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CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: ACCESS, EQUITY AND QUALITY

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Abstract:

The future of any nation resides with in the walls of education system, that plays a proactive role in developing and nurturing an individual's intellect, character and value system. Higher education is of paramount importance for economic and social development. It is of vital importance for the country as it is a powerful tool to build knowledge based society of 21st century. With the growing size and diversity of the higher education sector particularly in terms of courses, management and geographically coverage it has become necessary to develop a sound data based on higher education. The Indian higher education has emerged as one of the largest in the world with 14.6 million students enrolled in more than 31000 institutions. At present programme wise students enrollment percentage is 86%, 12% and 1% at Undergraduate level, Post graduate level and Research level respectively. The Gross enrollment Ratio (GER), of 13.5% compares quite poorly with 84% in USA and over 40% in several European countries and more than 20% in many developed and developing countries. Moreover only 161 universities and 4,371 colleges had been accredited by NAAC, in which 9 % were graded 'A' 68% were graded 'B' and remaining 'C'. The paper in this context highlights the "Challenges and Perspectives of Higher education in India: Access, Equity and Quality."

KEY WORDS:

Higher education , Access , Equity , Quality.

INTRODUCTION

"In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity- it is a pre requisite."

(Barack Obama)

Education in all its forms and at all levels is the single most potent instrument of social, economic, political and cultural transformation. Education in general and higher education in particular are fundamental to the construction of a knowledge based society. Higher education is of paramount important for the country development.

The future of any nation resides with in the walls of education system, that plays a proactive role in developing and nurturing an individual's intellect, character and value system. Higher education is of paramount importance for economic and social development. It is of vital importance for the country as it is a powerful tool to build knowledge based society of 21st century. With the growing size and diversity of the higher education sector particularly in terms of courses, management and geographically coverage it has become necessary to develop a sound data based on higher education. The Indian higher education has emerged as one of the largest in the world with 14.6 million students enrolled in more than 31000

institutions. At present programme wise students enrollment percentage is 86%, 12% and 1% at Undergraduate level, Post graduate level and Research level respectively. The Gross enrollment Ratio (GER), of 13.5% compares quite poorly with 84% in USA and over 40% in several European countries and more than 20% in many developed and developing countries. Moreover only 161 universities and 4,371 colleges had been accredited by NAAC, in which 9 % were graded 'A' 68% were graded 'B' and remaining 'C'. The gross enrollment ratio (GER) has increased from 7.2% in 2004-05 to 13.58% in 2009-10. The Paper in this context highlights the challenges and perspectives of higher education in India with emphasis on access, equity and quality and also highlights some reforms to overcome the problems.

CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Poor quality

With a few exceptions, the majority of our colleges and universities are palpably in shambles in terms of quality. Shortage of faculty of high caliber, ineffective teaching methods, outmoded curricula and evaluation system, lack of appropriate reading materials, poor infrastructural facilities, inefficient retain talented minds and absence of academically conducive atmosphere are some of the factors which adversely affect the quality of our higher education system.

Rising unemployment and ample employment avenues

The score of unemployed youth is increasing day by day and it has exceeded millions in the country. Around seven crore people in the country are either unemployed or under-employed, the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) has said in its latest report. As per the latest survey conducted by NSSO during the year 2009-2010, the number of unemployed or under unemployed persons on usual status basis in the country was 95 lakhs and about six crore respectively. The most agonizing concern is that though we are talking about promotion of education in the nook and corner of the state, but no importance is given for how to absorb the educated youth. As ample employment avenues is created for the graduates coming out of higher education institutions.

Poor Grading

In terms of international grading of academic output based on publications, citation of faculty and patents applied for and granted, we fare poorly in comparison to even some developing countries. However no Indian university not even an IIT, figures in the top 100 universities / institute of higher education's academic ranking of world university, or in the top 100 of the 2009 times higher education worlds universities ranking.

Low contribution to Research

India's total contribution to world research papers remained is a dismal two percent as per Statistics provided by the ministry of science and technology in 2003. India faces shortages in qualified research personal in educational institution, in national laborites and in industrial R&D units. In India the number of scientists and engineers engaged in R&D is close to 157 per million. On the other hand, countries like Korea have fifty times more and the U.S and Japan have about thirty times more scientists and engineers.

Moreover UGC Report (2008) on Higher education has projected enrolment for the 11th plan period (2007-12) in general education as 11,671,000 students at the UG level, 1,116,000 students at the UG level and only 78,000 students at the PhD level. That is, only 0.6% of the student goes on to the PhD level.

Low expenditure on Higher education

An asymmetry in the allocation of funds within the various stages of education can be observed. For example, in primary or elementary education the Government has given more focus, where in the higher stage of education the fund allocation is proportionately rather low. According to the Knowledge commission's note on higher education at 0.7% GDP the current support for higher education has been viewed as simply inadequate. It has been estimated that government should form at least 1.5% of GDP out of a total of 6.00% allocated to the education sector.

Diverse geographical locations

Most of the IT development has been geographical located around certain metropolitan and urban areas, increase their densification and their ability to create, attract and accumulate more capital. This has prevented the territorial dispersal of tertiary sector and service industries, and of wealth generation and consumption, across the state and restricted access to transformative technologies to an elite group.

Starvation of funds

It is a fact that almost all the universities in India are starved of the funds, What with nearly 70 percent of the budgets is spent on salaries and superannuating benefits, and about 15 percent on medical reimbursement, electricity etc. What is left is hardly 15 percent. With such meager resources at their disposal, can we expect our universities to counter the potential threat of the foreign or private universities?

Shortage of teaching faculties

45% of the positions for Professors, 51% positions of Associate Professors and 53% of Assistant Professors positions are still vacant in Indian universities. There is clearly a lack of educated educators and teaching is not an attractive profession. It's a last choice in terms career. In fact at many institutions fresh graduates are employed to teach. The national institutes of technologies and management is also suffering from the problem of shortage of teaching faculty as teaching profession looks to them unattractive. They are migrating to highly paid IT and other sectors. Thus, the best talent is migrating to the corporate sector instead of education sector.

Low expenditure on students' education and high cost of higher education

Another measure is to compare the public expenditure per students across countries. It is noted that where as developed countries spend close to US \$ 10,000 per student per year, developing countries spend less than US \$ 1000 per student, and India spends merely US \$ 400 per student. The unit cost of the higher education particularly is quite high and has gone out of the reach of the Indian middle and lower classes. Many private entrepreneurs have started educational institution for offering creamy courses with marketing approach and have raised fees not affordable to all

Unaccredited institutions

Accreditation mechanism is not a daily menu in the university and the affiliated colleges. Evaluation by extension bodies like NAAC looks fearful and it is never a professional outlook that evaluation, accreditation and grading are the stimuli to growth. The system likes to keep its information system hidden and tears of self assessment and display the self of the system to the public. As of now March 2011, only 161 universities and 4,371 colleges had been accredited by NAAC.

Low Gross enrollment ratio

USA	UK	SWEDEN	JAPAN	CHINA	RUSSIA	INDIA
84%	59%	82%	55%	23%	71%	13.5%

Although India is demographically rich with its vibrant workforce, it still has less than 14% Gross enrollment Ratio (GER), which compares quite poorly with 84% in USA and over 40% in several European countries and more than 20% in many developed and developing countries. So, this low GER is obstacle for the economic advancement of country.

Poor private participation

There has been significant private initiative in higher education in several states particularly in engineering, management and teacher education programmes. Instead of proving the point that private participation increases access and improves quality of higher education, majority of private institutions have come under severe criticism for poor quality of education. On the contrary, there is gross

commercialization by many of these institutions providing low quality education at a much higher cost. Lack of Vocational courses and career oriented courses and importance is given to educational employability

Even though India ranks high in the community of nations in terms of scientific and technical manpower, it also ranks high in terms of under employment of persons with high educational qualification. Seen from an economic standpoint this amounts to a gross wastage of human resources that India can ill afford. The main cause behind this is still we are going with those subjects which has low utility to our manpower.

Reforms to overcome the challenges of higher education in India

Promoting Research culture in UG levels

Research culture at UG level shall unleash and ignite the power of innovation and creativity, for example Delhi Technological universities' research at UG levels provided a number of innovation design such as Hybrid car, Super mileage vehicle, Unmanned Aerial vehicle, Autonomous underwater vehicle, Autonomous aircraft systems. It is a healthy sign and our institutes of technology should also take the task of research and innovation at UG level.

Autonomous colleges

To expand more colleges, more universities, more research programmes, more teachers, more facilities soon and so forth has been felt as the need of the hour. Moreover it would be a better idea if affiliated colleges should be separated from the universities and creation of community colleges can be seen as a revolutionary step for bringing the Knowledge revolution as reality.

Introduction of courses in the emerging area

Introduction of courses in the emerging areas, this practice is prevalent in all the leading institutes in the country including the IIT's, BITS Pilani, Delhi technological university etc., where in courses in the emerging areas of high relevance to science and technology developments and relevant to the country's industrial and economic development are identified, developed and introduced in the course curricular, both at the UG and PG levels.

Teacher's evaluation by students

This practice is prevalent in all the IIT's and in a number of reputed institutions, where in every teacher is evaluated by the students for the subject he/she teaches, The evaluation should be specific and aimed to assess the academic performance of the faculty, his command on the subject, his communication skills and the way he greets the teaching learning environment. This should be done both for theory as well as practical subjects.

Industries sponsored laboratories in institutions

Establishment of specialized laboratory in the engineering colleges as this practice is prevalent in universities abroad. So our Institutions of higher education should pay a great attention to this aspect by setting up sponsored laboratories of World class companies like BHEL, NTPC, IOC, GAIL, Hewlett-Packards, HCL, in the colleges of engineering and technology. At least one laboratory in each department should be established under sponsorship of the industry; this will promote frontline technologies and bring industries close to the institution.

Special policy interventions

As statistics on gross enrollment ratio and access rate according to various parameters are too disturbing to invite special Policy interventions, aimed at providing equal access to all irrespective of caste, religion, gender, economic, status and the like.

Part time PhD for Teachers teaching in Institutes of higher learning

The system of higher education needs to reframe the educational institutes by some flexible plans such as encouraging in-service teachers for research by providing opportunities for part time Ph.D both to permanent faculty as well as faculty on contract, For example, the Graduates of Indian School of mines can register themselves for Ph.D even working in industry, even the industrial experience is also reduced from five years to two years in this exercise.

Establishment of Educational Regulatory Authority

While restructuring the role of bodies like the UGC to grant of funds to the higher education institution, an Educational Regulatory Authority like the IRDA and TRAI, that have been immensely successful in fostering the growth of the insurance sector and the telecom sector, should be set up to enhance academic standards and facilitate the desired growth of the higher education sector.

Industry universities collaboration

Industry university collaboration is catching up in the country with deemed university likes the Vellore Institute of Technological (VIT) setting up technological incubation centers in their campus. The other academic bodies like IIT'S And IIM'S also have strong industry interaction. So, our state and central universities and technological institutes also need to establish a strong partnership with the industries not only to generate funds but also to make their academic output tailored to the needs of the industry. So, Net working systems will have to establish between the technical education and Industry, R&D organizations, Programmes of Rural and community development and with other sections of education with complementary characteristics.

Introduction of Vocational courses

In order to handle the problem of unemployment, the introduction of vocational courses, both at the graduate and post graduate stages assumes a special significance, as it is at these stages that its finds themselves at the threshold of practical life and of assuming larger socio-economic responsibilities.

Integrated approach

Better economic supplements can be achieved by promoting research options for faculty, providing opportunities for future growth. More promotion, interdisciplinary research, travel grants, study leave, in service training, emphasis on workshops, conferences, seminars, academic exchange programs, introduction of latest and hi technical methods for learning and disseminating of knowledge, well equipped laboratories and updated and well stocked libraries, etc can contribute in improving the quality of higher education.

Virtual universities

In order to face the multiple problems of higher education in India and in order to become competent in terms of maintaining quality in higher education and in order for survival of small institutions against the competition from the big ones, our colleges and universities have to formed Partnerships with Virtual universities by using essentially "First generation technologies" for becoming competitive and earning resources to support their institution development.

Evolving National e-Educational Networks

Development of such a network would create infrastructural and framework, which could help weaker and disadvantaged colleges and universities to join regional\national Consortia and offers best educational services to their personalized services.

Suitable Grants and loan Schemes

With a view to ensure that no one with aptitude and desire is denied access to higher education because he/she can't afford it, there is a need to introduce suitable grant and loan schemes. There can be

variety of grants and loan options designed to address this problem, for example Australia offers a student loan programme, this loan is repaid through temporary increase in the income tax of programme participants; consequently the money is can be continuously recycled to finance the education of future students.

Moreover there is a need to introduce a scheme of income contingent loans to make it easier for student from poor background to participate, this loan arrangement has built in insurance against inability to pay and help low earners. The govt. is required to share part of the risk of a student loan programs.

CONCLUSIONS

The critical role of higher education in the development process has gained emphasis with the emergence of the notion of “Knowledge-based economy”. As the world is becoming more and more interconnected and global markets for skills and innovations emerge, it has been crucial for India to expand equal opportunities to the nation youth to access higher education. Higher education, clearly a major contributor to economic growth and national development, therefore, must address the rights of all citizens to share its benefits.

A new vision of what higher education can achieve is required, combined with better planning and higher standards of management. The strengths of all players – Public and private must be used with the international community at least emerging to provide strong and coordinated support and leadership in this critical area. The three major issue of higher education in today's world namely access, equity and quality need to be addressed in a holistic manner to ensure that our system of higher education and research not only contribute to the development of the nation but also to the world by creation of a knowledge society with values of sustainability, peace and development.

As a nation with unique features and a strategic location, the speedy development of our nation needs an integrated approach. So there is a pressing need to meticulously review the current quality and quantity of the institutions of higher learning in India.

It's high time that the policy makers of higher educational institutions expand their horizons and seriously ponder upon the suggestions that are made above and in order to improve the education institution of our country.

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