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Economics

HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Even after 70 years of its independence, India is far away from the goal of universal literacy. Although there are a large number of educational institutions in the country, but they lack proper infrastructure and quality education facilities. The present paper is an attempt to identify and discuss a number of critical issues of higher education in India, to assess the current scenario and the possibilities of meeting the challenges. India has to rise to the occasion urgently and reorient its higher education system to be vibrant, competitive, meaningful and purposeful. The three major areas - *Quality of Education* in terms of infrastructure, teachers and accreditation, *Affordability of Education* in terms of ensuring education to poor and deserving students and *Ethics in Education* in terms of avoiding over-commercialization of education system, are to be focused for sustainability and global competitiveness of Indian Higher Education system.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in India is seen as one of the ways to achieve upward social and economic mobility. However, there is a multitude of interconnected issues that India faces in its higher education system at present, like financing and management, access, equity and relevance, values and ethics, quality of higher education together with the assessment of institutions and their accreditation. Higher Education in India continues to provide graduates that are unemployable despite emerging shortages of skilled manpower in an increasing number of sectors. The standards of academic research are low and declining. Inflexible academic structure, eroding autonomy of academic institutions, low level of public funding and absence of incentives for performing well are well-known deficiencies in the current scenario. These issues are significant for the country, as it is now engaged in the use of higher education as a powerful tool to build a knowledge-based information society of the 21st century.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present paper is an effort to identify a number of critical issues of Higher Education system in India. It is meant to be a modest attempt to assess higher education against the background of the current scenario and the possibilities of meeting the challenges.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is a review of a substantial number of secondary sources and observations on the current scenario and challenges of higher education in India.

Current Indian Higher Education Scenario

Higher Education in India is provided by five groups of institutions: Central, State, Private, Deemed Universities and Institutions of National Importance. The last category includes 52 such institutions which predominantly consist of the Indian Institutes of Technology, National Institutes of Technology and prominent Medical Colleges, including All India Institute of Medical Sciences. There are 47 central universities, 356 state universities, 252 private universities and 122 deemed universities in India(as on 02-12-2016) as listed by the University Grants Commission (UGC), the apex regulatory body for higher education. All the above university groups are legally entitled to grant degrees. State universities are the only institutions that have the right to affiliate private as well as public colleges under them. However, these colleges are allowed to operate only within the individual federal state borders. Private colleges which offer professional courses, that match specific needs of a sector or industry, are often affiliated to state universities. Affiliated colleges are called 2f and 12b colleges and according to the latest figures, there are approximately 9,195 such affiliated colleges in India supported by the UGC. Private universities do not have affiliated colleges, these universities also offer professional as well as regular courses.

CHALLENGES AND IMPERATIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

'Report to the Nation 2006' of the National Knowledge Commission concludes that, 'there is a quiet crisis in higher education in India that runs deep, and that it has to do with both the quantity and the quality of higher education in India'.

Challenges in India's Higher Education System can be seen on the following fronts:

1. **Expansion:**
 - India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education was only 16% in 2012(end of Eleventh plan), which was much below the world average of 27%, as well as that of other emerging countries such as China (22%) and Brazil (36%).
2. **Excellence:**
 - *Faculty Shortage:* There is 40% and 35% shortage of faculty in state and central universities, respectively.
 - *Accredited Institutions:* 62% of universities and 90% of colleges were average or below average in 2012, on the basis of their NAAC accreditation.
 - *Low Citation Impact:* India's relative citation impact in research is much below the world average.
3. **Equity:**
 - There is wide disparity in the GER of Higher Education across states, Gross Attendance Ratio (GAR) in urban and rural areas, and gender and community-wise enrolment.
 - *Inter-State Disparity:* GER of 47.9% in Delhi as against 9% in Assam.
 - *Urban-Rural Divide:* GAR of 30% in urban areas as against 11.1% in rural areas.
 - *Differences across Communities:* GER of 14.8% for OBCs, 11.6% for SCs, 7.7% for STs and 9.6% for Muslims.
 - *Gender Disparity:* GER of 10.2% for females as against 16% for males.

India can achieve its aim of becoming "knowledge economy" by promoting qualitative and inclusive growth in education. The three major areas to be focused to ensure that Indian higher education system is sustainable, inclusive and meets global standards are:

- *Quality of Education* - in terms of infrastructure, teachers, accreditation and relevance for employability.
- *Affordability of Education* – in terms of ensuring education to poor and deserving students.
- *Ethics in Education* – in terms of avoiding over-commercialization of education system.

Improving Quality of Higher Education

In every nation, education is the basic requirement for the socio-economic development of the individuals and the society. So, improved standards should be offered to the higher education institutions by the government authorities with sincere political will. To compete globally in the 21st century, Indian higher

education system should adopt certain bench-marking techniques for improving instruction models and administrative procedures in universities/colleges to move forward. India needs a thorough study and evaluation of models implemented elsewhere and to work out strategies to adopt such models in education system. India is yet to establish world class research facilities, recruiting profound academicians in universities, colleges and research institutions to sustain and forge ahead the rate of economic development.

Making Higher Education Affordable

In a country where majority of the people are groaning under poverty, hunger and increasing prices, the poor and middle class Indians face difficulties in pursuing their higher education. The fee structure in Government owned institutions is relatively economical but is escalating in the recent years. Moreover, in private sector institutions, which have the freedom to prescribe fee structure, the fee charges are beyond the capacity of poor and deserving students. Although, the fees charged by private colleges includes the infrastructural facilities, modern amenities, etc., there can still be provisions of scholarship schemes and tuition-fee waiver schemes by various government regulatory agencies like UGC, AICTE, etc. As such, with the efforts of all these prestigious bodies, higher education should be made affordable to all the poor and deserving students in India.

Enhancing Relevance of Higher Education

Measures have to be taken to enhance the relevance of higher education so that the education system is more demand- driven and forward- looking, especially to retain highly qualified people and meet the new and emerging needs of the economy. There is a huge migration of young talent from India to foreign universities, resulting in a serious drawback for Indian economy. A significant proportion of these students remain abroad after graduation and their academic talents and experience are all lost in India. The overall financial drain on India's resources is considerable and has to be added to the intellectual drain. Hence, an important part of India's strategy for developing its system of higher education should be to make some universities sufficiently attractive to persuade talented young Indians to remain at home, or to return.

Reflections on Opportunities in Indian Higher Education

By 2030, India will be the most populated country in the world, in the higher education age bracket. Increasing urbanisation and income levels will augment demand for higher education. India's economy is expected to grow at a fast pace; rapid industrialisation would require an incremental skilled workforce. Given the expected socio-economic scenario, India would need a robust higher education system that can deliver on multiple imperatives. The following strategies may be suggested in this regard:

Merit-based Student Financing: This would ensure admissions to meritorious students, independent of financial background.

Internationalisation of Education: This would entail aligning different aspects of education (curriculum, faculty, etc.) to international standards.

Enabling a Research Environment: This would involve creating adequate means of research funding, facilities and incentives to researchers and practical applications of research.

High Quality Faculty: The need of the hour is to create a conducive environment and provide incentives to attract and retain high quality faculty.

Improved Technology for Education Delivery: Provision of latest technology for enhancing the teaching- learning experience will ensure better outcomes.

Employability: Making education industry and market relevant and increasing its practicality, would be the right way to ensure a highly employable skilled youth.

CONCLUSION

The challenges in higher education are no longer nation- centric only. They have already attained global dimensions, particularly after trade in services has been brought under the purview of international trade. With the explosive growth of knowledge in the

past century and with the development of information and communication technologies and other scientific innovations, competition has become a hallmark of growth all over the world. Therefore, India has to rise to the occasion urgently and reorient its higher education system to be vibrant, competitive, meaningful and purposeful through transformational and innovative interventions across all levels.

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