

# Higher Education in India- Its Growth and Challenges

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## Introduction

Prior to independence, the growth of institutions of higher education in India was very slow and diversification in areas of studies was very limited. At the time of independence in 1947, India inherited a system of higher education, which was very small and which also inherited intra/interregional imbalances. Determined efforts were made to build a network of universities, and their affiliated colleges, which provided tremendous outreach to a county keeping in mind vast diversities in languages as also in meeting the need of education at the lower levels.

After independence, however, the number of institutions has increased significantly. The objectives of higher education have gradually become more and more precise with governance moving in the direction of promoting professional institutions and enriching quality of higher education.

## Higher Education Institutes in India

When India became independent, it had only 20 universities and 500 colleges located in different parts of the country. It enrolled around a hundred thousand students in higher education.

As on 31.02.2005, there were 342 Universities including 18 Central Universities, 211 State Universities, 92 Deemed Universities and 5 institutions established under State Legislation and 13 institutes of national importance. There were 17625 colleges, of which, 5286 have been recognized by UGC under Section 2(f) and 12(B) of UGC Act. In 2004-05, an estimated 104.81 lakh students were enrolled in the institutions of higher education and the faculty strength was 4.71 lakh.

## The current scene

India is today one of the fastest developing countries of the world with the annual growth rate going above 9%. In technical education, the IITs, and in management, the IIMs have already marked their names among the top higher educational institutes of the world. Moreover the Jawaharlal University and Delhi University are also regarded as good higher educational institutes for doing postgraduate courses and research in science, humanities and social sciences. As a result, students from various parts of the world are coming today for higher education in India. 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. Therefore the Prime Minister of India has announced the establishment of 8 IITs, seven Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and five Indian Institutes of Science, Education and Research (IISERs) and 30 Central Universities in his speech to the nation on the 60th Independence Day. The outlay for education during the 11th Five Year Plan, which runs from the current fiscal to 2012-13, represents a four-fold increase over the previous plan and stands at Rs 2500 billion.

## Key players in the Higher Education System in India

The University Grants 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. Apart from the UGC there are various professional councils that are responsible for recognizing courses, promoting

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professional institutes and providing grants to undergraduate programmes.

Human Resource Development ministry is contemplating the establishment of the National Commission for Higher Education in an attempt to streamline the higher education policy in all streams, including engineering, medicine, management and agriculture and bring about uniformity in the higher education policy. It may be recalled that the Knowledge Commission headed by Sam Pitroda has also recommended the establishment of a single regulatory policy. Currently there are 16 such bodies including 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) and the Central Council of Indian Medicine (CCIM).

There is also a move to bring the UGC under the proposed Commission to improve the quality of higher education. In this context, it is encouraging to note that the Union Human Resource Development Ministry has decided to intensify its search for potential institutes that can be accorded autonomy with the freedom to design their own curriculum, and frame their own admission and examination rules.

#### **Major issues in Higher Education today**

Although there has been a manifold increase in institutions imparting higher education, there is an urgent need of making some fundamental changes in the system. These changes may not occur as a direct response to call for greater transparency and accountability, but nevertheless, the fact that higher education today, has necessarily to undergo a major transformation cannot be denied.

In a letter sent to universities and colleges in March 2007, the UGC has admitted that despite various efforts by the Centre, the number of colleges coming forward to go independent is very small. At present there are 230 autonomous colleges and 48 universities across the country. With some recent studies clearly indicating that the country will need more than 100 universities in the ensuing years if the demand for higher education is to be met, autonomous colleges are being seen as the answer to the problem.

This essay draws on the above facts to provide a framework for introducing intentional change into higher education, a change that will address the challenges it faces.

Here are some alarming facts concerning higher education in our country:

- 50% of the students who complete Class XII do not enter college;
- 90% of the colleges and 68% of the universities in the country are of average or poor quality;
- 25% faculty positions in universities remain vacant;
- 57% of the teachers in colleges do not possess either an M Phil or a PhD.;
- There is only one computer for 220 students, on an average, in colleges;
- These revelations are made by the UGC's NAAC in its first-ever official assessment of the higher education system in the country.

Truly speaking, our higher education is in a mess and if efforts are not made to set the house in order, we may lose out on the several opportunities that are opening up in the world's knowledge economy. Major issues to be addressed in the process of excelling in higher education system are:

- **Inadequate Capacity of Institutions:** In contrast to the Indian Institutes of Management and the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIMs and IITs) and other elite institutions gaining international fame, many universities, colleges and

deemed universities serve their students poorly. More students are dumped than the capacity of such institutions. Student discontent, in these circumstances, is altogether rational. Governments everywhere are fond of announcements, especially those heralding new initiatives. The State is thereafter least bothered to see whether these institutions need to be supported with upgraded quality of infrastructure along with the quality of teaching.

- **Irrelevant Courses:** Most of the courses offered at the first degree level are irrelevant to the students to prepare themselves in their lives as earners.
- **Integrating Education System with Society:** The syllabi of the various courses are not constantly revised and updated in order to meet the social needs.
- **Incompatibility of Curriculum with the needs of Corporate Sector:** Development of curriculum objectively reflecting national and global needs is found to be overlooked. Curriculum design is not found to be relevant to the regional and national needs. Institutions need to redesign the courses and introduce academic programmes that are compatible with the goals and objectives of corporate sector.
- **Poor Feedback:** Courses are becoming meaningless as they fail to get feedback on programmes. Concerned authorities are reluctant to make efforts for interaction of academic peers with employers.
- **Examination Reforms:** The age old traditional pattern of examination needs to be eliminated right from its very roots. Radical changes need to be made in evaluation patterns.
- **Age old Teaching Methods:** The teaching methods of yesterday fail to cater to the needs of the education of tomorrow.
- **Internal Efficiency:** Party politics and lack of autonomy hamper the growth of

institutions. The internal efficiency in many institutions has been found to be deteriorating owing to undue influence of external forces.

- **Lack of Linking Education:** Professionals like engineers, scientists and managers are reluctant to take a break from their highly-paid jobs and interact with the students. They seem to be indifferent in guiding students as to the relevance of theoretical knowledge with its practical application.
- **Lack of Teacher's motivation – issues, problems and improvements:** Teachers, the backbone of educational institutions, are found to be lacking motivation; always entangled in many petty issues. It must be noted here that teacher's motivation has been a neglected aspect right from the beginning.
- **Academic Culture:** Apart from the paucity of financial resources and inadequate by qualified and competent teaching staff, the academic culture of today in higher educational institutions, is contributing to the crisis in the higher education sector.
- **Interference of External Forces:** Why should the Directors of the IIMs or IITs and the Vice-Chancellors of the universities be appointed by the government giving political colour to these appointments? Why can't they be appointed keeping the interests of the institutions in mind? As long as the external forces decide on the people who head the academic institutions, there can hardly be any hope of academic excellence.
- **Lack of Autonomy:** When undue restrictions such as fee-regulations and reservations are imposed on public in the name of social justice, consistency in policy is lost.

**Suggestions:**

If it is to remain competent, meet emerging challenges, and serve the needs of

the nation, higher education has necessarily to undergo a major revolution. Higher education needs a far-reaching structural reconstruction.

- We have to think of a holistic approach if we want to maintain the quality in the field of education. Quality is judged by the relevance of the syllabi in the real life situation of students. Society and parents are concerned about the future generation. The syllabi of the various courses have to be constantly revised and updated in order to meet societal needs. The students also need to learn the techniques of solving various areas such as environment, co-operative behavior, human values etc.
- Institutions should be allowed to operate in autonomous atmosphere. Flexibility should be accorded to the institutions to frame their courses that are relevant to the regional and national needs. Such autonomous institutions can introduce academic programmes compatible with the goals and objectives of the corporate sector. An environment that permits the choice of curriculum to suit the societal needs and requirements in higher education should be provided.
- It becomes meaningful to collect feedback on programmes and to have interaction with academic peers and employers. The programme options available to students make the courses interesting to learners.
- State instead of attempting to unduly restrict private players should fulfil its own responsibility in the matters such as fees and reservation and also should allow some autonomy.
- The State should open its doors to international service providers in the field of higher education. The only way forward is to improve the quality of education. Of course, a check needs to be exercised to see that their profit-oriented motives do not create other social evils.

- As long as the external forces decide on the people who head the academic institutions, there can hardly be any hope of academic excellence. Things can turn for the better only if the academic institutions are invested with adequate autonomy.
- The teachers themselves should be encouraged to participate in workshops, seminars, orientation programmes, refresher programmes. The methods and techniques so learnt, should be put into practice. There is an urgent need to replace the traditional chalk and talk methods by new and innovative methods of teaching.
- Many engineers, scientists and managers in India are eager to take a break from their highly-paid jobs and interact with the students. It is now for the government to take some concrete steps in this direction. If this calls for adequate autonomy to these academic institutions they should be invested with it and relaxations in academic qualification should be made to encourage the practicing engineers, scientists and managers to take up teaching assignments. The present stipulation that a professor should possess a PhD should be relaxed in the case of these practicing scientists, engineers and managers as their rich experience in the field concerned is much more valuable than a PhD whose worth is open to debate.

Autonomy will ensure that the academic institutions will not be controlled by the government while being accountable to their different stakeholders like the students, parents and so on.

In this context, it is encouraging to note that the Union Human Resource Development Ministry has decided to intensify its search for potential institutes that can be accorded autonomy with the freedom to design their own curriculum, and frame their own admission and examination rules. In a letter

sent to universities and colleges in March 2007, the UGC has admitted that despite various efforts by the Centre, the number of colleges coming forward to go independent is still very small. At present there are 230 autonomous colleges and 48 universities across the country. With some recent studies clearly indicating that the country will need more than 100 universities in the ensuing years if the demand for higher education is to be met, autonomous colleges are being seen as the answer to the problem.

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I am proud of being an Indian. I am part of indivisible unity that is Indian nationality. I am indispensable to this noble edifice and without me this splendid structure is incomplete.

I am an essential element, which has gone to build India. I can never surrender this claim

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad

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