

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

India is regarded as a country of high demographic dividend and if the dividend is not managed properly, it may lead to disaster. So, to keep the momentum of GDP growth rate intact or to make it better, India needs to invest in its human capital by investing in education. Moreover, this investment is also required to change the socio-economic structure of a vast majority of population who do not have access to higher education. Nevertheless in spite of various measures taken by the government there exists many problems like wide disparity with respect to gender equality, interstate disparities, and disparities among various ethnic groups. Moreover, there also exist disparities in employer's needs vis-a-vis supply made by the education sector. The paper aims to emphasize the need to coalesce the employers' expectations in the education sector to meet the challenges of employability crisis in the youth and also suggests various measures. The measures include a need to introduce semester system at graduation level, an advocacy for the initiation of a four-year degree course with special emphasis on research and focus on research to enable the education sector to anticipate and face newer challenges raised by globalization.

Introduction

India is regarded as a country of high demographic dividend and if the dividend is not managed properly, it may lead to disaster. So, to keep the momentum of GDP growth rate intact or to improve it, India needs to invest in its human capital through an investment in education. Moreover, this investment is also required to change the socio-economic structure of a vast majority of population who do not have an access to higher education. Since Independence, India has witnessed a tremendous increase in higher education, but with GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio) of 17.9% in higher education, India still lags behind the world average. India now needs both better economic growth and higher education to sustain its demographic dividend; otherwise this demographic dividend will become a rebound for India. Pratibha Patil, President of India, rightly stated in her speech at Indian School of Business at Hyderabad (4th July 2011). "Its a worrying sign that even though the 3rd largest number of graduates in the world every year is produced in India, only 15 percent of our boys and girls passing out of college have the skills required to become employable! This brings in concerns that students are getting degrees, but not getting employable hands-on skills".

A close study of the history of the developed nations would reveal that there exists a direct relationship between higher education and nation building. In the next few decades, India is expected to have the world's largest set of young people with more than half of the population under the age group of 25, but this working-age population can be an asset only if its potential employability is brought to fruition. Conversely, if the state does not harness the endowment, this demographic group can turn out to be a heavy burden on the economy, thus hindering the growth of the nation as well.

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This paper shows that in spite of various measures taken by the government, there exists wide disparity with respect to gender, ethnic groups and interstate differences. Moreover, there is also imbalance in employer's needs and, what is supplied by the education sector. The paper seeks to establish that there is a need to address the employers expectations in the education sector and to meet the challenges of employability crisis among the youth. It suggests various measures for the same. There is, for example, a need to introduce semester system at the graduation level, to advocate for the initiation of a four-year degree course with special emphasis on research, to focus on research to enable the education sector, to anticipate and face newer challenges raised by globalization.

India's higher education system now needs to be better aligned to industry and global practices, to be more inclusive and transparent, and supported by enabling regulations.

An Overview of Higher Education System (HES) in India

The critical moments in higher education in India, at present can be traced back in history when India followed the Washington Consensus model, without examining the suitability of such a model for our nation. At that time probably our nation was ready to adapt this model. During the last decade India implemented higher educational reform as a response to globalization and competitive knowledge based global economy. After confronting years of ineffective quality control in India's education system, the University Grants Commission (UGC), in 1994 established an autonomous entity called the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), as a mechanism to control the quality of higher education in India. India's higher education system is the third largest in the world, next to United States and China (World Bank, 2012). The statistics of the year 2011, shows that India has 42 central universities, 275 state universities, 130 deemed universities, 90 private universities, 5 institutions established and functioning under the State Act, and 33 Institutes of National Importance (UGC, 2012). There are 33,000 colleges as government degree colleges and private degree colleges. Out of them, 1800 colleges are exclusively for women, functioning under these universities and institutions as reported by the UGC in 2012. Currently, 14.6 million students are enrolled in higher education. An additional capacity of about 25 million seats will be required over the next decade to meet the increased demand. This requires huge investments.

"The investment required in higher education is more than Rs lakh crore if we want to achieve 30% GER (target of twelfth Five Year Plan). This includes the cost of setting up more institutes, infrastructure and salaries". According to an estimate of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration.

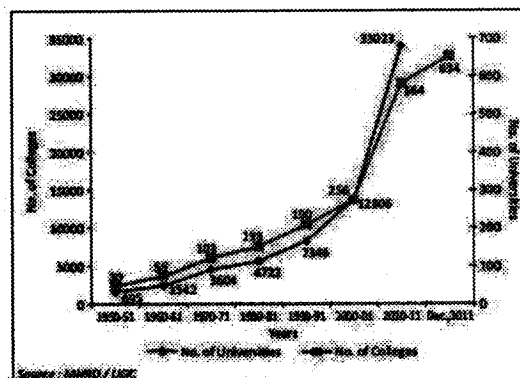


Figure 1: Growth of Higher Education in India
(Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development / UGC)

Figure 1, shows the number of universities and colleges established in India over a period from 1950-2011 and the growth figure shows that growth has been fast from 2006-07 onwards. In terms of number of universities and colleges, India has done well over the past few decades as it has created thousands of higher educational institutes which number more than five times that of China; whereas in terms of universities, China has more. China has primarily grown its higher education with the help of universities, numbering more than 2300, whereas in India, there are only 600 universities having more than 33000 affiliated colleges under them. This is the largest number of affiliated colleges in the world, and is 10 times more than that of China. The majority of these universities and colleges in India are private and do not receive financial support from the Indian government.

The University Grants Commission has taken initiatives to rectify the fundamental lapses in the Indian higher education system. This seems to have positive impact on the education system in India. The plan mandates that those autonomous colleges that show promise will be identified as "colleges with potential for excellence" (CPE) and upgraded into universities. To this end, the UGC has allotted over Rs1, 84,740 crore. The guiding idea is to ease the load of universities which are typically over burdened in terms of limited budget and administration of more colleges and students than is adequate. Parallel to the idea is the goal of greater autonomy to existing colleges and universities. It does so in very concrete terms: universities are not to have more than fifty affiliated colleges; further, the total enrollment is not to exceed 50,000 students.

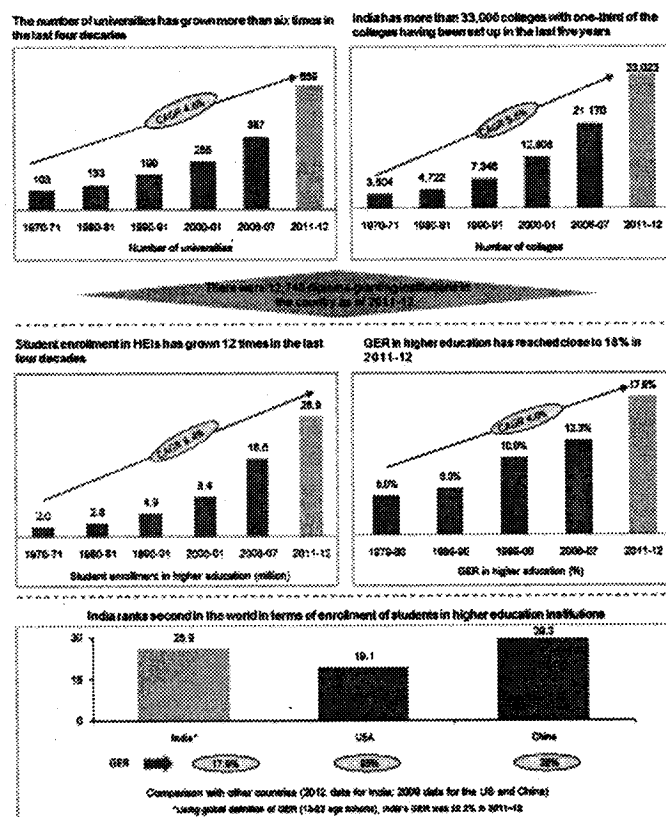
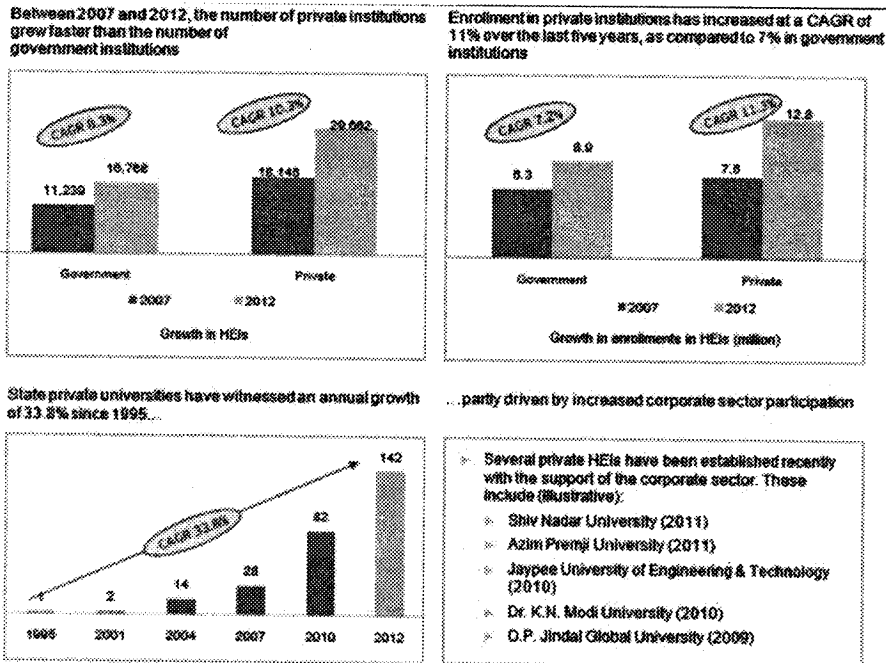


Figure-2 Twelfth Five Year Plan

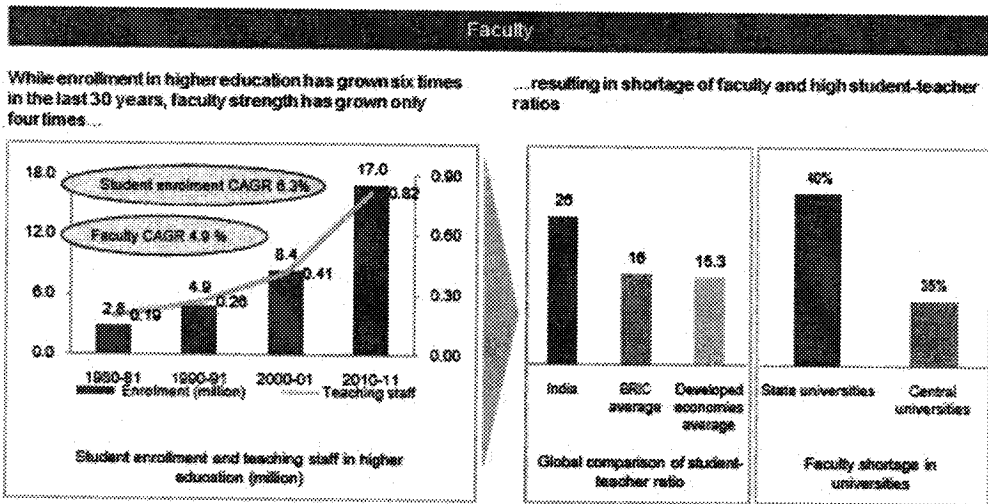
Source: MoE of India, Twelfth Five Year Plan: Chapter on HE, UNESCO: Global Education Digest 2011. National Center for Education Statistics USA)

Figure 2 shows the growth in the number of universities and colleges from 1970-2012. The growth has been faster since 2006-07.



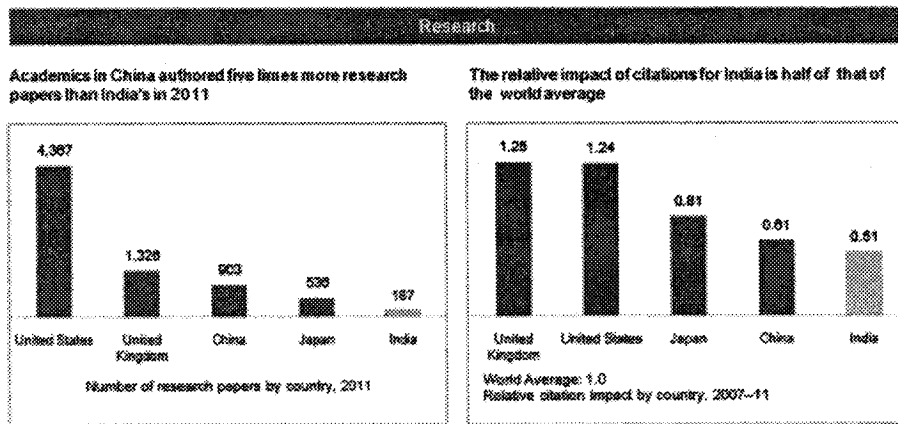
Source: Twelfth Five year plan: Chapter on higher education: UGC

Faculty shortage – According to the twelfth Five Year Plan there is 40% and 35% shortage of faculty in state and central universities, respectively. Moreover, a recent task force of the HRD ministry said the lecturer-to-student ratio in the country is 1:20.9, against 1:13.5 recommended by the University Grants Commission, at 1:12 for postgraduate students and 1:15 for undergraduates. The shortage of faculty stands at 3 lakh at present.



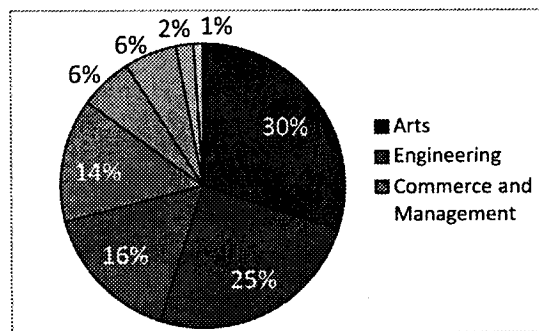
According to twelfth five year plan research universities that are able to participate in research and teaching in multiple disciplines will be promoted. A legislative framework for setting up "Universities for Research

and Innovation" is being considered. The government intends to have 20 such universities, which are either created or converted, by the end of the Twelfth Plan.



Faculty-wise Student Enrollment in Higher Education – 2011-12

Around 30% of the population pursue their graduation in Arts, followed by 25% in engineering, 16% in Commerce and Management and so on. The study found that, poor graduates—lack skills for employability only 10% of graduates and 25% of engineering graduates are directly employable. Infosys, an IT giant, last year sorted through 1.3 million applicants only to find that around two percent were qualified for jobs. Moreover, increasing number of students are going abroad for higher education due to lack of opportunities in India, which is a drain on foreign exchange resources. While countries like Brazil, Japan, UK and US moved away from liberal education in favor of technical and professional education earlier on, India rose to the possibilities far later. Powar (2012) states that in the year 2007-08, Humanities/Social Sciences accounted for 45% of the student population, engineering and technology only 7% and Medicine a meager 3%.



*2009-10 statistics ** Excludes enrollment in 'other' courses

Source – Twelfth five year plan

Recommendations

The chief aim of higher education is to enhance employability. The government had planned an expenditure of INR 1,107 billion on higher education during the Twelfth Five-Year Plan, 1.3 times higher than the planned expenditure in the eleventh plan. However, expenditure always does not ensure efficiency. What we need in addition is to make certain changes in the education system, some of which are suggested below:

- Scaling up capacity in existing institutes rather than adding new institutes.
- All Indian universities should be encouraged to shift from the current annual examination system to semesters with choice-based credit system (CBCS), comprehensive and continuous evaluation and regular revision of curricula to ensure its relevant to changing time.updated and relevant curricula.
- Four-year undergraduate courses (in place of three-year courses) should promoted, to provide holistic education and opportunities for intellectual exploration. It should include hands-on research, experiential learning, as well as ethical and leadership education, community service, creative thinking, education on acquiring.
- A globally compatible academic credit system and internationally recognized curricula and processes should introduced.
- Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) should be explored and developed to meet the future demands.
- There is a need to coalesce the employer's expectations in the education sector to meet the challenges of employability crisis in the youth

Conclusion

Earlier, the development of a nation was measured in terms of high GDP, possession of nuclear weapons, or national income. But now as per World Bank statistic, higher education (HE) enrolment is the principal indicator of economic growth. Increase of economic growth of a nation can be measured by the number of university students it educates with high quality standards. So there is a need for reforms in the education sector so that it meets the employment challenges in the competitive era of globalization. It is not a quantity, but quality-based education system which empowers youth for self-sustainability by inculcating in them employment skills. This is the need of the hour. Better employment opportunities to the educated unemployed will not only help in using demographic dividend effectively, but will also help in fighting with the problem of poverty. A mere graduation degree will not help the youth in fetching a job. What is more essential is, skill building. Knowledge augmented by skill will help in ensuring a job, to these graduates.

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