HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: INTROSPECTION

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Abstract

The Indian higher education system is facing an unprecedented transformation in the coming decade. This transformation is being driven by economic and demographic change: by 2020, India will be the world's third largest economy, with a correspondingly rapid growth in the size of its middle classes. Currently, over 50% of India's population is under 25 years old; by 2020 India will outpace China as the country with the largest tertiary-age population. With a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 15 per cent, India is still below the world average. With relatively stagnant growth of public sector, private sector now accounts for 63 per cent of the total higher education institutions and 52 per cent of the total enrolments in Indian higher education. Quality and efficiency policy responses and their endeavors have been insufficient accompanied by poor regulations and its subsequent implementation. Multiple regulations and measures have been envisaged by different commissions and committees to enhance the access, quality and equity to face the challenges globally in years to come.

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INTRODUCTION

India's higher education system is the third largest in the world, next to the United States and China.[1] The higher education system in India grew rapidly after independence. Today, Indian higher education is comprised of 33,657 institutions, made up of 634 universities and 33,023 colleges; it is the largest higher education system in the world in terms of the number of institutions.[2] India's demographic trend indicates that it will soon overtake China as the world's largest population, and with an average GDP annual growth of 8% over the last decade, its middle classes that demand higher education will swell to over 500 million people in the next ten years.

There is, indeed, a multitude of interconnected problems that higher education system in India faces; *"Higher education in India suffers from several systemic deficiencies. As a result, it 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."*[3]

With the changing demographics, political, philanthropic and economic environment, the objective of higher education has now a more focused attention on access and equity. In 1994, the World Bank produced a report entitled, *Higher Education*: *The Lessons of Experience*, and followed-up with another report *Priorities and Strategies for Education: A World Bank Review in 1995*. The 1994 report emanates confusion, and uncertainty about its subject matter and ultimately stresses that higher education should not have much priority in development strategies. To quote:

Indeed, it is arguable that higher education should not have highest priority claim on incremental public resources available for education in many developing countries, especially those that have not yet achieved adequate access, equity and quality at the primary and secondary levels. This is because of the priority these countries attach to achieving universal literacy; because the social rates of return in investments in primary and secondary education usually exceed the rates of return on higher education and because investment in

[1] World Bank, *India Country Summary of Higher Education*, Available at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/Resources/278200112170327425 5/1439264119324916 3062/India_CountrySummary.pdf

[2] Agarwal, P. (2006). *Higher Education in India: The Need for Change*, ICRIER Working Paper, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations: No. 180

[3] *Ibid*

basic education can improve equity because it tends to reduce inequalities. (World Bank, 1994, p.3)

Surprisingly, the executive summary of the same document reads:

Higher education is of paramount importance for social and economic development. Institutions of higher education have the main responsibility for equipping individuals with advanced knowledge and skills required for positions of responsibility….estimated social rates of return of ten percent or more in many developing countries also indicates that investments in higher education contributed to increase in labor productivity and to higher long term economic growth essential for poverty alleviation. (World Bank, 1994, p.1)

The manner in which this debate was carried out in India The allegedly low social rates of return on higher education were frequently deployed during 1990s to reallocate public expenditure away from higher education. This resulted in a number of problems. At the same time, the gains to be derived from overcoming these problems

Are shown by a recent World Bank study to be tremendous:

The time is very opportune for India to make its transition to the knowledge economy – an economy that creates, disseminates, and uses knowledge to enhance its growth and development…[4] India currently produces a solid core of knowledge workers in tertiary, scientific and technical education, although the country needs to do more to create a larger cadre of educated and agile workers who can adapt and use knowledge.

This paper is meant to be a modest contribution to assessing, against the background of the current situation of higher education in India. Despite impressive progress over the years, the higher education in India is faced with these challenges:

1. GOVERNANCE AND REGULATION

The Department of Higher Education), under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD is the Apex body of governance, acting as an umbrella organization, consists of fifteen regulatory bodies performing overlapping roles in addition to influences from few other ministries too. It is overregulated, limiting the initiatives for change and misdirecting individual or private efforts. In its assessment of the existing regulatory arrangements, the

[4] Dahlman and Utz 2005

National Knowledge Commission concludes: *"In sum, the existing regulatory framework constrains the supply of good institutions, excessively regulates existing institutions in the wrong places, and is not conducive to innovation or creativity in higher education."*[5]

The judicial interventions also have at several times complemented or contradicted the objectives associated with higher education (Agarwal, 2006). It thus results into ambiguity related to policy understanding, policy implementations, accountability, and answerability.

Thus, the extent and the nature of the regulatory arrangements appear to inhibit both the reform of Indian higher education and the mobilization of additional resources for its further development.

QUALITY AND EFFICIENCY

The quality in many of its institutions is at stake due to chronic shortage of faculty, poor quality teaching, outdated and rigid curricula, lack of accountability and quality assurance and separation of research and teaching. The appointments are almost stagnated in most of the sections of the public sector, left alone expanding the faculty intake in accordance to the ever-growing higher education sector.

External Quality assurance was conceived in India in 1990s as a solution to the deteriorating higher education quality in India. There are three main agencies to evaluate quality of institutions: The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), National Board of Accreditation (NBA) for technical education and the Accreditation Board (AB) for agriculture institutions. It shows that majority of accreditation process is carried out by NAAC but as accreditation is voluntary. The accreditation grading is not associated with either rewards or punishment. Now initiative has been taken to link it with UGC funding.

As efficiency is the product of quality education. Higher education is seen as one of the sources to increase private and social rates of returns thereby justifying the efficiency resulting from pursuing higher education. Conditions of employment may also be looked at as a parameter of efficiency. The Times of India paper in its article, "Unemployment rate at graduation level is 9.4 per cent and that at post-graduation level is 10 per cent. For Urban India it was 8.2 per cent and 7.7 percent respectively. Among SCs, graduate unemployment is

[5] NKC 2007, 54; see also Khemani and Narayan 2006, 4; Kapur and Mehta 2004, Agarwal 2006, 76-102; Kaul 2006

11.3 per cent and post-graduate unemployment 12.7 per cent, while for 'others', the corresponding figures are 9 per cent and 9.7 per cent. Unemployment among graduate and post-graduate STs and OBCs is also higher than for *others*. Across social groups, graduate unemployment among women is above 25 per cent.[6]

FINANCING

The Indian higher education has seen three phases of funding, philanthropic to public, and then to private financing. Even in public sector it's a joint responsibility of Central government as well as State government. India being a developing economy, amongst competing governmental priorities higher education is not treated as priority sector. About 80 per cent of the public higher education funding has been sourced from State governments and about 20 per cent from the Centre. Of the 80 per cent State government funding about 82 per cent goes in non-plan expenditure, i.e. routine administration and maintenance and hardly in any capacity is building. The Central government spending lopsided towards central universities and centers of excellence serving hardly 3per cent of the total students. While the trend has always been upwards, the total public expenditure on higher education at about 1.25 per cent of the GDP, is by any standards certainly insufficient (UGC, 2012).

Even the global patterns of funding also show that higher education remains very much a state dominated sector. In OECD countries such as Denmark and Holland, public funding provides 98 percent of the resources in this sector; the figure is almost 90 percent for Canada. Even in the United States, the figure is as high as 78 percent. There is absolutely no doubt that the public sector has a preeminent role to play in higher education which will be dealt separately.[7]

NATURE OF PRIVATIZATION

The private sector has outpaced the state sector in higher education and is rapidly expanding. Trends show that of the various forms of institutes of higher education that exists, the number supported by public funding have very limited growth (like the central and state universities, aided colleges, etc.) and rather the numbers with private funding have witnessed a speedily rising growth (like the private universities, deemed universities, unaided colleges, etc.) (Agarwal 2006). Within a small duration of five years from 2001–2006 the unaided private

[6] *Higher your education, harder it is getting a job*, Times of India, Delhi18-7-12.
[7] Devesh Kapur,, Ajay.S. Mehta, R Moon Dutt, *Indian Diasporic Philanthropy*

higher education accounted for 63 per cent (from 43 per cent in 2001) of the total higher education institutes and 52 per cent (from 33% in 2001) of the total higher education enrolments (FICCI, 2011). Since 2005–2011, the State Private Universities have witnessed a fifteen-fold rise in the number of institutes from 6 to 94. Of the 130 Deemed Universities, 73 are in the private sector. About 1 per cent of colleges have been granted an autonomous status (FICCI, 2011). Quiet obviously most of this growth of private higher education has happened in the more marketable professional courses like engineering, medicine, management, computer applications. Currently, private higher education universities are growing at 40% per annum and worth $6.5 billion.[8] Many potential private investors are waiting in the wings. The private sector will continue to be crucial in the growth of higher education in India.

ACCESS

Socially, India remains highly divided; access to higher education is uneven with multidimensional inequalities in enrolment across population groups and geographies.

In Indian higher education, about 86 per cent of students are enrolled at undergraduate level and only about 12 per cent are enrolled at post graduate level. Surprisingly, diploma and certificate education has a meagre 1 per cent enrolment as it is considered as an available provision for those who are not able to make it in the mainstream higher education. Unfortunately, for a nation aspiring to become a knowledge economy, a trivial one per cent enrolment in research would not be praiseworthy (UGC, 2012).[9]

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has seen steep growth in recent past decade, which is appreciable considering the ever increasing population and thereby the relevant age cohort in absolute terms. During the last five years the GER has increased more than 5 per cent and for some of the disadvantaged sections of the population it has been much more. With a GER of 15 per cent, India still lags behind world average, the averages of other countries including its growth sharing BRICS nations, and even the average of developing nations. But the GER attainment of 15 per cent is a result of increase in social demand and deliberate policy efforts to improve access (MHRD, 2012).[10]

[8] *Private universities in India: an investment in national development*, The Parthenon Group (2012)
[9] Higher Education in India at a glance, UGC, February (2012)
[10] MHRD (2012), Annual Report 2011-12, Department of School Education and Literacy and Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

POLICY INITIATIVE

In general, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the central and state governments' performance in giving clear direction and momentum to systemic reform, while at the same time, broad support for the government's future plans. There was broad endorsement of the 12th Five Year Plan (2013-17).[11] These three overarching challenges: excellence, equity and expansion, interrelated areas are not new: all have been addressed in various forms in previous five-year plans dating back to 1980. The main difference in the 12th plan is its holistic nature, with a clear focus on quality, or 'excellence', as an overarching guiding principle for expansion and equity. The excellence principle incorporates the diversification of higher education courses in response to changing economic and industry needs, the provision of greater choice and career paths for students and brings teaching quality to the fore, alongside research capability.

* *Excellence*:

Priority issues include improvements in teaching and learning, and a focus on learning outcomes; faculty development to improve teaching; increased integration between research and teaching; more international partnerships in teaching as well as research; better links between industry and research to stimulate innovation; and connecting institutions through networks, alliances and consortia.

* *Equity:*

Further initiatives targeted at underprivileged and underserved populations in society and geography, addressing urban/rural, gender, people with disabilities and community divisions and inequities.

* *Expansion:*

Scaling up capacity in existing institutions, rather than creating many new government-funded institutions; enabling discipline diversity, counteracting the skewed growth towards engineering and other technical subjects; enabling flexible and skills-based learning; ensuring a more even spread across the country; alignment to the needs of the economy; and encouraging private investment.

[11] Twelfth five-year plan, Chapter on Higher Education, Government of India Planning Commission (2012), Available at: *http://planningcommission.gov.in/plans/planrel/12thplan/welcome.html*

CONCLUSION

Considering both the multitude and the magnitude of the difficulties that Indian higher education faces, it would be easy to be overwhelmed by the problems and to despair of finding solutions but at the same time, the tremendous potential of India's booming industry and technology, the considerable progress made in higher education and the scientific research in recent decades will certainly push India to surmount these difficulties. What is at stake is aptly captured Dr. Ragunath A. Mashelkar. As I see it from my perch in India's science and technology leadership, if India plays its cards right, it can become by 2020 the world's number-one knowledge production center, creating not only valuable private goods but also much needed public goods that will help the growing global population suffer less and live better.[12] The entire present problem is addressed and incorporated in the 12th Five Year Plan. The Indian government is planning huge expansion at all levels of education. While there is no doubt that this will be the decade of change at a transformational scale and pace, India's rise faces daunting challenges. The education system as a whole is beset with issues of quality, access and equity, and change is happening in much faster pace.

Nevertheless, India continues to walk its way forward carrying a chaotically huge but more-or-less harmonized higher education system. Higher education does hold many promises for a bright future for India in the years to come.

[12] Raghunath A. Mashelkar, *India's R&D: Reaching for the Top*. Science Vol. 307, No. 5714 (4 March 2005), pp. 1415-1417