STATUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: SCOPE & CHALLENGES

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Abstract

India boasts of a robust higher education system on the global education map today. It is the third largest in the world, after the United States of America and China. The higher education sector has seen an exponential growth from independence to where we are today. At the time of independence, there were only 20 universities in the country. Today there are 903 universities, 40026 colleges and 11669 stand alone institutions in India. In spite of the exponential growth that the higher education sector has witnessed over the decades, discussions have always been rife about the quality of education being imparted by these higher education institutions. Also, concerns are raised from time to time by different stakeholders whether our higher education system is constantly evolving to ensure employability of the passing out students. This paper attempts to examine the status and scope of higher education in India. It also attempts to explore the challenges being faced by the country in the higher education sector. The paper concludes that quality, transparency, accountability, research and innovation are essential to improve the quality of higher education in India.

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1. Introduction

"Education is empowerment; it not only helps us know our world better, but also enables us to think of ways to change the world better."

Ram Nath Kovind

President, India

India boasts of a robust higher education system on the global education map. It is the third largest in the world, after the United States of America and China. The higher education sector has seen an exponential growth from independence to where we are today. At the time of independence, there were only 20 universities in the country. Today there are over 903 universities, 40026 colleges and 11669 stand alone institutions in India. According to reports, between 1950 and 2014, the number of universities in India increased by 34 times. And, between 1950 and 2013, colleges have increased by 74 times. Also, Right to Education heralded a revolution in the education roadmap of India with a staggering increase in the adult literacy rate in India.

Education plays a very significant role in achieving the developmental goals of any country. Only an educated nation, and more so a democracy where voices of people impact not just the polity but also the policy decisions, can take well informed decisions. Highlighting the significance of education, the Education Commission (1964-66) said, 'The destiny of India is being shaped in her classrooms.' In fact, classrooms are the places where the future citizens of the country are reared, trained, educated, and motivated to accept the new challenges and to face the changing situations. The interim budget 2019-20 recently tabled in the Parliament also mentions improving the quality of education as part of the ten dimensions of the Vision 2030 of the government. The government has also allocated Rs 93,848 crore (3.3 per cent of the total budget expenditure) for the education sector. This is over Rs 10,000 crore hike from the revised estimate Rs 83,626 last year. However, surprisingly in the interim budget, the allocation for Higher Education Financing Agency has been reduced from Rs 2,750 crore last year to Rs 2,100 crore.

India's higher education system has come a long way since independence. But the journey hasn't been very smooth. There have been both opportunities and challenges. Today, despite the exponential growth of the higher education sector, there have been many overbearing concerns.

This paper attempts to examine the present status of higher education in India. It also examines the challenges being faced by the higher education system in India today.

2. Present Status of Higher Education and its Challenges

Skewed Gender Ratio: According to a report of HRD Ministry, the enrollment of students in higher education institutions rose to 25.8 per cent in 2018. However, the percentage of female students is lowest in Institutions of national importance, followed by state private open universities and deemed universities (government). The total enrolment in higher education has been estimated to be 36.6 million with 19.2 million boys and 17.4 million girls. The girls constitute 47.6 per cent of the enrolment. As per the report, the GER (Gross Enrolment Ratio) in higher education for male population is 26.3 per cent and for the female population is 25.4 per cent. As per the report 'Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls' released in July, it was stated that the loss in human capital wealth incurred today because many adult women did not benefit in their youth from universal secondary education (defined as 12 years of schooling) is estimated to range between USD 15 trillion to USD 30 trillion globally.

Average Pupil-Teacher Ratio: The higher education system in India has shown a progression over the years. Still, the average pupil-teacher ratio in many states is far from satisfactory. While the best ratio is recorded in the states of Karnataka (1:16) and Andhra Pradesh (1:18), most of the other states show a dismal pupil-teacher ratio with Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand ranking lowest with one teacher for 50 students. According to the findings of the All India Survey on Higher Education 2017-18, while the number of higher education institutions has increased, the pupil-teacher ratio has come down from 20 to 25. Also, in many instances the quality of teaching is poor.

Unfilled Vacancies: There is severe crunch of teachers in different streams. In the last four years, seven IITs, seven IIMs, fourteen IIITs, 15 AIIMS, one NIT, and four NIDs have been set up or are in the process of being set up. But most of them are yet to be functional and suffer from serious shortage of faculty. Faculty vacancy in Indian Institutes of Technology is 34 per cent while almost 35 per cent of the teaching posts in central universities is lying vacant. According to an HRD Committee report for 2018-19, even when the ad-hoc, adjunct and visiting faculty -- who are not permanent teachers -- are added to the fold, 19 per cent positions still remain vacant in central universities. According to a

government survey, the number of teachers in graduate and the post-graduate colleges and universities has declined for a second consecutive year from 1.52 million in 2015-16 to 1.37 in 2017-18. On one hand the number of teachers is decreasing, while on the other hand there has been a steady rise in the number of colleges and universities. This in turn widens the gap further. The menace of ghost teachers poses another challenge for higher education. According to official data, there are 80,000 ghost teachers at private and government universities/colleges who have been using proxy methods to work at multiple places as full time employees. The regulatory body has come down heavily on them. Government is trying to curtail this issue with the help of Aadhar Card details of the teachers.

Lack of Infrastructure: High quality infrastructure is one of the crucial elements of learning environments in universities. It facilitates better instruction, improves student outcomes, and reduces dropout rates, among other benefits. Despite education being on the priority list of the government over the years, the infrastructure and amenities provided by most of the public institutions are not up to the mark. They do not match the facilities being provided by most of the private institutions. Labs are unequipped, libraries are partially stocked and the equipment is not latest. A recee of higher education institutions reveals absence of conducive environment for teaching-learning. The ICT infrastructure which is integral for technology-aided teaching-learning too exists at varying stages of development in the higher education institutions. Infrastructural facilities provided by most private universities are much better than most of the government universities. The institutions located in rural and semi urban India tend to have poorer infrastructure. Funding to the higher education institutions should also be regularized and uniformly distributed. According to the available data, amongst government universities, 97 per cent of the students study in state universities against 3 per cent who study in the central universities. However, 57.5 per cent of the higher education budget goes to the central universities and premier institutions like IIT, IIM etc.

Industry-Academia Gap: There is a dire need of developing specific programmes for different areas after consultation with the industry. There is a constant feedback from the industry regarding the mismatch between the industry expectations and the core syllabi taught in the higher education institutions. Taking note of this mismatch, many universities especially private ones are involving industry experts while designing the course curriculum. Most professional

courses now have internships as an integral part of their curriculum. The industry also needs to get involved in the complete process and support the academia. This will make the students more employable once they are ready to join the industry. According to data released by NASSCOM, only 25 per cent of the technical graduates passing out of Indian higher education institutions every year are considered employable by the IT industry.

Lack of Emphasis on Research & Innovation: Many believe that the growth in HE sector has been more quantitative than qualitative. President Ram Nath Kovind's recent remark regarding the Indian higher education ecosystem highlights a grave concern. He said despite India adding an impressive number of new colleges every year, we still need to work on improving the quality of education. The institutions lack facilities like state-of-the-art laboratories, other resources like information technology support etc which are required for world class research. Realising this, many government policies and scholarships have been rolled out to give the much required boost to research and innovation at HE institutions. In August 2018, Innovation Cell and Atal Ranking of Institutions on Innovation Achievements (ARIIA) were launched to assess innovation efforts and encourage a healthy competition among higher educational institutions in the country.

Monitoring of Private Players in Higher Education: Privatization of higher education has opened doors for the private players in the field. Today, over 60 per cent of the higher education institutions are being run by private entities. In the absence of "*sarkari*" work culture, many well meant private universities are contributing immensely towards providing quality education to the students. However, many private universities have been founded which do not adhere to the norms laid by the University Grants Commission, which is the main governing body that enforces the standards, advises the government and helps coordinate between center and states. Such universities thrive on the gullible candidates especially from the rural areas. UGC has cracked its whip on such institutions which are running programmes without proper approvals and are issuing unrecognized degrees. UGC also publishes a list of fake universities on its official website to create awareness amongst the stakeholders. In 2018, as many as 7 institutions of higher education were pronounced fake in Delhi itself. Uttar Pradesh topped the list with 8 universities being declared as fake. According to official figures, there are 23 universities and 279 technical colleges in India.

World Ranking: Higher education in India needs drastic reforms. Only a very few Indian institutions of higher education like Indian Institute of Sciences and Indian Institutes of Technology have managed global acclaim. However, even after 72 years of Independence, none of our higher education institutions figure in the top 200 list. According to data released by Times Higher Education 25 Indian institutions figure in the 2019 ranking of top 200 in 43 emerging economic countries – seven more than the number that figured in last year's table. Despite this, most of them do not figure in the world rankings. According to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2019, no Asian university figures in top 20 higher education institutions globally. Interestingly, the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings 2019 depicts 3 Asian higher education institutions in the top 20. This includes National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technical University and Tsinghua University. Unfortunately, none of the Indian higher education institutions finds place amongst the top 20 list in both the world higher education institution ranking bodies.

Teacher Training: Gone are the times when a teacher could be complacent. Today's industry is very dynamic and technology keeps evolving. Thus to ensure quality teaching-learning in the Indian colleges and universities, it is essential that the teachers are encouraged to constantly update their knowledge and brush up their skill sets. The statutory bodies of higher education with the support of state and union government have recognized the importance of 'training the trainer'. Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya New Teachers Training Programme was introduced in 2014 to help teachers hone their skill sets. The Union Ministry of Human Resource and Development has also launched Diksha Portal for providing a digital platform to the teacher to make their lifestyle more digital.

Use of Technology for Boosting Higher Education: Today's generation is technology driven. Also, their expectation of technology-aided learning cannot be ignored. Conventional pedagogy disinterests today's generation. Researches have shown that use of appropriate technological tools by teachers enhances learning. The teaching-learning experience becomes more meaningful with use of appropriate technological tools. In 2014, the government announced that it would set up virtual classrooms. The SWAYAM online courses have emerged as a successful massive open online course (MOOC). A Committee has been set up, by the Department of Higher

Education, to work out the modalities to provide quality education by effective use of technology and telecom services.

Access to Higher Education: Over the years, the GER in higher education has seen some improvement. However, the situation is far from satisfactory. According to the official statistics, only 11.2 per cent has an access to opportunities in higher education. The higher education institutions are not even spread uniformly over the 719 districts of the country. States in South India have the highest college density (number of colleges per lakh of eligible population) whereas Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal are at the bottom. The current literacy rate in India is 74.04 per cent compare to 17 per cent in 1950. However, India's literacy rate is still much below the world average of 86.3 per cent. The literacy gap can be narrowed down only by providing ample access to education.

3. Recommendations for Strengthening Higher Education System in India

➢ Adopting collaborative approach can help improve the quality of higher education. Partnerships with foreign universities can help in gaining an access to their resources. This would enhance knowledge inflow from the developed West and pave way for collaborative research projects.

➢ Access to higher education can be improved by encouraging distance learning and online learning.

➢ High quality private institutions should be promoted under various government policies.

➢ Adequate financial support should be provided to the higher education institutions to boost research and improve infrastructure.

➢ An interface between higher education institutions, national research laboratories and industry can also yield positive results.

➢ In order to enhance employability, industry experts must be involved in the designing of curriculum. The curriculum should be such that it focuses on skill-based learning.

➢ More skill-based and job-oriented diploma courses should be introduced. Such courses, in turn, will boost the employment prospects.

➢ Regular academic and administrative audit by external experts can help in ensuring quality of education.

➢ Reforms in examination system should be introduced. Rather than semester/annual assessment, continuous assessment throughout the programme should be preferred.

4. Conclusion

Indian higher education sector has grown immensely since independence. The number of higher education institutions has grown steadily with the gross enrollment ratio also improving significantly over the years. However, on an average only about 1.47 per cent of the annual budget has been allocated to higher education in the last one decade. This should be understood keeping in mind the fact that by 2020 34.33 per cent of India's population will be between 15-24 years of age. In order to ensure that the country's eligible population gets quality education which enables them to compete at global level, it is pertinent for all stakeholders to come together to make sincere and well meaning efforts. Higher education cannot be strengthened unless all stakeholders and regulators come together. It is time that we concentrate on not just the numbers but the quality of higher education. More funds and their proper utilisation, well meant policies, stricter regulations, emphasis on collaborations, academia-industry synergy and most importantly political will is the need of the day.

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