

Higher Education in India : Challenges and Opportunities



Education

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Vineeta Agrawal

House No. 4207, I.P. Extension, Part II Sector-49, Faridabad (Haryana)

ABSTRACT

Higher education sector in India is undergoing rapid transformation. Since Independence this sector has grown remarkably. The country now has the largest higher education system in the world in terms of number of institutions, it holds the second largest place in terms of student enrollment. However despite this impressive statistics, there are still many inadequacies that plague the sector. India's GER(Gross Enrolment Ratio) not only significantly lags behind that of developed nations such as US, Switzerland, Japan and UK but also that of developing countries including China, Brazil, Malaysia and Philippines. Rising commodification, substandard quality, inappropriate measures of assessment, lack of focus on quality research and development, poor infrastructure and faculty shortages are some of the enormous issues that the education sector is currently grappling with. This paper seeks to address the challenges before education sector and also suggests actions to be taken to make India a real 'knowledge hub' of the world.

Indian Education Sector: An overview

India's national policy on education, as revised in 1992, states "Higher education provides people with an opportunity to reflect on the critical social, economic, cultural, moral and spiritual issues facing humanity. It contributes to national development through dissemination of specialised knowledge and skills. It is therefore a critical factor for survival."

Knowledge is Power". There is no doubt in the fact that 21st century is going to be a knowledge century, and economic development and human resources development are closely linked together. India being the nation of young people, is full of aspirations and has lot to achieve in the era of knowledge. Indian government has realised that education plays an indispensable role in the empowerment of people social or economic. Earlier higher education used to be seen as a luxury, which was available to few only, but now it is proved that it contributes effectively in national, social and economic development. The presence of quality institutes of learning is seen as a sign of development of the society. While basic level education makes the person literate, higher education makes him stand out, makes him realise his true potential. It acts like a mirror that introduces man to himself and the world and refines his personality. As quoted by Agrawal, P. (2006) in his paper "it is realised that though primary and secondary education is important, it is the quality and size of higher education system that will differentiate a dynamic economy from a marginalised one in the global knowledge based economy."

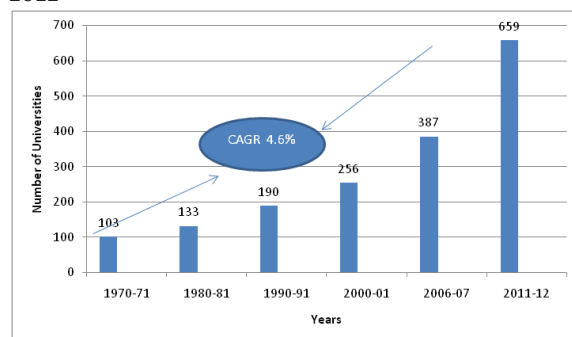
As published in a Report by Pricewaterhouse Coopers Ltd.(pwc) in January 2012 'with a median age of 25 years, India has over 550 million people below at the age of 25 years. According to census figure over 32 percent of the 1.1 billion populations is between the age group 0-14. This means that the number of people in India needing primary and secondary education alone exceeds the entire population of USA. Since these students will be seeking higher education in India, over the next decade, it illustrates the sheer size of Indian education market." It is predicted that by 2030 India's median age will be 32, much lower than China and other developed countries.

The Growth Story of Higher Education in India

India has been always been a land of scholars and learners. In ancient times also, India was regarded all over the world for its universities like Taxila, Nalanda, Vikramshila and its scholars. Pupils from all over the world used to flock for getting education in these institutes. Still the rich and varied literature, skills in art, craft and world famous monuments mesmerises the people all over the world. In 1854, establishment of modern universities in India was first recommended by British colonial administration; universities in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras were setup in 1857. By independence India had 20 universities, 500 colleges enrolling about 2, 30,000 students. Since independence India has progressed significantly in terms of higher education statistics. There is no doubt to the fact that much of the progress

achieved by India in education, has come from private sector. In fact the public sector and private sector is not in opposition to each other but they are working simultaneously in Indian education sphere. UGC is the main governing body that enforces the standards, advises the government and helps coordinate between center and states. The chart shown below depicts the growth of universities in India from 1970 to 2012. The number of universities has grown more than six times in last four decades.

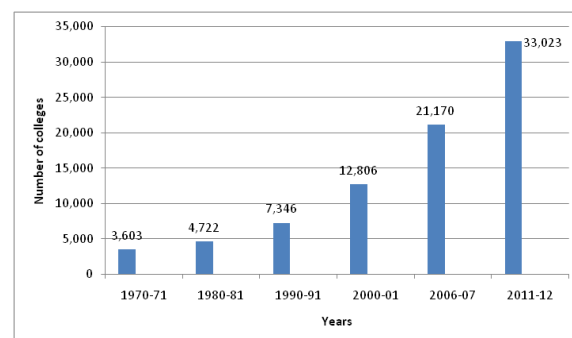
Figure 1. The growth of universities in India from 1970 to 2012*



***Source: Higher Education In India: Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-17) and beyond FICCI Higher Education Summit 2012**

The decade-wise growth in number of colleges has been shown here. Now India has more than 33000 colleges.

Figure 2. The decade-wise growth in number of colleges**



****Source: Higher Education In India: twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-17) and beyond FICCI Higher Education Summit 2012.**

According to Sanat Kaul (2006) ".....with globalisation, there is

a great need for india higher education to provide a platform for gradual integration of its degrees with the best available in the world. This is so because as mobility of skilled manpower increase and India evolves into a knowledge based society, skilled professionals from India will be in great demand both in India and abroad." Some of the key factors that will drive the growth of the sector-

There is huge demand for higher education as 32% of the population in 0-14 year group.

Growing middles class population

India's recent growth has been mainly contributed by service sector and the main strength of this sector is human resource.

Huge demand for Indian student in overseas market

Investment in higher education in India is economically efficient, as the rates of return are fairly high.

The entry of foreign universities in India will boost demand for higher education in India, and it will also help in earning and saving foreign exchange. The competition among institutes will help in maintaining qualitative education.

Critical Issues: Challenging the Sector

'Our university system is, in many parts, in a state of disrepair... In almost half the districts in the country, higher education enrollments are abysmally low, almost two-third of our universities and 90 per cent of our colleges are rated as below average on quality parameters... I am concerned that in many states university appointments, including that of vice-chancellors, have been politicised and have become subject to caste and communal considerations, there are complaints of favouritism and corruption' – Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2007

In spite of the whopping size of the sector all is not well, Currently India's education sector is facing a crisis like situation. Some of the problems being faced by the sector can be enumerated as below.

Low gross enrollment ratio. According to the World Bank statistics, higher education enrollment is a leading indicator of economic growth. When a country substantially increases the number of university student it educates, the country tends to enjoy a spike in economic growth. Since independence in 1947, there has been a significant expansion in higher education. Despite the impressive statistics, the reality is that India has a very low GER as compared to the other developing nations. Currently India's GER stands at 15%(Source: Higher Education In India: twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-17) and beyond FICCI Higher Education Summit) and the government has targeted it take it to a level of 20% by 2020.

Huge demand and supply gap. There is a huge demand for getting admissions in some particular institutes of repute while other colleges and universities lament about the vacant seats of the colleges also there are some courses for which demand is in excess to the available seats while there are excess capacity in others.

Poor focus on research. Highlighting the issue of poor focus towards research, President Pranab Mukherjee said, "India's priorities for research and innovation should be conditioned by our socio-economic realities. The Indian innovation strategy should focus on generating ideas that promote inclusive growth and benefit people at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. Our higher academic institutions should play a vital role in inclusive innovation. They should mentor grassroots innovators for development of their ideas into useful products"

Accreditation. As per the data provided by NAAC not even 25% of the total higher education institutions in the country were accredited and among those accredited, only 30% of the universities and 45% of the colleges were found to be ranked at "A" level.

There are a number of accreditation agencies to take approval from so that has to be done away with a single agency to simplify the system.

Highly examination oriented system. As quoted by Prof. Kulan-dai Swamy, V.C. (2006) "Semester system, credit system and continuous internal evaluation are the basic component of the instructional programme in higher education all over the world but not in India..... It may be difficult to believe but true that till today, this basic universally accepted reform has not been carried out at all. All the recommendations made, and the reforms written do adorn the shelves, are often quoted and pleaded for, but remain unimplemented except in few institutes and that too in few disciplines"

The system of assessment is not adequate to judge a student and it leaves little in the hands of instructor. Instructor is not able to impart his knowledge fully as he has to take account of the pattern of paper and good results of the students. This system has generated another gap which we call now skill gap or the issue of unemployability. It has also aided in mushrooming of coaching centre industry that is a financial burden on the society. There should be a system of assessment all around year and not focused on just one test.

Shortage and lack of qualified faculty. If we take into account the ideal student and teacher ratio, and compare it with India, we will find huge gap. Sometimes the posts remain vacant for years because of approval or lack of funds and sometimes the reason is lack of qualified person. This is also responsible for under-performance of students.

Financial constraint. As quoted by Kareena Bhatia and Manoj Dash (2011) in their paper Public Expenditure (Centre and States) on education is only around 3.6 % of GDP, Government funding of higher education is still below 1% of GDP, The percentage expenditure on university and higher education which was 0.77% in 1990-91 showed a gradual decrease to 0.66% in 2004 to 2005. Various committees have unanimously recommended that state funding should be increased to 6%. India has also one of the lowest expenditure on higher education per student as compared to USA, UK, Brazil and China.

Quality. Expansion in higher education has been at the cost of quality, in that quality varies with institutions. In the year 2012, India did not have a single university among the top 200 on the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) list- the most reputed global ranking of institutions for higher education. For instance, speaking at a conference of vice chancellors of central universities Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that "too many of our higher educational institutions are simply not up to the mark. Too many of them have simply not kept abreast with the rapid changes that have taken place in the world around us in recent years, still producing graduates in subjects that the job market no longer requires. It is a sobering thought for us that not one Indian varsity figures in the top 200 universities of the world today" –

Employability. According to industry reports, only 25% of technical graduates and 10%-15% of other graduates are considered employable by the IT/ITES industries..... According to a survey conducted among 800 MBA students across different cities in India, only 23% were considered employable. (Higher Education In India: twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-17) and beyond).

Discussion

The core issue in our case is not that of allocation in budget or any other thing but lack of sincerity towards implementation of standards. On paper we have made provisions for everything but the reality is starkly different. Nothing is going to happen by just bringing proposals and plans year after year. Political will combined with powerful economic solutions is the key to solve the problems being faced by higher education.

There exists a huge imbalance in 'India' and 'Bharat'. There are regional, communal and gender wise difference. So we have to make sure equal opportunities exist for all. As per data col-

lected by various agencies, India is education nearly 15% of its population for higher education; this figure is abysmally low as compared to other countries and growing demand for higher education in India.

Right now there is a list of accreditation agencies, whose approvals are needed by every university and college and even for starting new courses and increasing the intake of students, pattern of assessment etc. So the autonomy of the educating institute is marginalized this way. So the reforms are needed so that institute can take its academic decisions independently or with lesser interference.

There should be lesser political interference in university and colleges and campuses should be politics free.

The cost of higher education is getting very high, so it has to be taken into account that deserving students get the opportunity to get higher education.

Curriculum and assessment system has to be revised keeping in view the current changes taking place in the environment to be globally competitive.

Skill gap among the graduates has to be taken care of by initiating some industry institute collaborations.

Faculty is the backbone of the higher education, so it has to be ensured that they are available in the right proportions in the institute and they continuously upgrade themselves.

Use of technology can bring efficiency and transparency in the system, so the use of technology at not only administration but also in imparting the education will make commendable progress.

Focus should be on improving the infrastructure of existing institutes.

Significant adoption of PPP (Public, Private Partnership) Model can be a possible solution of some of the problems being faced by the sector.

Conclusion

Government has done considerably well if we analyze the statistics and there are some very good proposals brought by government. In the twelfth Plan government has launched a programme Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhayaan (RUSA), that seeks to improve the overall quality of existing state higher educational institutes by ensuring conformity to prescribed norms and standards and adoption of accreditation as a mandatory quality assurance framework. There are some proposals which are waiting for approval like, Higher Education and Research Bill 2011, National Academic Depository Bill 2011, Foreign Education Institution Bill 2010 there is an urgent need to debate on these bills and make sure that they are passed. India has a long way to go to meet the aspirations of its young population.

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