

Higher Education in the 21st Century: Issues and Challenge

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Abstract

The higher education system in India has grown in a remarkable way after independence, to become one of the largest systems of its kind in the world. We now live in an increasingly diverse, globalized, and complex, media-saturated society. Despite of that, the system has many issues of concern at present, like financing and management, adequate infrastructure, technology and research, access and equity, safeguarding of national academic standards, ethical relevance, improvement and enhancement of quality of higher education together with the assessment of institutions and their accreditation. Under-investment in libraries, information technology, laboratories, and classrooms makes it very difficult to provide top-quality instruction or engage in cutting-edge era. These issues are important 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. With significant improvements in school education and higher education programs such as SSA, RMSA and RUSA, it is the right time to address the higher education system in the country. The urgent need has been to address the shortcomings of the entire process of converting youth into educated and well groomed citizens. At present, there is a vast need to analyse critically our higher education system and to measure for making India a knowledge-based democratic and wisdom society.

Key words: Higher education, Quality education, 21st Century, Indian higher education

Introduction

Education in India is seen as one of the ways to upward social mobility. Good education is seen as a stepping stone to a high flying career. India possesses a highly developed higher education system which offers facility of education and training in almost all aspects of human creative and intellectual endeavors. Indian higher education system has undergone massive expansion in post-independent India with a national resolve to establish several universities, technical institutes, research institutions and professional / non-professional colleges all over the country to generate and disseminate knowledge.

The rapid growth in the sector, both in terms of enrolment and number of institutions has thrown up new challenges of maintaining quality of higher education. Various new initiatives are being taken by state and central government to increase the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education. India educates approximately 20 per cent of its young people between the age group of 17-23 enrolled in higher education as compared to 30 percent in China and 91 percent to South Korea. At present, the world-class institutions are mainly limited to the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and perhaps a few others such as the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. There are a small number of high quality institutions, departments, and centres that can form the basis of quality sector in higher education. None of its universities occupies a solid position at the top. A few of the best universities have some excellent departments and centres, and these colleges are countable. These institutions have only one per cent enrolment of the student population.

Present Scenario of Higher Education

India's higher education is managed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the various councils. The UGC, set up under UGC Act 1956, has been empowered to promote and coordinate university education in India and also approve grants to them. The UGC is responsible for coordination, determination, and maintenance of standards and release of grants to universities and research organizations. Various professional councils are responsible for recognition of courses, promotion of professional institutions and provision of grants to undergraduate programmes. In the last six decades, the higher education sector in India has witnessed exponential growth, both in terms of the number of institutions and the rate of enrolment. While talking about the growth in student enrolment, the recent UGC report states that in 1950-51, when there were only 3, 97,000 students enrolled in all disciplines in 750 colleges affiliated to 30 universities. Now, the growth of higher education in India has been phenomenal. As of 6 September 2016, India had 784 universities (47 central universities, 353 state universities, 123 deemed universities, 246 private universities etc.), around 100 institutes of national importance, over 45,000 colleges and about 13,000 stand alone institutions. The state with the most universities is Rajasthan with 73 universities and it has the most private universities (42). India has one of the largest higher education systems in the world comprising numerous stand-alone technical/professional institutions with annual enrolment in excess of 25 million students. Education System in India currently represents a great contradiction. On the one hand we have IIMs & IITs that rank among the best institutes in the world and on the other hand there are number of schools & colleges in the country that do not even have the basic infrastructure. Even more than 66 years after independence we are far away from the goal of universal literacy. But on a positive note, Indian professionals are considered among the best in the world are in great demand. With about 50% of the Indian population below the age of 25 years, and an estimated 150 million people in the age group of 18-23 years. The structure of degree-granting institutions is cumbersome primarily due to affiliation and funding sources. More than 85% of students are enrolled in bachelor's degree programs with majority enrolling in three-year B.A., B.Com. or B.Sc. degrees. One-sixth of all Indian students are enrolled in Engineering/Technology degrees.

The world has fast shrunk to a common platform of education and learning. Today, Indian higher education institutes offer a wide array of courses in various streams and some of the courses have gained global recognition. The IITs and IIMs are recognized among the world's best institutes. India has also gained a footing in the field of research. It is then heartening to know that some Indian universities like Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Indian Institute of Management (IIM) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) have been listed in the world's top two hundred universities. In the field of finance, Indian School of Business, Hyderabad has been ranked number 12 in the global MBA ranking by Financial Times, London. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India is still about 20%. The National Knowledge Commission, a high-level advisory body to the Prime Minister, has projected a requirement of 1500 universities and 45000 colleges to achieve this target. Higher education has given ample proof of its viability over the centuries and of its ability to change and to induce change and progress in society.

Despite the recent growth, we have not yet touched upon the idea of dismal global impact of our institutions pertaining to research and enrolments from across the globe. The Times Higher Education (THE) Magazine, UK, world reputation rankings list shows the world's top 100 universities based purely on their academic prestige. According to the London Times Higher Education World University Rankings powered by Thomson

Reuters (2015-16), no Indian university features among the first 100. But universities in East Asia have been included in the first hundred. Hong Kong has three, ranked at 45, 71 and 80; Singapore two ranked at 26 and 86 and South Korea two ranked at 45 and 90th position. Notably, China's Tsinghua University and Peking University are ranked at 18 and 21 respectively.

According to The India Reputation Rankings, Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore, is in the first position, followed by IIT Bombay, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), IIT Kanpur and IIT Delhi respectively. The University of Delhi takes the sixth place — the first full-fledged university on the list.

According to the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings (2016-17) IISc, Bangalore is ranked globally at 152 with a 49.4% score with IIT, Delhi making it to 185 and IIT Bombay to 219. IIT, Kanpur, Kharagpur and Roorkee are ranked globally at 302, 313 and 399 respectively. Universities of Delhi and Mumbai are ranked above 500. In contrast, China has four universities in the top 100 with Peking, Tsinghua and Fudan placed at 24, 39 and 43 and Shanghai Jiao Tong University at 61. Quite shockingly, no Indian university has made it to the top 100 universities of the world today.

In India, we have clear evidence that quality is not there and this is reflected in educational institutions where most of the graduates do not end up finding a job. During the last few years, universities have increased manifold and colleges have mushroomed all over our country to impart higher education. Mushroom growth, lured by placements in software organisations, donations to obtain seats and mafias running educational institutions is the order of day in India. Having realised the importance of the higher education sector, the Government has increased its focus to introduce a number of reforms to straighten out some key irritants.

Problems and Challenges in Higher Education

The aim of higher education is to prepare a person to play his part well, as an enlightened member of society. Rabindranath Tagore rightly said, “The higher education is that which does not merely give us information, but makes life in harmony with all existence”. India has a large higher education sector — the third largest in the world in student numbers, after China and the United States. This in itself is a remarkable achievement. It has significant advantages in the 21st century knowledge race. But the severity of challenges that the system faces is exceedingly high, daunting, and at times looks insurmountable. The challenges confronting the Indian higher education system are also challenging, complex and have different hues. One of the fundamental weaknesses of the system are lack of transparency and recommendations has been made to mandate high standards of data disclosures by institutions on performance.

About 62% of universities and 90% of colleges were average or below average in 2010, on the basis of their NAAC accreditation. In this scenario, a conflicting picture arises with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's words (2007), “Our university system is, in many parts, in a state of disrepair. In almost half the districts higher education enrollment are abysmally low. Almost two third of our universities and 90% of colleges are rated below average in quality parameters...”. Unattractive compensation packages, lengthy recruitment procedure, and working environment not conducive to retention are some other problems faced by higher educational institutes. As a result, a substantial proportion of high-ranking students who could fill up such assignments prefer to work elsewhere or go abroad. Most institutions offer outdated programmes with inflexible structures and content.

The GER and quality education are always related to increase in nation's wealth, GDP and The GER and quality education are always related to increase in nation's wealth, GDP and prosperity. At present, India has a gross enrolment ratio of close to 20%, which is much below the world average of 27%. There is also a big challenge before Indian government to increase the gross enrolment ratio, or GER, in higher education to 30% by 2020 from the current level of around 20% and this would require an additional capacity of about 10 million to be created over rate that is common in developed countries. With the explosive growth of knowledge in the past century and with the development of handy tools of information and communication technologies as well as of other scientific innovations, competition has become a hallmark of growth all over the World.

India's main competitors especially and South Korea are investing in large and differentiated higher education systems. They are providing access to large numbers of students at the bottom of the academic system while at the same time building some research-based universities that are able to compete with the world's best institutions. Infrastructure facilities range from inadequate to dismal. Classrooms are often unattractive and laboratories inadequately stocked, leading to poor teaching. It is estimated that barely 20 per cent of the institutions have the basic minimum laboratory equipment. Steady electric power supply is not available in many universities and computerization, where it exists is generally dependent on poor communication lines.

Unfortunately, we are lacking hugely in terms of quality output from our higher education institutes. This can be confirmed from the fact that barring exception of few institutes mentioned above very little world class research gets published from other institutes, very few new innovations comes from Indian soil. In India, number of research parks is in single digit and patent application from Indian researchers received very little in comparison to China and Japan in 2013. There is 40% and 35% shortage of faculty in state and central universities, respectively. India's relative citation impact is half the world average. Many private colleges levy charges midway through the course of study by when the student has no choice but to pay up; they advertise achievements of the college which are false; they promise to offer courses without any intention to actually do so. This need to be severely punished has also a big challenge in higher education. There are currently around 20 separate education bills awaiting approval in the Indian Parliament, with the majority of them focused on higher education. In the current world scenario new inventions, modern technologies, growing economy and competition is the order of the day. In this emerging global era, India has another issue to position itself as a knowledge driven economy. It is with the aim of providing solutions to these challenges and of setting in motion a process of in-depth reform in higher education worldwide. A new strategy for meeting this challenge needs to be evolved with complete policy commitment on the part of the Government because service sector export requires a steady supply of highly skilled manpower which can only be supported by a robust Higher Education System.

Some Measures for Improving Quality of Higher Education

The role of higher education in the growth and progress of a nation has been well recognized for centuries. There are many areas where we need reform higher education. Our main aim must be to nurture excellence instead of spending a disproportionate amount of energy trying to curb the lack of it. It is the responsibility of the UGC to maintain the quality of our higher education and research. The country needs skilled and trained faculty and researchers for making India superpower in the world. For this, there are some possible measures for improving quality in higher education:

- In India, the first step towards improvement should be taken at school level with aptitude
- ❖ In India, the first step towards improvement should be taken at school level with aptitude tests being introduced to know where the interest of the student lies. These students should then be encouraged to join those fields of interest.
- ❖ India is a promising investment market and itself has to step up its efforts to create investor confidence and build an enabling investment climate.
- ❖ Indian government should take steps to give more students access to a college education. The goal now is to more than one and half the number of 18 - 23 year olds who enroll in higher education, from the current estimated 20 percent to 30 percent. According to the HRD Ministry, to achieve this goal, India will need to add more than 45,000 new universities and colleges in the coming decade.
- ❖ E-Learning appears to be a fast emerging mode of global entry at the present time. The Universities and other Institutions of higher education can design their web sites for offering online education worldwide.
- ❖ Indian institutions and regulators should restore transparency, coherence and confidence in the higher education system both at home and abroad.
- ❖ Laboratories should be updated and obsolescence in equipment/facilities should be removed on a regular basis. Innovative practices related to examination reforms should be empirically tested and institutionalized. All the examination processes should be computerized and recent advances in ICT should be exploited to make the process automated and efficient.
- ❖ Emphasis should be laid on not just increasing the number of higher education institutes but Centre of excellence. Great stress must be laid on good infrastructure and facilities. Achievers in every field should be rewarded adequately.
- ❖ Libraries should be fully equipped with the latest books, journals and periodicals. A library must be online and conducive for serious study. Make available high quality e-text books, e-reference books, e-research papers and e-content in different languages free of cost to genuine learners.
- ❖ Most of the areas identified for export of higher education are directly concerned with industries. Therefore, Central and State Governments should introduce a range of programmes and incentives designed specially to improve the links between Universities and Industry. The Universities and National Institutes of higher Learning should design their courses in collaboration with industry and such courses be updated regularly, e.g., every year, according to need.
- ❖ Multi-disciplinary mission mode research and innovation programmes should be evolved in association with arts, humanities and social sciences which should directly benefit the society. In order to achieve this, every University should allocate a certain proportion of their annual budget as an earmarked budget for research and innovation.
- ❖ Public Private Partnership (PPP) is most essential to bring in quality in the higher education system. University Grants Commission and Ministry of HRD should play a major role in developing a purposeful interface between the Universities, Industries and National Research Laboratories (NRLs) as a step towards PPP.
- ❖ The need of the hour is to create a conducive environment and provide incentives to attract and retain high quality faculty. India with its third largest higher education system can become an educational super power through knowledge based society.
- ❖ The RUSA and State Higher Education Councils should play key role to undertake the process of planning, execution and evaluation, in addition to other monitoring and capacity building functions. The UGC should, likewise, produce and publicize ratings of and information about all

- ❖ The UGC should, likewise, produce and publicize ratings of and information about all universities and institutes of higher education. This should be a detailed, annual exercise and be prominently available on a website.
- ❖ There must be better mechanisms to evaluate the quality of teaching. Each higher education institution should define its mission according to the present and future needs of the society to reach the necessary level of sustainable and environmentally sound economic and social development.
- ❖ There should be regular monitoring and evaluation of teaching and research in the Universities and other Institutions of higher learning.
- ❖ To remain competitive, India must grow its pool of skilled workers by improving and expanding access to higher education.
- ❖ Working facilities and workload of teachers should be as per the international norms. Knowledge and skills must be developed with a view to provide relevance and meaningfulness. Teachers should be encouraged to attend various Conventions, Conferences, Seminars and Workshops in their disciplines to update their professional knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

Higher education is of vital importance for the country, as it is a powerful tool to build knowledge-based society of the 21st Century. It is widely recognized that the existing data base on higher education is inadequate, out-of-date. Higher education can play an instrumental role in the achievement of these outcomes through the creation of knowledge networks, research and innovation centers, corporate-backed institutions, and support for faculty development. Society as a whole must support education at all levels, including higher education, given its role in promoting sustainable economic, social and cultural development. UPA-II wanted to change the face of higher education through a slew of legislations but all fell through in Parliament. The BJP manifesto has promised a revamp of regulator UGC, which BJP-led government should be able to implement them. Research and extension activities so as to balance both the need and the demand. Creative solutions-like online courses and foreign university partnerships put India in a position to grow its higher education sector dramatically in the coming years.

In conclusion, it may be said, the Higher Education System in India while critical for the development of the economy is afflicted with some serious concerns. It is a long way from a transformational change which is envisaged by various committees. Finally, this is the time to consider steps to make India into the world's major hub for higher education in the 21st century.

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