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Higher education system in India: Issues and recommendations

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Abstract

Higher education system has a vital role to play for the nation's holistic growth which comprise of manufacturing, societal, economic etc. Indian higher education system has third largest student registration in the world, next to the US and China. Since freedom, India as a developing country is continually taking a step forward in the field of education. Although the challenges have been numerous but at the same time lot of opportunities have been there to overcome these challenges and to make higher education system much enhanced. It needs greater precision and answerability. India need well experienced and highly knowledgeable citizens who can drive our country nation forward. The role of Indian higher education institutions in the current time is to provide quality based education in the field of education, research etc. to give power to youth for self sufficiency. This paper includes the major challenges and issues that India is presently facing in higher education.

Keywords: Employment, higher education, new education policy, developed nation, innovation, research

Introduction

Higher Education is the backbone of any country's holistic development. It is the catalyst for cultural, societal, economic and industrial development of any nation. As a nation, India has the third largest Higher Education System next to USA and China. 75 years after Independence, India has not only emerged as a robust knowledge society but also as a great purveyor of highly skilled human resources to the world. As a system that offers quality based learning and gives an individual a purpose for life and the skill and ability for employability, making him thus a useful society, Higher Education in India has come a long way in fulfilling this task. Besides it is the key to economic and industrial growth that is propelling India towards a developed nation. And yet there are many challenges that remain and need to be surmounted with the gusto that the only a vibrant democracy can forge through.

Status Quo

Today as it stands, the Higher Education System in India comprises diverse institutions of Higher Education like universities, colleges, institutes of national importance, polytechnics etc. Universities are also of different types like central universities which are formed by government of India, by an act of Parliament which are responsible for arranging and distributing resources required by UGC, State universities, Deemed universities aided and unaided and Private Universities. As of Jan 2022, India has over one thousand universities, with a break up of 55 central universities, 415 state universities, 120 deemed universities, 360 private universities and 160 Institutes of National Importance which include AIIMS, IIMs, IITs, IISERs, IITs and NITs among others.

The entry of the private sector into the higher education system had fuelled the growth of many universities and colleges especially in the STEM field. In fact more than 60% of all Higher Education institutions in India belong to the private sector and offer very high quality education at competitive prices. This is a heartening thing indeed,

Lacunae

Gap between Supply and Demand

Despite such large infrastructure, there is a significant disparity between supply and demand in the Higher Education Sector. With a soaring population, and almost an adult illiteracy population of 287 million, and the Gross Enrolment Ration (GER) standing at only 15%

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(which is minuscule compared to developed nations), India stares at an abyss which needs to be urgently filled. There is another big gap too, that of faculty members in universities and colleges both in Humanities, Social Sciences, Medical and Engineering. The void is so glaring that even in the centrally funded universities 6,535 of 19,349 sanctioned faculty posts in 46 central universities remain vacant (IE 03 Feb 2022).

Budgetary Allocation

The Government's allocation for Education is by far lesser than developed nations. Yet while it allocated 93, 244 crore in FY 2021-2022 of which the Department of Higher Education received Rs 39,466.52 crore in last Budget but allocated Rs 38350.65 crore for 2021-22, registering a dip of Rs 1115.87 crore. The disappointing factor is however that the unspent amount from the allocated budget just for the centrally funded universities stood at 7,143 crores. This tells the story if why growth is being impeded even though the excuse for this is being put at the door of the pandemic.

The Innovation and Research Syndrome.

High quality research and innovation is the bulwark of development. However, India has been marred by poor quality of research and very few innovative efforts that have made their mark in the world. Very few of India's top institutions therefore figure in the World Rankings. It was a bold move for the FM to allocate a budget of 50000 crore for Research and Innovation in FY 2021-2022 to be spent over a period of five years. This is expected to rejuvenate and revitalize the research ecosystem in the country and move the country forward.

Poor Infrastructure

Poor Infrastructural facilities dodge institutions of higher learning in India. In spite of the rapid increase in digital infrastructure throughout the world, the digital ecosystem has not percolated the systems of higher education in India. Lack of research facilities, labs and libraries, even proper buildings and furniture, and even basic requirements like restrooms and common rooms are not found in many educational institutions across India. The failure to judiciously use the money allocated and the systemic corruption on the top of it results in no or poor infrastructure that comes neither in quality nor quantity.

Gender Equity

The enrolment of the girl child is a cause of concern even from the primary level. The Beti "Bacchao, Beti Pado" campaign has done much to alleviate this. However, the GER at the Higher Education level has not changed drastically. For a nation to be holistically developed, its women too must be empowered but unfortunately this is not taking place at a healthy rate.

Employment and Employability

Education that does not make you employable and does not provide you with an employment is of no use at all. As per the "Consumer Pyramids survey conducted by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy Pvt. Ltd, (CMIE) between September and December 2021 among rural and urban households in India showed that, people who were graduates including those who went further in their education had the highest unemployment rate in India in 2021, with a share of

19.4 percent, made up the highest unemployment rate in 2021. This was followed by individuals who completed their higher secondary education (10th - 12th), who had an unemployment rate of just above ten percent" (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1001039/india-unemployment-rate-by-education-level/>) Education must translate into jobs or this can lead to social unrest and crime thereby, having a decadent effect on society and economy.

The Question of Quality Education

Taking all the above factors into account, it is obvious that the provision of quality higher education to such a huge population is a humongous task. Obsolete methodology, obsolete infrastructure, obsolete curriculum and even obsolete faculty members hinder the quality of education provided in Higher Education sector. The task is difficult but not impossible and the Govt. of India has taken the steps in the right direction to address the problems at hand.

NEP and Higher Education.

The New Education Policy promulgated in 2020 is a game changer. It envisages a complete change in the ecosystem of higher education which can have a long lasting and quality impact on the system. Some of its salient features include the establishment of a single regulatory body called the Higher Education Commission, the establishment of single point entrance system through the National Testing Agency, the provision of multiple entry and exit points for students through a credit based system that allows for greater flexibility in the earning and learning process with the credits being transferred through Academic Bank of Credits; Quality technology-based options for adult learning such as apps, online courses/modules, satellite-based TV channels, online books, and ICT-equipped libraries and Adult education Centre's; use of technology for education planning, teaching, learning, assessment, teacher, school, and student training and e-content to be available in regional languages, starting with 8 major languages – Kannada, Odia, Bengali among others to join the e-courses and of course the establishment of foreign universities in India.

The NEP attempts to remove the bureaucratic tangles of the higher education system by having one regulatory body, it offers increased flexibility for autonomy and autonomous institutions for innovation and growth. The plan for Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERU) gives great hopes for the future. The vision of Multidisciplinary Higher Education Institutions in every district by 2030 with credit-based courses and projects in the areas of community engagement and service, environmental education, and value-based education is another area of exploration and that in application can boost the higher education sector. Besides, the proposal for establishment of foreign universities will give a fillip to quality education. As a boost the research and innovation the Govt. had allocated 50000 crores for research and innovation. For example the Govt. introduced the Impacting Research, Innovation, and Technology (IMPRINT) and Impactful Policy Research in Social Science (IMPRESS) Schemes which have kicked off. Thus the NEP 2020 has already kick started a positive move in the Higher Education Sector.

Following the NEP, a unique scheme called "Udaan" for girl students has been initiated by the Central government. In this scheme mentoring and scholarship is provided to enable commendable girl students for their journey from

schools to technical education without any complexity and also to encourage learning of mathematics and science at senior secondary school level by giving free resources. The scheme focuses on overcoming the issue of low enrolment ratio of girl students in important technical institutions and enables them to receive special motivation and support so that they can join these institutions and go on to take leadership roles in the future.

On similar line, the Central Government has also started 'Unnat Bharat Abhiyan' for the support of technologies from the laboratory to the ground. About 150 rural areas have so far been adopted by premier institutions across the country under the scheme.

PM e-VIDYA to Digital Infra for Education

The education sector received another shot in the arm with the announcement in Budget 2022, the expansion of e-Vidya that is, the "One class, one TV channel" initiative from 12 to 200 TV channels will include students from all backgrounds and also do away with the lack of digital infrastructure. Similarly, the proposal for a Digital University is path breaking in a post pandemic world. The emphasis on skilling, reskilling and up skilling so as to stay relevant and align with Industry requirements is also a great step taken by the govt.

Recommendations

There is no doubt that the govt. is seized of the problems and challenges that face the Higher Education Sector. It has studied the landscape well and made policy changes that fit in with the requirement of the ecosystem. However, grandiose plans need to be implemented on the ground. The first thing that must be done is the increase in the gross enrolment ratio. It is pity that despite govt. initiatives in this direction, it has not paid off as it should. The strengthening of primary and universal education as well as secondary education must be made to have more enrolment at the tertiary level.

Secondly, the quality of HE must be improved drastically. This can be done by giving more funding to district level colleges and institutions so that they can improve their infrastructure, renew their syllabus, hire faculty and run their institutions effectively. The need for skilling that is suitable for employability in the local environment must be looked into if there is to be motivation among locals to enroll in colleges.

Thirdly, international quality of research and innovation must be encouraged with proper funding, MOUs, guidance and infrastructural facilities. The vision of MERUs must take off practically too ensure that India figures gradually in single figures in the world rankings. Specialization is the need of the hour and just as China has focused on forming on its top nine universities and has successfully brought them higher up the World Rankings, India too must do so.

Fourthly, the injection and spending of funds must be increased. Research and innovation needs adequate funds, both in Science and Technology as well as Social Science and Humanities. While the pandemic saw unspent balance, the future will prove funds to be insufficient for innovative research especially in Science and Technology. This is where partnerships with private industries must be strengthened and result oriented SMART goals be set to yield benefits for both and for the country as well.

Fifthly, control of regulatory bodies even like that of to be formed Higher Education Commission should be limited. Instead these bodies should serve as facilitators rather than regulators. There is an urgent need to decentralize and deregulate higher education; appoint able leaders as heads of institutions by giving them training in academic administration and financial management and keep decisions of academic institutions outside the interference of politics.

India has moved into a knowledge based society with digital technology and online learning modules coming into their own. The digital infrastructure for higher education is rapidly improving and with the establishment of a digital university it will be firmly established. However, the task is onerous since quality is to be maintained while reaching out to a vast population who have been encouraged to enroll in HE. At the same time the gap between graduation and employment must be reduced to zero so that education becomes a fruitful and meaningful exercise. There is sanguine hopes that this will come to fruition in the years ahead since India can afford the necessary human and material resources to effect that change.

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