

Higher Education Reforms and Challenges in India

Kayte C.N, Kayte J.N, Kayte S.N, Sonwane C.D

Department of Computer Science ,Indraraj College Sillod,Dist Aurangabad-431112

Abstract

The number of institutions and enrollment in higher education continue their rapid growth, but the quality of this education remains uncertain. A small number of statesubsidized institutions attract a thin top layer of talent from each year's cohort. High selectivity of admission to these elite institutions provides a screen valued by potential employers. Domestic and foreign demand for the services of these few thousand students has created an inflated reputation of the overall quality of India's higher education. The number of such graduates remains small relative to the population and the demands of India's economy for educated manpower. Reliable estimates of value-added by higher education, beyond the screening value of admission to elite institutions, are needed to assess colleges and universities, and to guide educational policy. Graduate education—the seed farm of higher education and scholarship—continues in an alarming state of disarray with respect to both quality and quantity. Pressed by budgetary constraints, the government appears to have decided on profit-oriented privatization of higher education as the solution. Political and business classes, with significant overlap between the two, see higher education as a source of lucrative private returns on investment. There is little theoretical or empirical evidence that supports the prospects of success of a for-profit model in building quality higher education. Some recent proposals hold promise of radical reform and renovation, including regulatory restructuring. It remains unclear whether the government has the wisdom, determination, financing, and power to push reforms past the resistance from entrenched faculty and from the political and business classes.

KEYWORDS: India, economic growth, higher education, university, reforms, innovation,doctoral programs, financing, regulation, teacher scarcity, investment

Introduction

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 percent 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.

Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India (2007)

The number of higher education institutions and enrollment continue to grow faster than the population. Today, there are a total of 481 universities in India out of which 254 are State Universities, 130 Deemed Universities, 58 Private Universities and 39 Central Universities. , 130 deemed universities³ , and 16,885 colleges where 9.954 million students are taught by 457 thousand teachers.⁴

The web site of the Department of Higher Education in the Ministry of Human Resource Development in the Government of India proclaims: "India has one of the largest higher education system in the world." While the level and growth of these numbers are impressive, the quality of this education remains uncertain. Measures of quality are difficult to come by. India is

supposed to do well in technical education. The challenge of quality in Indian higher education has many roots. Perhaps the most basic problem, and the most difficult to resolve, is that it fails to attract a sufficiently large number of talented young to the life of teaching and scholarship. Starved of talent, many colleges and universities become either rule-bound bureaucracies or profit-bound commercial enterprises. As all levels of education are public goods in part, a commercial model does not serve society well. Since learning, scholarship, and good teaching do not lend themselves well to bureaucratic control and measurements of performance, attempts to run universities by rules of civil service curtails their ability to achieve their goals.

The challenges of quality in Indian higher education include: (1) inability to attract sufficiently large number of talented young to lives of teaching and scholarship; (2) separation of education from research; (3) inadequate financing; (4) belief in the adequacy of investor-run colleges and universities, and the financial and political power of such investors; (5) short-term profit orientation on education in a large part of the business community; (6) excessive rent-seeking by well-organized groups and dominance of the university-as-employer perspective; and (7) administrative weaknesses and wasteful expenditures.

Challenges of Higher Education

1. Attracting More Talent to Teaching and Scholarship

That Indian academia is not attractive to talented youth is apparent in many ways. During visits to Indian campuses, when one requests student audiences to raise their hands if they plan to pursue a career of teaching and scholarship, barely a hand or two goes up in auditoriums filled with a few hundred undergraduate and graduate students. The occasional lonely raised hand attracts curious and surprised looks, and derisive giggles fill the room. The raised hand drops back to the lap, as the pity and ridicule of friends and colleagues sink in, making clear the oppressive social contempt of an academic career path. Inquiries from vice-chancellors, directors, deans, and department heads reveal the persistent difficulty of filling academic positions with individuals who have the promise

of being inspiring teachers and innovative scholars. India's rapid economic growth of the past two decades followed investments made in education during the previous fifty years. Today, most of the system is focused on undergraduate education to meet the current demand. Few of the top students in India are attracted to careers of scholarship. With its inability to attract even the top one percent of each year's class into PhD programs, the quality of instruction and scholarship in Indian higher education is in decline. India is enjoying the fruit of the educational trees planted long ago, but is not planting enough new trees. Unless it invests heavily in research scholarship and doctoral education today (as the U.S., Europe, and China do), the quality of its higher education will continue

to decline, with serious consequences for its economy. There is evidence that this decline has been continuing for some time. The technology boom may lose steam as Indian firms move their operations to other countries where they can find well-educated employees in large numbers.

2. Separation and Fragmentation of Education and Research

Indian universities and research organizations have been highly resistant to change and innovation, partially because the system is organized as independent bunkers, each guarded against encroachment by the civil and academic bureaucracies residing therein. Two major dimensions of this isolation—instruction and research—and its devastating consequences are worth visiting here.

3. Inadequate financing

Statistics from UNESCO and University Grants Commission show that India's public expenditure on all levels of education, both as a percentage of government spending (12.73% in 2005-2006) as well as a percentage of gross domestic product (3.46% in 2005-2006), is not out-of-line with the expenditures in other developed countries. For example, in 2005, the comparable percentages were, for the U.S. were 13.7 and 5.3. For Japan, the figures were 9.2% and 3.5%. A large chunk of India's budget that might have gone to universities is already assigned to low-productivity government laboratories run, not by criteria of science and innovation, but by rules of civil service. What is left for education is directed to the existing government-run or government-aided colleges, universities, and special purpose institutes designated for specific disciplines. Given the heavy demands of economic development on India's budget, it is unlikely that these percentages can be raised significantly in the near future. How, then, can the expansion of higher education in India be funded?

4. Investor-run colleges and universities

Investor financing of higher education relieves the exchequer of budgetary pressure. However, it also raises new challenges of its own. Investor-financed colleges are feasible, at most, for vocational education, or low-quality professional education that borders on the vocational. Thousands of colleges of engineering, computer applications, and business management have sprouted all over India, promising their students good jobs in exchange for cash. Many of these "colleges" are little more than shops that granting degrees in computer science without computers and in mechanical engineering without machines. Business management, fortunately, calls for little more than a room, some chairs, a chalk board, and a person to stand in front of the class to play the role of the teacher. Visitors to Indian cities can easily spot signboards of many such "universities" from far away states that are offering classes in a few rooms of a residential flat. Given the fast growth and prevalence of this form of higher education, it is not surprising that the recent World Bank-FICCI survey, mentioned earlier, found that almost two out of three persons holding engineering degrees in India are not employable in that capacity.

5. Attitude of the Business Community

The Indian business community appears to believe that entrepreneurial investors can do well for themselves financially, while doing good for society, by opening and operating for-profit colleges of higher education: We've still got time to make amends. It starts with dismantling yet another shibboleth: That education should be run only by not-for-profit trusts. Now, here's my contention: Why not allow some of India's leading corporations, be it the Tatas, Birlas, or even Wipro, to set up for-profit institutions? Many of them are genuinely interested and they'd be a good deal better than the assortment of unscrupulous politicians and dubious entrepreneurs who have used these entry barriers to dish out poor quality education and fleece students. Under the existing model, no corporation can set aside large amounts on education without running into corporate governance issues Gupta (2010).

6. Rent seeking and Universities as Employment Agencies

A well-functioning system of higher education is a place for learning and personal growth to help individuals attain their potential. In India, the focus on learning yields, perhaps understandably, to acquiring the degrees required for employment in government and private sectors. What is less understandable is that universities and colleges are seen, especially in government, primarily as opportunities for the employment of academic and non-academic staff. Actual value added, in the form of learning by students and innovation through research and interaction with various segments of society, takes a back seat to getting a diploma and securing employment. The dominance of this "university as an employer" perspective is reflected in the single short paragraph used by the University Grants Commission (UGC) to introduce the prestigious Indian Council for Agricultural Research, available on the UGC website:

Administrative Perspective and Wasteful Expenditures

1. Physical versus Human Resources
2. Every Ministry is in Education
3. Regulatory Waste
4. Political, Civil Service and Commercial Control
5. Indian Constitution and the Political Power of Teachers
6. Enforcement of the Societies Act
7. Resource Use and Productivity
8. Public Good Aspects of Higher Education
9. Internal Governance and Evaluation of Faculty
10. Personnel Policies

Reform Proposals

Reforms for India's higher education will have to be found within India. Outside solutions are not acceptable to a proud society, and they attract immediate counter arguments as to why they would not work. Nor are they likely to work. There is evidence that the top policy makers in India recognize the urgency and importance of reforming

the higher education system in India. The Yash Pal Committee Report and legislation to open India to universities from abroad are indicative of a change in the thinking of the policy makers. Yet formidable obstacles remain. Investor-run colleges and universities have the power of money and politics behind them, and it will not be easy to divest them of the profitable franchises already granted.

Concluding Remarks

The Indian economy and higher education must be viewed not merely in relation to its own past, but also relative to its neighborhood and the world. Comparison with universities in other parts of the world, including Asian universities, which were easily outranked by their Indian counterparts a few decades ago, is not favorable. The 2010 survey by the London Times Higher Education Supplement shows no Indian universities in the top 100, although there are 16 from Asia, and only two in the top 200, whereas Asia as a whole has 32. These two are the Bombay and Delhi IITs, and their research output is barely noticeable. The 2005 survey by Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Institute of Higher Education lists only three Indian universities among the top 500 in the world, compared to 18 from China and eight from Korea

References

- Anonymous. "PhD Survey: Student's Perspective on Doing a PhD in India." http://www.cse.iitd.ernet.in/~jalote/misc/phd_surveyIITK-D-B.pdf accessed on July 18, 2010.
- Apoorvanand. 2009. "The Future of Ideas," The Indian Express, September 1.
- Agarwal, Pawan. 2006. Higher Education in India: The Need for a Change, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, (www.icrier.org/publication/working_papers_180.html).
- Altbach, Philip G. "The Asian Higher Education Century," International Higher Education No. 59 (Spring), pp.3-5.