure on the funds every year on Education where the fund goes and our system remains intact. Central government prepares policies and plan while responsibility of State government is run those policies on ground. The standard education facilities are higher in the states which are much rich. There is a need to change such defects from the country education system which only can be influenced by increasing funding and providing better facilities to students. But we know there is always increase in the fund for the education system but never implemented in that area. So we have to work in this area. Government tries to make different policies which are implemented but quality never checked. Majority of fund goes in the pockets of officials working for this. There is a vast need to improve the quality and standards.

The time now is to modernize our education system so that our country can get much more technically graduated people which can help our country to developed state. Today's youth always try to go foreign for his higher education as they have much better facilities and quality of their system. Can't we get that quality here itself? We have to stop this brain drainage so as avoid students to run away from country. Our governments trying for various challenges faced but no one is doing well for that. Government came and goes but system remains intact.

There should be inclusion of ethics, values and various aspects of stress management in the

syllabus of higher educational. The courses have to be designed and redesigned according to the changing expectations of the society and industries. The syllabi must be such as to suit the needs of society at large and the recipient should not only acquire knowledge, but also should be able to make use of it. There is an urgent need of building a strong relationship with industry through teaching, research, student placement, problem solving and case study method.

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