

HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA – ISSUES AND IMPERATIVES

Dr. Gurjeet Virk Sidhu*

Our university system is, in many parts, in a state of disrepair...In almost half the districts in the country, higher education enrolments are abysmally low, almost two-third of our universities and 90 per cent 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.

– Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2007

Abstract

Although there have been challenges to higher education in the past, these most recent calls for reform may provoke a fundamental change in higher education. This change may not occur as a direct response to calls for greater transparency and accountability, but rather because of the opportunity to reflect on the purpose of higher education, the role of colleges and universities in the new millennium, and emerging scientific research on how people learn. These disparate literatures have not been tied together in a way that would examine the impact of fundamental change from the policy level to the institutional level and to the everyday lives of college and university administrators, faculty and students. Now the time has come to create a second wave of institution building and of excellence in the fields of education, research and capability building. We need higher educated people who are skilled and who can drive our economy forward. When India can provide skilled people to the outside world then we can transfer our country from a developing nation to a developed nation very easily and quickly.

* Assistant Professor, Head , Post Graduate Department of Sociology, Guru Nanak National College, Doraha, Ludhiana

Introduction

India's higher education system is the world's third largest in terms of students, next to China and the United States. Unlike China, however, India has the advantage of English being the primary language of higher education and research. India educates approximately 11 per cent of its youth in higher education as compared to 20 per cent in China. The main governing body at the tertiary level is the University Grants Commission (India), which enforces its standards, advises the government, and helps coordinate between the centre and the state. Universities and its constituent colleges are the main institutes of higher education in India. At present in 2011, there are 227 government-recognized Universities in India. Out of them 20 are central universities, 109 are deemed universities and 11 are Open Universities and rest are state universities. Most of these universities in India have affiliating colleges where undergraduate courses are being taught. However Jawaharlal University is a remarkable exception to this rule.

According to the Department of higher Education government of India, 16,885 colleges, including 1800 exclusive women's colleges functioning under these universities and institutions and there are 4.57 lakh teachers and 99.54 lakh students in various higher education institutes in India. Apart from these higher education institutes there are several private institutes in India that offer various professional courses in India. Distance learning is also a feature of the Indian higher education system.

Some institutions of India, such as the Indian Institutes of technology (IITs), have been globally acclaimed for their standard of education. The IITs enroll about 8000 students annually and the alumni have contributed to both the growth of the private sector and the public sectors of India. However, India has failed to produce world class universities like Harvard and Cambridge. According to the London Times Higher Education (2009)-Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University rankings, 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 24, 35 and 46; Singapore two ranked at 30 and 73; South Korea two ranked at 47 and 69 and Taiwan one in the 95th position. Notably, China's Tsinghua University and Peking University are ranked at 49 and 52 respectively. There is no Indian university in the rankings from 100 to 200. It is only when one moves on to the next 100 that we find the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur at 237; IIT Madras at 284 and the University of Delhi at 291.

A recent evaluation of universities and research institutes all over the world, conducted by a Shanghai university, has not a single Indian university in the world's top 300 while China has six. The Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, comes in somewhere in the top 400 and IIT, Kharagpur, makes an appearance after that. Yet this decisive edge also has its shortcomings. Besides top rated universities which provide highly competitive world class education to their pupil, India is also home to many universities which have been founded with the sole objective of making easy money. UGC and other Regulatory authorities have been trying very hard to extirpate the menace of private universities which running courses without any affiliation or recognition. Students from rural and semi urban background often fall prey to these institutes and colleges. Today, Knowledge is power. The more knowledge one has, the more empowered one is. 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.

The country lacks the critical mass in higher education. Its gross enrolment ratio (GER) is a mere 11 per cent compared to China's 20 per cent, the USA's 83 per cent and South Korea's 91 per cent. This means that in comparison to India, China has double the number of students pursuing higher education. The Eleventh Five Year Plan envisages increase in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 15 per cent of the population in the age cohort group of 18-24 years by 2011-12. This requires a substantial increase in the number of institutions and consequently would require an adequate number of teachers for imparting education. Failure to redress the faculty shortage would hamper the achievement of the targets for increase in GER set out by Government.

The overall scenario of higher education in India does not match with the global Quality standards. Hence, there is enough justification for an increased assessment of the Quality of the country's educational institutions. Traditionally, these institutions assumed that Quality could be determined by their internal resources, viz., faculty with an impressive set of degrees and experience detailed at the end of the institute's admission brochure, number of books and journals in the library, an ultra-modern campus, and size of the endowment, etc., or by its definable and assessable outputs, viz., efficient use of resources, producing uniquely educated, highly satisfied and employable graduates.

Critical appraisals undertaken by the governmental committees and independent academicians have highlighted the crisis confronting the system: 'increasing educated unemployment; weakening of student motivation; increasing unrest and indiscipline on the campuses; frequent collapse of administration; deterioration of standards; and above all, the demoralizing effect of the irrelevance and purposelessness of most of what is being done.' While the politicians and policy makers have often spoken about the need for radical reconstruction of the system, what has been achieved in reality is only moderate reformism.

At present, the world-class institutions in India are mainly limited. Most of the Indian colleges and universities lack in high-end research facilities. Under-investment in libraries, information technology, laboratories and classrooms makes it very difficult to provide top quality instruction or engage in cutting-edge research. This gap has to be bridged if we want to speed up our path to development. The University Grant Commission of India is not only the lone grant giving agency in the country, but also responsible for coordinating, determining and maintaining the standards in institutions of higher education. The emergence of a worldwide economic order has immense consequences for higher education more so under the changes that have taken place in the recent past with regard to globalization, industrialization, information technology advancement and its impact on education aided to these are the policy changes that have taken place at the UGC, All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), Distance Education Council (DEC), Indian Council for Agriculture Research (ICAR), Bar Council of India (BCI), National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), Medical Council of India (MCI), Pharmacy Council of India (PCI), Indian Nursing Council (INC), Dentist Council of India (DCI), Central Council of Homeopathy (CCH), the Central Council of Indian Medicine (CCIM) and such other regulatory bodies from time to time to accommodate these development and yet maintain quality students in higher education. It is time for all those who are concerned with policymaking, planning, administration and implementation of Higher Education to revitalize the very thinking on the subject and put it on the right track. After recording growth rate of around 9 percent for the three consecutive years, India is now considered to be one of the most promising economies of the world. While, higher education gives India an edge in the world economy as evident from the availability of the skilled manpower, and research scholars working abroad, unemployment, illiteracy and relative poverty continue to be the major deterrents to realize her potential in human resources. The

taskforce constituted by World Bank and UNESCO during 2000 has also observed that higher education helps increase wages and productivity that directly enrich individuals and society. The prospects and development in the higher education sector in India needs a critical examination in a rapidly globalising world. Expansion, inclusion and excellence were the three objectives of higher education policy of Government of India. The government had taken many steps to increase student enrolment in higher education and quality improvement in higher educational institutions.

Critical issues in Indian higher education

The present system of higher education does not serve the purpose for which it has been started. In general education itself has become so profitable a business that quality is lost in the increase of quantity of professional institutions with quota system and politicization adding fuel to the fire of spoil system, thereby increasing unemployment of graduates without quick relief to mitigate their sufferings in the job market of the country. So, the drawbacks of the higher education system underscore the need for reforms to make it worthwhile and beneficial to all concerned. Most observers agree that Indian higher education, the significant and impressive developments of the past few decades notwithstanding, faces major challenges in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Perhaps the clearest and boldest statement of this issue can be found in the “Report to the Nation 2006” of the National Knowledge Commission which concludes that there is ‘a quiet crisis in higher education in India that runs deep’, and that it has to do with both the quantity and the quality of higher education in India. Recognizing this dual challenge, the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, severely criticized in a recent speech the serious qualitative deficiencies in Indian higher education while at the same time announcing plans for a major expansion of the system. Reflecting on the findings of a confidential report by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council, which is affiliated to the University Grants Commission (UGC), he expressed his concern over the fact that two thirds (68%) of the country’s universities and 90 percent of its colleges are “of middling or poor quality” and that well over half of the faculty in India’s colleges do not have the appropriate degree qualifications. Knowledge is the base for overall growth and if the nation has to be competitive and to be at par with the globalization pace, we will have to respond to the market forces.

According to a study only 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.) Quality of education delivered in most institutions is very poor. While India has some institutions of global repute delivering quality education, such as (Indian Institute of Management) IIMs and (Indian Institute of Technology) IITs, we do not have enough of them. It has very narrow range of course options that are offered and education is a seller's market, where is no scope of incentive to provide quality education. There is clearly a lack of educated educators and teaching is not an attractive profession. It's a last choice in terms of career. Number of Ph.D.s produced each year is very low and those required by academia is far higher. In fact, at many institutions fresh graduates are employed to teach, leading to poor quality of classroom instruction. Most of the education institutions esp. in states such as Maharashtra and states in South India are owned by politicians. This Education system which is highly regulated by the government has been set up to benefit politicians. The growth of higher education in India has been largely guided by the serviceable prerequisite of the economy. After independence, the role of the state in planning out a development path and also in building higher education institutions was guided by mutuality of purpose. Most observers of higher education in India feel that performance of higher education institutions has been less than satisfactory in terms of access, equity and quality. Now there is an urgent need to work for the development of the educational sector to meet the need of the emerging opportunities, increasing younger generation population and challenges of the 21st century.

Challenges of present higher educational system in India

Since we have got independence we are facing challenges to establish a great and strong education system. Various governments came and gone. Off course they tried to establish new education policies in the system but this is very sad to dictate that they were not sufficient for our country. Still we are facing lot of problems and challenges in our Education System. India recognises that the new global scenario poses unprecedented challenges for the higher education system. The University Grants Commission has appropriately stated that a whole range of skills will be demanded from the graduates of humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and commerce, as well as from the various professional disciplines such as agriculture, law, management, medicine or engineering.

India can no longer continue the model of general education as it has been persisting in for the large bulk of the student population. Rather, it requires a major investment to make

human resource productive by coupling the older general disciplines of humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and commerce to their applications in the new economy and having adequate field based experience to enhance knowledge with skills and develop appropriate attitudes.

Responding to these emerging needs, the UGC stated: "The University has a crucial role to play in promoting social change. It must make an impact on the community if it is to retain its legitimacy and gain public support". It seeks to do so by a new emphasis on community based programmes and work on social issues. Concepts of access, equity, relevance and quality can be operationalised only if the system is both effective and efficient. Hence, the management of higher education and the total networking of the system has become an important issue for effective management. The shift can occur only through a systemic approach to change as also the development of its human resource, and networking the system through information and communication technology.

There are many basic problems facing higher education in India today. These include inadequate infrastructure and facilities, large vacancies in faculty positions and poor faculty thereof, low student enrolment rate, outmoded teaching methods, declining research standards, unmotivated students, overcrowded classrooms and widespread geographic, income, gender, and ethnic imbalances. Apart from concerns relating to deteriorating standards, there is reported exploitation of students by many private providers. Ensuring equitable access to quality higher education for students coming from poor families is a major challenge. Students from poor background are put to further disadvantage since they are not academically prepared to crack highly competitive entrance examinations that have bias towards urban elite and rich students having access to private tuitions and coaching. Education in basic sciences and subjects that are not market friendly has suffered.

Research in higher education institutions is at its lowest ebb. There is an inadequate and diminishing financial support for higher education from the government and from society. Many colleges established in rural areas are non-viable, are under-enrolled and have extremely poor infrastructure and facilities with just a few teachers. A series of judicial interventions over the last two decades and knee-jerk reaction of the government – both at the centre and state level and the regulatory bodies without proper understanding of the emerging market structure of higher education in India has further added confusion to the higher education landscape in the country.

There is an absence of a well-informed reform agenda for higher education in the country. A few efforts made now and then are not rooted in the new global realities based on competition and increased mobility of students and workforce.

Time to time system influenced with new challenges and government taken a major role to build the system. But there are many challenges always faced by the government. Some of the leading challenges before the higher education system are continuous upgradation of curriculum to keep in pace with rapid growth of science and technology; globalisation and the resultant challenges from the international universities; grooming of many private institutions without any method of ensuring maintenance of quality and standard; need for adequate funding to meet the demands of various novel innovative programmes; developing a meaningful and purposeful inter-face between the universities, National Research Laboratories, industries, government and society, etc. ICT in higher education policy may not be able to completely overcome all these challenges though it may play a role in information and resource sharing.

There are so many people in various parts of country which are still out of reach. This is when we have emphasize more on our education programs and made our system reachable to all areas. Government has to rethink on these areas to implement more on the policies. Money also plays a vital role for the education system which needs to unique for all globally recognized syllabus and curricula. Take a look on our constitution which says that this is the responsibility of central and state government to build good education system. For that we need to have funds. But despite there was a large expenditure on the funds every year on Education where the fund goes and our system remains intact.

Central government prepares policies and plan while responsibility of State government is run those policies on ground. The standard education facilities are higher in the states which are much rich. There is a need to change such defects from the country education system which only can be influenced by increasing funding and providing better facilities to students. But we know there is always increase in the fund for the education system but never implemented in that area. So we have to work in this area. Government tries to make different policies which are implemented but quality never checked. Majority of fund goes in the pockets of officials working for this. There is a vast need to improve the quality and standards.

The time now is to modernize our education system so that our country can get much

more technically graduated people which can help our country to developed state. Today's youth always try to go foreign for his higher education as they have much better facilities and quality of their system. Can't we get that quality here itself? We have to stop this brain drainage so as avoid students to run away from country. Our governments trying for various challenges faced but no one is doing well for that. Government came and goes but system remains intact.

Higher education is extremely diverse and the challenges and issues faced by higher education institutions are just as diverse. The process of education is not merely digesting books. It is also about doing several co-curricular and extra-curricular activities that give a broader meaning to life in general and education in particular. I believe that opportunities for such holistic development are not enough in India. Facilities for the same are lacking or not easily accessible in India. Even where facilities exist, there is a lack of information about the same.

There is a lack of universities and institutes for education but one most important fact is that the quality of education is absent in higher education. There are very few teachers and their knowledge is very insufficient. Most of the teachers are making money with tuitions. I have seen my places where there tuitions. The teachers are not having proper knowledge of subject even and resources to student community are very poor. Students do not have any student-ship ethics, they just want marks in the subject and they study only for grabbing jobs. There is no creativity in students. Our top class students are hard-worker but not innovative. They are not capable enough to produce new technology. There is a great need to revolution in higher education. These are just some challenges which should cover all the aspect in the present scenario of education and we have to implement hard on them.

Suggestions for improving quality of higher education

There are some suggestions and Expectations from Government, Industry, Educational Institutions, Parents and Students for improving quality of higher education-

1. **Towards a Learning Society-** As we move towards a learning society, every human activity will require contributions from experts, and this will place the entire sector of higher education in sharp focus. Although the priorities, which are being assigned today to the task of Education for All, will continue to be preponderant, the country will have to prepare itself to invest more and more on higher education and, simultaneously, measures will have to be taken to refine, diversify and upgrade higher education and research programmes.

2. **Industry and Academia Connection-** Industry and Academia connect necessary to ensure curriculum and skills in line with requirements. Skill building is really very crucial to ensure employability of academia to understand and make sure good jobs (keeping in view knowledge + skills+ global professional skills = good jobs).
3. **Incentives to Teachers and Researchers-** Industry and students are expecting specialized courses to be offered so that they get the latest and best in education and they are also industry ready and employable. Vocational and Diploma courses need to be made more attractive to facilitate specialized programs being offered to students. Incentives should be provided to teachers and researchers to make these professions more attractive for the younger generation.
4. **Innovative Practices-** The new technologies offer vast opportunities for progress in all walks of life. It offers opportunities for economic growth, improved health, better service delivery, improved learning and socio-cultural advances. Though efforts are required to improve the country's innovative capacity, yet the efforts should be to build on the existing strengths in light of new understanding of the research-innovation-growth linkage.
5. **To mobilize resources-** The decline in public funding in the last two plan periods has resulted in serious effects on standards due to increasing costs on non-salary items and emoluments of staff, on the one hand, and declining resources, on the other. Effective measures will have to be adopted to mobilize resources for higher education. There is also a need to relate the fee structure to the student's capacity to pay for the cost. So that, students at lower economic levels can be given highly subsidised and fully subsidised education.
6. **To Provide Need Based Job-Oriented Courses-** All round development of personality is the purpose of education. But the present day education is neither imparting true knowledge of life and nor improving the talent of a student by which one can achieve laurels in the field one is interested. So, combination of arts subjects and computer science and science and humanities or literature should be introduced so that such courses could be useful for the students to do jobs after recruitment in some companies which would reduce unnecessary rush to higher education. The programme must be focused on graduate studies and research and developing strategies and mechanisms for the rapid and

efficient transfer of knowledge and for its application to specific national and local conditions and needs. Meritorious doctoral students should be recognized through teaching assistantships with stipends over and above the research fellowships. Finally, based on knowledge only vision of the future life and work can be had; based on this vision only a broad ambition can be fixed for oneself; and based on this ambition only one can lead interesting life doing satisfying job to do remarkable achievements in some field in the world.

7. **Action Plan for Improving Quality-** Academic and administrative audit should be conducted once in three years in colleges by external experts for ensuring quality in all aspects of academic activities. The self-finance colleges should come forward for accreditation and fulfil the requirements of accreditation. Universities and colleges should realise the need for quality education and come forward with action plan for improving quality in higher educational institutions.
8. **Individuality-** The life of one will not be interesting but rather boring, monotonous and frustrating. This is mainly due to parental interference in the education of the children. Parental guidance is necessary but it should not interfere in the creativity or individuality of the students. Also, in spite of the obsolete type of education system, some are achieving wonderful things in Sports, Music, Dance, Painting, Science and Technology in the world. This is only due to the encouragement of the parents and some dedicated teachers in the educational institutions. Higher education is necessary for one to achieve excellence in the line one is best. But one should be selected for higher education on the basis of merit only. Further, fees for education in general should not be high; especially, the fees for higher studies should be within the reach of every class of people in the nation.
9. **Stipends to Research Fellows-** The number of Ph.Ds from Indian Universities should increase with proper standards. This should be seen in the context of extremely low fraction of Ph.Ds in India in relation to M.Sc./B.Tech., as compared to what it is in USA, UK, Germany, Japan etc. Meritorious doctoral students should be recognized through teaching assistantships with stipends over and above the research fellowships Identifying talented, meritorious students and encouraging them through recognition is very important to attract students into research and teaching.

10. **Fair Quality Assurance System-** Colleges and Private institutes should set up Internal Quality Assurance Cell and must follow a minimum standard to give degrees. The quality assurance system must be independent of political and institutional interaction and it must have a basis in the legislation. There should be operational, financial and academic autonomy coupled with accountability. There is a need of an independent accreditation agency with a conglomerate of government, industry, academia, society etc. means all stakeholders of the education to ensure that the stakeholders particularly the students are not taken for a ride. They should be able to know whether a particular institution delivers value or not, then things can be under control to some extent. It is also important that all institutes of higher learning must make public the acceptability of their courses and degrees. (i.e. the status, recognition and acceptability of their courses by other institutions).
11. **To increase Quantity of Universities-** We need more universities because we are more in number and present number of universities is too less. On 13th June, 2005 Government of India constituted a high level advisory body known as National Knowledge Commission (NKC) to advise the PM about the state of education in India and measures needed to reform this sector. It was headed by Sam Pitroda and submitted its report in November 2007. NKC has recommended setting up of 1500 universities by 2015 so that gross enrolment ratio increases to 15 percent. It has also called for establishing an Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE) to monitor the quality of overall higher education in India.
12. **Examination Reforms-** Examination reforms, gradually shifting from the terminal, annual and semester examinations to regular and continuous assessment of student's performance in learning should be implemented.
13. **High-tech Libraries-** Our university libraries have a very good collection of books, but they are all in mess. A library must be online and conducive for serious study. Indian universities should concentrate more on providing quality education which is comparable to that of international standards.

Conclusion

After independence, there has been tremendous increase in institutions of higher learning in all disciplines. But with the quantitative growth has it been able to attend to the core issue of quality. India is today one of the fastest developing countries of the world with the annual growth rate going above 9%. In order to sustain that rate of growth, there is need to increase the number of institutes and also the quality of higher education in India. To reach and achieve the future requirements there is an urgent need to relook at the Financial Resources, Access and Equity, Quality Standards, Relevance and at the end the Responsiveness. To attain and sustain national, regional or international quality, certain components are particularly relevant, notably careful selection of staff and continuous staff development, in particular through the promotion of appropriate programs for academic development, including teaching/learning methodology and mobility between countries, between higher education institutions and the world of work, as well as student mobility within and between countries. Internal self-evaluation and external review must be conducted openly by independent specialists, if possible with international experts. Report of the National Knowledge Commission if implemented can help boost education sector in India. We are moving towards an era which would be defined by the parameters of knowledge and wisdom. India in order to become a developed nation by 2020 and knowledge power by 2015. The decisions that are going to be taken on these are likely to hold the key to India's future as a center of knowledge production. We need higher educated people who are skilled and who can drive our economy forward. When India can provide skilled people to the outside world then we can transfer our country from a developing nation to a developed nation very easily and quickly.

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