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DIMENSIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Higher education means the education beyond the level of secondary education. It is often assumed that education imparted by the colleges or universities are higher education. But in fact higher educational institutions include Professional Schools in the field of Law, Theology, Medicine, Business, Music and Art. It also includes other institutions like Teacher's Training School and Technological Institutions. Today, Knowledge is power. The more knowledge one has, the more empowered one is. A lot has been researched and said about Higher Education in India and many papers have been presented on the same. These have brought forth the fact that Higher Education is extremely diverse and the challenges and issues faced by higher education institutions are just as diverse. The process of education is not merely digesting books. It is also about doing several co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that give a broader meaning to life in general and education in particular. Through this paper the author has attempted to compile and present a comprehensive review of various dimensions of Higher Education in India. The data was collected through secondary sources and analyzed to generate a cryptic and precise report for quick review. The paper also throws light on threats and challenges to higher education in India, current scenario, issues and suggestive measures to overcome them.

KEYWORDS

educational institutions, educational system, higher education, knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Education has a special significance in the context of a quasi-traditional or transitional society like India. India is now considered to be one of the most promising economies of the world. While, higher education gives India an edge in the world economy as evident from the availability of the skilled manpower, and research scholars working abroad, unemployment, illiteracy and relative poverty continue to be the major deterrents to realize her potential in human resources

The key to harnessing India's demographic dividend is education. Indian higher education currently the third largest in the world, is likely to surpass the US in the next five years and China in the next 15 years to be the largest system of higher education in the world. By 2030, India will be amongst the youngest nations in the world. With nearly 140 million people in the college-going age group, one in every four graduates in the world will be a product of the Indian education system. Higher education in India has recorded impressive growth since Independence. University Grants Commission (UGC), by designing programmes and implementing various schemes through academic, administrative and financial support, has contributed in the growth and development of Indian higher education. In India the central Government and the state Governments are trying to nurture talent through focusing on the expansion of higher education. India has certainly come a long way from 28 universities and 578 colleges in 1950–51 to over 500 universities and more than 25,000 colleges at present. Today, the country has the largest number of higher education institutions in the world and close to 20 million students enrolled. As per reports of 2011, there are 227 government-recognized Universities in India. Out of them 20 are central universities, 109 are deemed universities and 11 are Open Universities and rest are state universities. Most of these universities in India have affiliating colleges where undergraduate courses are being taught. However, Jawaharlal University is a remarkable exception to this rule. According to the Department of higher Education government of India, 16,885 colleges, including 1800 exclusive women's colleges functioning under these universities and institutions and there are 4.57 lakh teachers and 99.54 lakh students in various higher education institutes in India. Apart from these higher education institutes there are several private institutes in India that offer various professional courses in India. Distance learning is also a feature of the Indian higher education system (Dr. J. D. Singh).

According to the University Grants Commission (UGC), India still needs 1500 more universities with adequate research facilities by the end of the year 2015 in order to compete in the global market. In the current scenario the country lacks the critical mass in higher education. Its gross enrolment ratio (GER) is a mere 11 per cent compared to China's 20 per cent, the USA's 83 per cent and South Korea's 91 per cent. This means that in comparison to India, China has double the number of students pursuing higher education.

Higher Education unquestionably faces huge challenges. While on one hand there is a need to bring as many young people as possible into the higher education fold, on the other it is required to significantly focus on building quality and global competitiveness. It is a known fact that quality of education has a wide-ranging impact on Employability and labor production.

THREATS AND CHALLENGES FOR INDIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Dr. Manmohan Singh (2005) optimistically forecasted that the 21st Century will be the "knowledge century", by which he referred to the socio-economic transformation that the country was projected to go through in the 21st century as a result of knowledge creation. The prospects and development in the higher education sector in India need a critical examination in a rapidly globalizing world. Other countries are also upgrading higher education with the aim of building world class universities. India's growth story is primarily driven by its services sector which in turn derives strength from skilled labor force. Unless the country has a dynamic higher education system, it faces the danger of losing its competitive advantage not just to China and Brazil but also smaller nations such as Philippines and Malaysia.

While there is a need for an expansion of the higher education sector, resource constraint for both the Centre and the states poses challenge to ensure quality education even in the existing institutions

CURRENT SCENARIO

India's higher education system is the world's third largest in terms of students, next to China and the United States. Unlike China, however, India has the advantage of English being the primary language of higher education and research. India educates approximately 11 per cent of its youth in higher education as compared to 20 per cent in China. The main Governing body at the tertiary level is the University Grants Commission (India), which enforces its standards, advises the government, and helps coordinate between the centre and the state. Universities and its constituent colleges are the main institutes of higher education in India.

India's public expenditure on higher education as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is 0.6 per cent (Ernst & Young-FICCI 2009), which is less than what other nations such as United States (US), United Kingdom (UK) and China spend on a per-student basis. Most of the public expenditure on higher education

is used up on salaries and maintenance of existing institutions. Majority of central government's spending on higher education is allocated to the University Grants Commission (UGC) (around 40 per cent), which in turn assists colleges, mainly in the form of grants for their maintenance and development. Very little is spent on curriculum, research and technology. Only a few institutions, such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), stand as beacons of excellence amidst a sea of mediocrity. Entrance to these institutions is characterized by limited seats on one hand and a mad rush of aspirants on the other hand leading to extreme stress among the aspirants.

Although, Indian Institutes of technology (IITs), have been globally acclaimed for their standard of education. The IITs enroll about 8000 students annually and the alumni have contributed to both the growth of the private sector and the public sectors of India, India has failed to produce world class universities like Harvard and Cambridge. According to the London Times Higher Education report on World University rankings, no Indian university features among the first 100 Universities. This is probably because at present, the world-class institutions in India are mainly limited. Most of the Indian colleges and universities lack in high-end research facilities. Under-investment in libraries, information technology, laboratories and classrooms makes it very difficult to provide top quality instruction or engage in cutting-edge research. This gap has to be bridged if we want to speed up our path to development

Besides, the long queues in front of the colleges as well as the screaming headlines in the newspapers, starkly present the scarcity of capacity in the higher educational sector. The premium that the seats in better colleges for almost all the courses attract is common knowledge. Whilst there are supervisory mechanisms in place we know that supervision many a time means additional side payments. The solution lies in self enforcing system design which in this case would clearly imply removal of structural and overall scarcities through increased capacities

ISSUES

Many IIT graduates, well trained in technology, have chosen not to contribute their skills to the burgeoning technology sector in India; perhaps half leave the country immediately upon graduation to pursue advanced studies abroad, and most do not return. A stunning 86 per cent of Indian students in the fields of science and technology who obtain degrees in the United States do not return home immediately following their graduation. A body of dedicated and able teachers work at the IITs and IIMs, but the lure of jobs abroad and in the private sector makes it increasingly difficult to lure the best and brightest to the academic profession. Consequently, quality of education delivered in most institutions is very poor. There are many basic problems facing higher education in India today. These include: inadequate infrastructure and facilities, large vacancies in faculty positions and poor faculty thereof, low student enrolment rate, outmoded teaching methods, declining research standards, unmotivated students, overcrowded classrooms and widespread geographic, income, gender, and ethnic imbalances. 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, 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

WHAT DO THE EXPERTS SAY?

There is an immediate need to transform the whole system of higher education in India. Education is a seller's market, where there is no scope of incentive to provide quality education. Quality is the key to India's future growth as knowledge economy start dominating. It is here that Indian Higher Education System is being found to be most wanting. In order to have good quality academic institutions, we should follow the best practices in accreditation and assessment. Currently, only a handful of Institutions in India are accredited by NAAC and NBA. This lack of quality, except in a handful of institution, permeates throughout the higher education sector, be it engineering, medicine, Business Administration or in Science, commerce, humanities, liberal arts and law institutes. Only a handful of these institutions make the mark. The total number of higher education seats in India is approximately over 3 Million per year, but those with high quality, may not number much more than 30,000. The problem with the institutes with poor quality is that they fail to inspire the students even to a small extent. The rapidly expanding Indian industry finds the graduates of these institutes lacking in simple skills required for employability. Therefore, on one hand, the industry do not find enough people to employ, spiraling up the salaries and its wage bill; on the other hand, many who graduate do not find ready employment. Thus, another major concern for India is creation of employable workforce to harness our demographic dividend. According to Industry reports supported by NASSCOM, only 25% of technical graduates and about 15% of other graduates are considered employable by IT/ITES industry. Another survey conducted on 800 MBA students across different cities in India revealed that only 23% of them were considered employable. Hence, there is an immediate need for a holistic and symbiotic association between industry and academia to make employable graduates. There is also an immediate need for moving from 'generic model' of education to a 'learner-centered' model of education. The students should be mentored to make their careers in the areas of their strength and abilities. Currently, there are lots of issues regarding governance and autonomy of such educational institutions, which create major road blocks in performance and require urgent attention. There are several legal and regulatory hurdles to create quality institutions in India. For example, ISB Hyderabad is the only B-School from India which features in Top-20 in Financial Times list, but it cannot grant a recognized MBA degree due to legal and regulatory constraints. There is an immediate need for transforming governance and leadership in higher education Institutions.

Faculty members form the core of any academic institution. They should be research focused and properly engaged with mentoring, industry engagement, research and consulting. Quality results require quality teachers. Even the best institutions in the country be it IITs or JNUs struggle to find enough quality teachers. The other institutes find it almost impossible. Many of the new private institutions are the worst sufferers. In many of these institutes, "fresh graduates who fail to get any other job," become the teachers. As soon as they acquire some experience and get a bit better, they drift to industry. This is the main reason that quality is a commodity in serious shortage in our academia. The students are not too bad. Once inspired, many of them are capable of working hard and even work on their own to learn adequately. But most of these youngsters fail to see even one quality teacher and fail to be inspired in any way. Unfortunately, there is clearly a lack of educated educators and teaching is not an attractive profession. It's a last choice in terms of career. Number of Ph.D's produced each year is very low and those required by academia is far higher. In fact, at many institutions fresh graduates are employed to teach, leading to poor quality of classroom instruction. The lack of facilities some time deter the students, but not to the same extent as low quality of teachers. Colleges which lack quality are also incapable of creating an open atmosphere for learning.

Teachers and administrators spend more energy on controlling the students. Overall the academic atmosphere disappears. Often, the poor quality of teachers goes hand in hand with authoritarian and non-accountable administration. This is so both in Government as well as private run institutions. Teachers and administration spend more time on petty things like how to earn little more by setting question papers or taking other outside assignments rather than on educating and inspiring youngsters. As the problem of low quality teachers in these institutions is becoming very apparent, it is often said that the low quality of teachers is due to inadequate opportunity for these teachers to get trained. It is often forgotten that training of teachers in the form of Quality Improvement Programmes has been a major focus in the nation for the last thirty-five years. While training the teachers continuously is important, this often hides the true problem of inadequate compensation. The result of these training the teacher program has been that most of the time when a teacher gets adequately trained, he/she leaves the educational institutes and migrate to the industry. Those teachers, who fail to benefit even from these quality improvement programs, stay as teachers. The only answer to the quality is to make the teaching vocation more attractive. Once this is done, enough bright youngsters will find various innovative ways to train themselves to take up such positions.

Most observers of higher education in India feel that performance of higher education institutions has also been less than satisfactory in terms of access, equity and quality. Responding to these emerging needs, the UGC stated: "The University has a crucial role to play in promoting social change. It must make an impact on the community if it is to retain its legitimacy and gain public support". It seeks to do so by a new emphasis on community based programmes and work on social issues. Concepts of access, equity, relevance and quality can be operationalised only if the system is both effective and efficient. Hence, the management of higher education and the total networking of the system has become an important issue for effective management. The shift can occur only through a systemic approach to change as also the development of its human resource, and networking the system through information and communication technology.

Now there is an urgent need to work for the development of the educational sector to meet the need of the emerging opportunities, increasing younger generation population and challenges of the 21st century.

The required enabling (through regulatory changes) of private sector is a must for the purposes of raising supplementary resources. The private endowments which at one time were significant, have to be restored through incentive based legislation. At the same time the interference of the State in all aspects of education has to be significantly reduced, especially in the 'operations' and procedural aspects. This has been a major cause that led to the Universities being converted to mediocrity. The state must truly practice private enablement with 'oversight from a distance'.

The processes involved in the setting up in the national universities are so long drawn that it will be some time before the plan becomes a reality. Also, and more importantly, the shortage with regard to the requirement of quality faculty is so great that even with physical infrastructure the delivery will not be assured. This requires some bold and innovative thinking and application which requires a key governance initiative. The external agencies like the corporations and industries will have to play a major role, IT enabled distance learning mode as well as the platform for e-learning have to be exploited to the fullest extent. This will require huge organization and collaborative effort of the best minds. Just as in case of fundamental/ foundational courses so also in case of e-learning material creation; we have to identify first rate minds and incentivize them to get involved with the tasks in a time bound and target oriented fashion.

Flexibility has to be understood in various ways, so as to encompass the entire spectrum of stakeholders. These clearly, are the students, faculty and the managements. The students in India are to a very great extent presented with a rigid degree/ diploma system with 'papers' defining the course as given. Academic reforms – e.g., through choice based credit system – need to be carried out. Academic autonomy has to be bestowed. This will mean that students will have the choice to pick and choose various components that would result in a degree or diploma. This is an aspect of capacity (not necessarily to do overall availability but concerned with the structure – viz., capacity to provide access to relevant education. The credibility of courses/ degree, even as a signal, is severely eroded. It has to be understood that the mismatch between the demand and supply that is reported by various agencies is essentially a result of the rigidities inherent in the system. That employability requires imparting of soft skills – including articulation – is well understood. But how will this be achieved when the faculty themselves, by and large, lack in soft skills? Faculty Development Programmes to ensure the development of faculty in order to be good teachers have to be comprehensively designed and delivered in the time-bound system.

Workload of teachers as well as the type and wage contracting while hiring the teachers will need to be flexible. The current practice with regard to the pay structure as well as 'clerical' work ethic is not conducive to face the current challenges. There are no incentives for faculty with quality and excellence, to self select themselves in this sector. Indeed, as a rule, persons with low or no quality find secure cocoons here. Incentive compatibility in wage contracts as well as flexibility in hiring of teachers (enabled through private endowments) is essential if one is to attract good persons to this sector.

There is much to be said for liberalizing the environment that confronts the managements today. The rules have to be clear and unambiguous and the oversight by government has to be non-intrusive. There is clearly no place for harassment in day to day operations.

In the most important aspect of quality, which is clearly of essence in the context of India emerging as a front runner in the comity of knowledge society? We consider the various stakeholders. The subsidy (partial as well as total) is leading students to make wrong decisions about seeking admissions. Reverse discrimination as is currently practiced should be seriously reviewed and modified. Rather than mere access through quotas, it should be strengthened by serious mentoring processes. Otherwise we would be found guilty of doing actual disservice to the students whom we seek to benefit. Teacher training apparatus and research ambience have to be created with serious and focused thought. This has to do with much more than finance. The other requirements such as NET /SET and M Phil/ PhD are so badly designed that there are no elements that test the qualities of the prospective teachers. The on-job training programs (orientation and refresher courses) are little more than a farce and are in serious need of a complete overhaul. There is of course no denying the fact that much public resources and private efforts are expended in their conduct. The pay structures are an example of incorrect pricing that leads to 'right' kind of persons entering the profession. The quotas for jobs in academics should be dispensed with at higher levels or promotions at least. Of course to do this, the Government will have to sacrifice petty politics and indulge in visionary statecraft.

Research is yet another weak ground. Not only do we require first rate infrastructure in terms of laboratories, library resources, equipment, and internet connectivity but also a threshold sized group of dedicated researchers that interact and work and play together. The current regime of organizing lectures of 48 minutes and use every excuse to disallow filling up of vacancies is hardly conducive to creation of research environment. But this is the easiest way for the bureaucrats (who have very little idea about research ethos) to bring about expenditure management. Faith and extreme patience here are of essence. In the current context, with well paying jobs available to the 'good' students, it is difficult to

attract students to research. Indeed, as Kaushik Basu pointed out, most students always went out in search of well paid careers, but what has changed of late unlike earlier times is that even the 'best/ top' students do not enter the field of research. This means that mostly, only the not so good come in to do research – because they have nothing else to do. Ambience apart, it is necessary to use innovative ways to rectify the situation. The research scholarships – not numbers but amounts – have to be seriously enhanced. Also, to attain threshold level groups, multi/ interdisciplinary centers of excellence have to be created. Such centers will be in keeping with the current ethos of research and will have the advantage of reaping economies of scale. Whilst this is a strategy that will find many positive receptors, it is clear that this is well beyond the scope of government alone. It is here that private sector – in an enlightened self interest mode – play a vital role. Privatization in higher education is probably the need today. Take for example the role played by private enterprise in transforming sectors, such as Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Services (IT and ITES), telecom, banking, etc., is evident. Today, IT's growth story has put India on the global economic map. These sectors are shining examples of the progress that can be made when private enterprise is allowed to function in a free and encouraging manner. Unfortunately, the higher education operating environment provides certain challenges which discourage serious players from entering the field.

CONCLUSION

Although there have been challenges to higher education in the past, these most recent calls for reform may provoke a fundamental change in higher education. This change may not occur as a direct response to calls for greater transparency and accountability, but rather because of the opportunity to reflect on the purpose of higher education, the role of colleges and universities in the new millennium, and emerging scientific research on how people learn. It is important to allow non-profit making institutes to bring large-scale investments from Indian promoters and global educational institutes. This step can truly transform the Education sector and India can become the knowledge capital of the world. Now the time has come to create a second wave of institution building and of excellence in the fields of education, research and capability building. We need higher educated people who are skilled and who can drive our economy forward. When India can provide skilled people to the outside world then we can also transfer our country from a developing nation to a developed nation very easily and quickly.

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