

HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA : ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Education plays a vital role in human resource development and it is the backbone of the growth of any country. Higher education is the key to India's aspiration of presenting itself as a knowledge-driven economy. But the picture is not that bright, as the education system in India contains many systemic deficiencies at present, like financing, access, equity, quality and relevance to the present demand of industry, which will prove to be a hindrance in building a knowledge-based information society in the 21st century. The global competitiveness of Indian industry depends on the availability of required skills and trained personnel; for example, the requirement of soft skills for the human capital, which is missing from our system. Also, over the past years we have ignored the importance of the study of humanities in the development of our human resource because of its lack of employment potential. In the present scenario, if India aims to become a super power, it will have to work assiduously on its higher education because of two reasons. Firstly, it will have the largest population in the world in a decade and hence it has to capitalize on its demographic dividend. Secondly, due to expansion of industry and service sector as its driving force, it will require a well-trained workforce. One of the solutions could be to corporatize the higher education, with emphasis on introduction of soft skills to enhance the employment potential and to improve the governance in public as well as private institutions. This paper aims to highlight the issues in higher education system in India and suggest remedies for increasing its effectiveness to meet the employment challenges.

Introduction

In 2007, the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made an observation about the abysmal state of the state of education in India. Our university system, he said, is in a state of disrepair. In almost half the districts in the country, higher education enrolments are abysmally low. To add to it, almost two-third of our universities and 90 per cent of our colleges are rated as below average on quality parameters. In many states, university appointments, including that of vice-chancellors, have been politicised and have become subject to caste and communal considerations. There are credible complaints of favouritism and corruption.

India has one of the largest higher education systems in the world, with 25.9 million students enrolled in more than 45,000 degree and diploma institutions in the country. It has witnessed particularly high growth in the last decade, with enrolment of students increasing at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 10.8% and institutions at a CAGR of 9%. Moreover, the government intends to achieve enrolment of 35.9 million students in higher education institutions, with a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 25.2%, by the end of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan period through the co-existence of multiple types of institutions including research-centric, teaching and vocational ones. The private sector can be expected to play an instrumental

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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 (Twelfth Five-Year Plan Document, 2012).

Economic Survey, 2011-12 presents some valuable statistics on the education sector:

During the Eleventh Five-Year plan, education sector witnessed one of the biggest expansions of university education. This expansion comprises 30 central universities, 8 Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), 8 Indian Institute of Management (IIM), 10 National Institute of Technology (NIT), 20 Indian Institute of Information Technology (IIIT), 374 model colleges, 98 private state universities, 17 private deemed universities, 7,818 private colleges and 3,581 private diploma institutions. (*Economic Survey*, 2011-12).

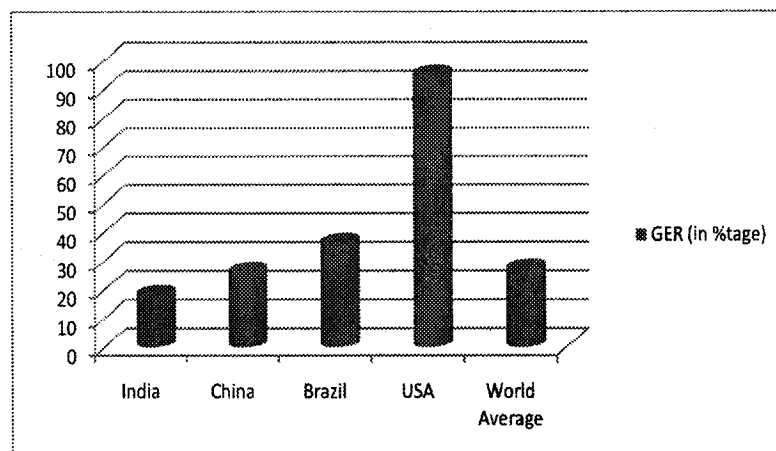
It needs to be recalled that India's Education Policy Document, 1986 and Action Plan, 1992 for higher education have been governed by five broad goals. These included enhancement of the enrolment rate; provision for equal access to all, specifically educationally backward classes; enhancing quality education and promotion of relevant education. The present educational structure, regrettably, lacks access, quality, equity, exposure and job-orientation. This will certainly have a repercussion on the demographic dividend, which India aims to reap in the long run. Even the National Knowledge Commission has suggested that India cannot sustain its impressive rates of economic growth without fundamental reforms in its system of higher education.

Systemic Deficiencies in Our Higher Education System

According to the London Times Higher Education (2009)-Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings, no Indian university features among the first 200 (Singh, 2008). On the other hand, Indian higher education system is the largest in the world in terms of the number of institutions, with 646 universities and more than 33,000 degree colleges; third largest in terms of enrolment, just behind China and US (*Business Standard*, 2012). In spite of all this, the state of education in our country remains disappointing, mainly due to the following factors.

Expansion

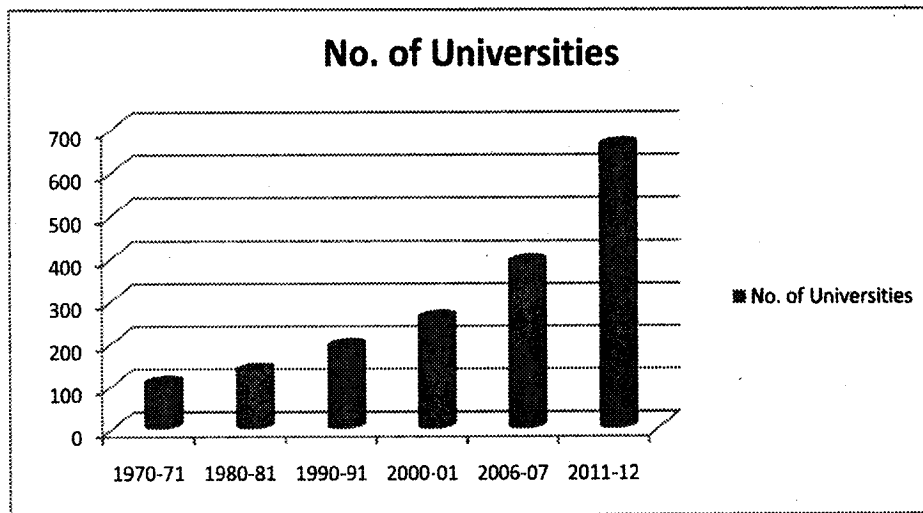
It refers to the availability of suitable number of institutions across regions. The GER indicates the capacity of education system to enroll students of a particular age group. A higher GER indicates higher participation and a low GER shows poor accommodation of specific-age population in the system. (UNESCO, 2009). In terms of GER, India (18%) stands much



Source: Twelfth Five Year Plan Document, 2012

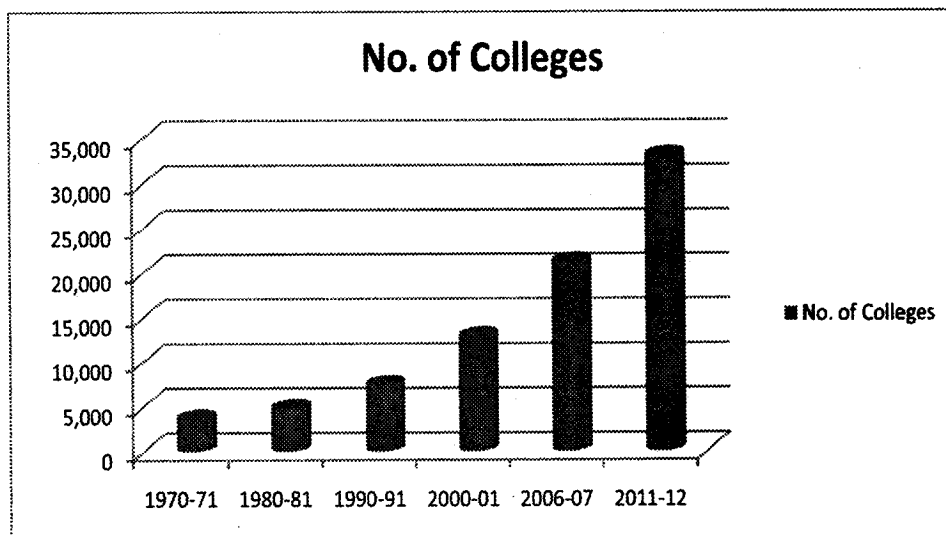
below the world average (27%), as well as in comparison to USA (95%) and other emerging economies such as China (26%) and Brazil (36%) in 2010. Here, it is important to note that the 12th Five- Year Plan aims at increasing the GER to 25 percent by 2017.

The number of universities has grown more than six times in the last four decades (from 103 in 1970-71 to 659 in 2011-12) at a CAGR of 4.6 percent.



Source: Twelfth Five Year Plan Document, 2012

India has more than 33,000 colleges, one-third of which was setup in the last five years. It grew at a CAGR of 5.6 percent from 3,604 colleges in 1970-71 to 33,023 in 2011-12. (Higher Education in India: Twelfth Five-Year Plan and Beyond, 2012)



Source: Twelfth Five Year Plan Document, 2012

Excellence

It refers to the provision of suitable infrastructure, trained faculty and effective teaching style in higher education institutions. This has been a real problem in our education system. We rank second in the world after China in terms of enrolment of students in higher education institutions. But, the standard of education is very low in comparison to other developed or emerging countries. Leaving apart IITs, IIMs, and few central universities, our higher education institutions are extremely incompetent and backward. The majority of the state universities and colleges are incapable of producing skilled labour force. We are lacking in quality, as indicated by low-citation impact, mainly due to faculty shortage and lack of accredited institutions. There is 40% and 35% shortage of faculty in state and central universities, respectively. India's citation impact is half the world average. The emphasis on quantity has had a deplorable effect on the quality because resources are spread too thinly. In comparison to several Asian countries, the most funded universities or research institutes in India receive no more than a fraction of the funds available to their counterparts (Times of India, 2010).

Equity

Access to higher education is another major issue in India, considering its large and growing population. Equity implies equal opportunity for all sections of society to participate in higher education. Rural India lacks access to higher educational institutions and this increases the burden on urban infrastructure. Also, there is a wide disparity in the GER of higher education across states and in the Gross Attendance Ratio (GAR) in urban and rural areas. Disparity is noticeable also in the areas of gender and community. There is a 30 percent to 11.1 percent urban-rural divide respectively. Differences across communities are also prominent, with GAR of 14.8 % for OBCs, 11.6% for SCs, 7.7% for STs and 9.6% for Muslims. Gender bias in favour of males is high with 19% GAR for males and 15.2% for females. This data shows that there is still inequity in access and delivery of higher education. This implies that we need to work a lot on the inclusivity of education as well.

Financing

Resource crunch is a serious obstacle in higher education. According to NSS data, the share of the government expenditure (both state and central) increased from 49 percent in 1950-51 to 80 percent in 1983, but came down to 67 percent in 1999, while private expenditure on education has risen 10.8 times in the last 16 years. At present, India is spending 3 percent of its GDP on higher education, of which 1.2 percent is from public and 1.8 percent from private sources. The 12th FYP target is to increase the public spending to 1.5 percent of GDP. Other sources of financing, besides the government, have to be developed so that the massive expenditure required for expanding, improving and bringing it to world standards, could be carried out. There is a dire need for the government to redefine its role within sharper contours and hence keeping it to manageable proportions. For example, the government should use its resources by prioritizing on foundational areas, like liberal arts, languages and humanities as well as basic sciences, where it is difficult for students to find a job. On the other hand, professional courses are more popular because of their employment potential. Another problem in public funding is that, under the Millennium Development Goals, India is committed to provide universal primary education. This is a gigantic task which requires huge funding. This will prove to be an obstacle in increasing its budgetary outlay for higher education.

Employability and Higher Education Mismatch

There exists a dichotomy in our system. On the one hand, our educational infrastructure is inadequate to cater to the demand for higher education; on the other hand, from our middle and lower level institutions, we are churning out many more graduates who cannot find suitable employment. The main factor behind this is that the opportunities for viable employment are limited and there is a mismatch between the degrees available and the demand for employment. Thus, there is a chronic over-supply of graduates but a shortage of skilled labour force, resulting in unemployment of graduates in conventional areas. Hence, employability requires imparting of soft skills which includes the skill of articulation. But, how can this be achieved when we do not have sufficient resources, co-relation between industry requirement and course structure, or qualified faculties. According to NASSCOM-Mc-Kinsey Report 2005, not more than 15 percent of graduates of general education and 25-30 percent of technical education are fit for employment, on account of the lack of skilled teachers (Jaypee Business School, 2008). Hence, there is a dire need to align the higher education curriculum with the industry needs and global practices, and to make it more inclusive. Making education, industry relevant and practical will be the way forward in order to ensure a highly employable talent pool.

Industrial sector should be encouraged to collaborate with educational institutions in order to develop dedicated human resource. This could happen in the areas of creating infrastructure, faculty development and direct support with funds. This will give the much needed support to the industry specific demand. Hence, there is a need to make our education system more demand driven to meet the emerging needs of the economy and to keep its highly qualified human resource within the country.

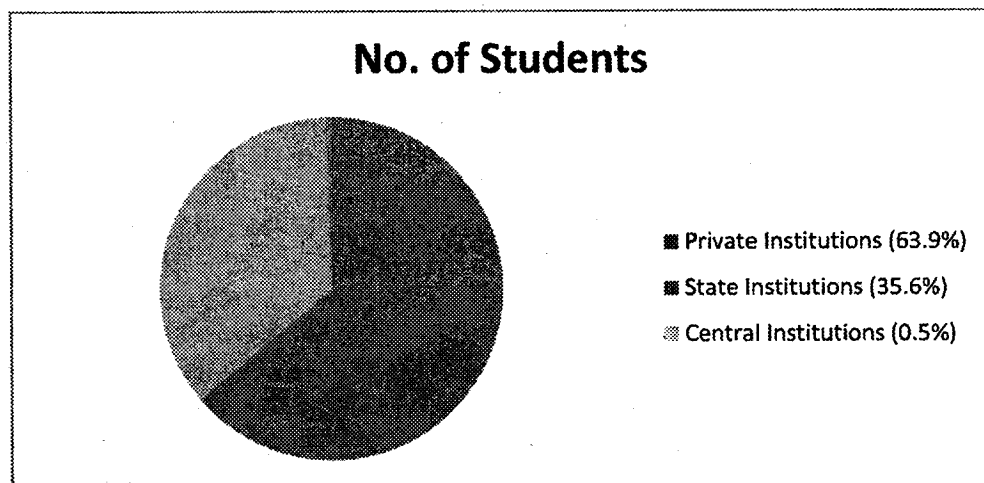
How to Strengthen the Higher Education System?

Privatization in Higher Education

The present condition of government colleges is extremely poor. Teachers are being involved in all sorts of activities, except teaching. On the other hand, because of handsome salary and job security there is no interest among the teachers to perform their duties. The standard of education is very low in state universities and government colleges; hence, they are reduced to degree-providing institutions. There is no creation of skilled or employable man-power for the country. This increases the burden on the few privately-owned quality institutions and central universities.

A partial privatization of government colleges can be a solution to improve the standard of education in India. The government colleges in urban areas should be given to private institutions/trusts with full administrative and functional autonomy, while being affiliated to state or central university. This will lead to better education delivery as the institutions will work with full efficiency to maintain its brand image while seeking profit. Here, the students who belong to economically backward class should be financially assisted by the government through loans and grants. This will reduce the burden on the government of running colleges in urban areas, and help in shifting the much-needed resources to rural areas where there is an acute shortage in quality institutions.

Private universities like Azim Premji University or established institutions/societies like Xavier's, for example, can be given preference while handing over the existing government colleges in both urban and rural areas. As of now, our majority higher education institutions are privately owned with a minor chunk owned by the government. Consequently, the private sector has the largest student enrolment.



There is a fear that excess of privatization will lead to commercialization of education, which is happening in the field of professional courses, such as management, medicine and engineering. This might lead to reduction in the quality of education, because the private institutions might become a factory of mass-producing graduates of poor quality, while focusing on minting money. This will be more harmful. Hence, government needs to think about the regulatory aspect here. Close monitoring by the government is the key to achieve inclusive and qualitative education.

Internationalization of Education

Policy makers need to align our education system with that of the global institutions, so that our students can compete with the foreign students and this will enhance the standard of our education as well. This can be done by aligning the curriculum, faculty exchanges, etc. An initiative of Karnataka government requires a mention here. Under the Azim Premji University Act, 2010 University of Bangalore will offer post-graduate and post-doctoral programmes (Masters in Education Policy, Masters in Assessment Methods, Masters in Philosophy of Education and M. Phil in Philosophy of Education) to create experts who can design educational policy and can join the government or District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) or universities or NGOs.

Research Environment

India has an unimpressive research environment in all the streams of education. There is no motivation for the scholars to devote their precious time to research in India. The scenario is different in the developed nations like the United States, Germany, France, etc. There, the scholars are very well paid and supported with a proper infrastructure for research. This has been one of the main reasons for the brain-drain also. Government should provide adequate funds for research and create adequate means for the practical application of research, in order to create an environment for research in India and to motivate the scholars. Kaushik Basu recently pointed out that the majority of the university toppers of late are unwilling to enter the arena of research because it is underpaid in India. Hence, students of average merit engage in research because they have nothing else to do. This has further contributed to the deterioration the level of research.

Inclusive Expansion

Our focus should be on promoting education in low GER states like Rajasthan, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Orissa, Haryana, Mizoram, and Sikkim. Also, the government must try to reduce the rural-urban disparity by opening colleges in rural areas. Government should focus more on rural areas, by giving preference to vocational courses. Also, there is an urgent need to reduce the disparity among different communities so that the access to education is enhanced.

Conclusion

Education, being a public good, is one of the major responsibilities of the government. But, regrettably, the government has failed in it miserably. The government colleges and state universities are in shambles and this has compelled the government to seek the help of private sector in this area. A two-member committee on higher education, comprising two leading industrialists - Mr. Kumarmangalam Birla and Mr. Mukesh Ambani - strongly argued that the government should handover much of the higher education to the private sector and confine itself to primary and secondary education. In this direction, the Twelfth Plan has chosen an approach that will promote private capital in higher education with an eye on profit generation - a stance contradicting present policy. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC), India needs 1500 more universities with adequate research facilities by the end of the year 2015 in order to compete in the global market. Also, the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) report highlighted the need for setting up of 50 National Universities with augmented resources leading to capacity enhancement. The private universities' bill, which allows establishment of self-financing universities, is in the pipeline too. (Pethe, 2008). Singapore, China and the Gulf nations are examples of countries where private institutions have been allowed and the higher education sector is flourishing.

We should look at the US as an example. The US has been the undisputed economic leader since the Second World War. Its education system has been the backbone of its economic growth, with special focus on higher education and research. For example, Columbia University is credited with 47 Nobel prizes. Companies like Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard (pioneer of Silicon Valley), Yahoo and Google were started by university students. Venture capital was another pioneering initiative that started in the US. This emphasizes, need to think out-of-box to establish our country as one of the global power. There is no magic wand and no easy solution to our problems. But, it is the duty of the government, along with the private sector, to carve out a roadmap that benefits the ever-growing population, so that it does not become a burden. Hence, the government needs to be the facilitator rather than a doer.

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