

Towards a Knowledge Society – State Contribution in Higher Education

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Abstract

With universities becoming a seat of power and the principal driver of change in any society, it has become imperative for the state to play an active role in the growth and proliferation of institutions of higher education. No more is the need greater than in countries like India that have long borne the ill-effects of improper planning and negligence of human resource, especially in the education sector. The state machinery in India has thankfully begun to recognize the fallacy within its system and put the wheels in motion towards bringing in the much-needed change. Educational institutions too on their part are demanding a rightful place in the scheme of things with most universities vying for a coveted place in the world university ranking list. State intervention is critical now if the planning and strategizing from both fronts has to bear fruition. This paper attempts to explore the issue of state initiatives in the field of higher education in India.

Keywords: Knowledge society, University, Higher education (HE), Administration

Introduction

It does not come as a surprise when we hear it said today that we live in a 'knowledge society'. According to the report of the committee on 'India Vision 2020' (Planning Commission, 2002), the indicators of national development have changed from 'manufacturing' to 'services' and from 'capital resources' to 'knowledge resources'. The role of education, especially higher education, is crucial in this regard because it is the starting point of the knowledge resources.

Higher education in India is going through a sea change. According to the MHRD (Ministry of Human Resources and Development) report (Department Of Higher Education Planning, 2011), India is experiencing an exponential growth in the field of education since independence. Sources from MHRD state that the higher education sector has witnessed a tremendous increase in its institutional

capacity in the years since independence. The number of universities/university-level institutions has increased 18 times from 27 in 1950 to 504 in 2009. The sector boasts 42 central universities, 243 state universities, 53 state private universities, 130 deemed universities, 33 institutions of national importance (established under Acts of Parliament) and five institutions (established under various state legislations). The number of colleges has also registered manifold increase with just 578 in 1950 growing to be more than 30,000 in 2011. The quantum growth in the HE sector is spearheaded by the universities, which are the highest seat of learning. (Department of Higher Education Planning, 2011)

It is apparent that the field of higher education in India has come a long way since the early years. Traditionally, Indian education to some extent has been elitist, with only a select few from the chosen class of people having access to education. Fortunately, a lot has changed since those

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days. What was once a niche area meant for a select few is now a vast sector catering to a mass population.

According to Arun Nigvekar, then Chairman of UGC, the higher education system in India has grown in a remarkable way, particularly in the post-independence period, to become one of the largest systems of its kind in the world. However, the system has many issues of concern at present, like financing and management including access, equity and relevance, reorientation of programs by laying emphasis on health consciousness, values and ethics and quality of higher education, together with the assessment of institutions and their accreditation. These issues are important for the country, as it is now engaged in the use of higher education as a powerful tool to build a knowledge-based information society of the 21st century. Universities have to perform multiple roles, like creating new knowledge, acquiring new capabilities and producing an intelligent human resource pool, through challenging teaching, research and extension activities so as to balance both the need and the demand (UGC report, 2003).

This is more pertinent to institutions that have been designated as Deemed to be University, under section 3 of the UGC Act of 1956, since such institutions are striving to create an identity uniquely their own, independent of their past associations as affiliated colleges. Presently, the driving concern in such Deemed to be Universities is the issue of administration and management. If policy changes have to be brought about, there has to be a conscious move towards systemic changes in the administration of the educational institution. They are not fully implemented because of faulty management of the institutes of higher education. The administrative structure of the universities, which was devised in the pre-independence period, seems to be still continuing. The new challenges facing the system of higher education in the country cannot be met without a total overhaul of the structure of management of higher education institutions. This has become all the more necessary because of globalization, which requires talent, competence, drive, initiative and innovation at several levels. This cannot be achieved without overhauling the administrative set up of the universities/institutions.

The concern of the UGC has generally been focused towards 'research and innovation, engagement with social concerns and leadership development'. In order to achieve this, strategic plans of most universities in India included the said themes as the primary objective. This helped in concentrating the resources in major directions in order to maximize benefits to stakeholders like students, prospective employers, related agencies, and society, as well as internal stakeholders such as faculty and staff. The framework put all the core issues in the widest perspective possible.

The aim is to conceptualize, internalize, and operationalize

the key components and implementation process through an operational plan that helps to be in tune with the proposed strategic plan. The other objective is to ensure that the conceptual and practical aspects of strategic planning in the context of university's growing role finally gets its shape ready to be applied in real situations.

Review of Literature

For some time now, people in India as in other countries have realized the true value of education. The realization that in the education of the masses lies the path to achieving the goals of the country is crystal clear to most people, especially people who are involved in policy making. The irony cannot be any deeper than it already is. India is a country that has literally spelt out in no uncertain terms that as a society it stands for good-quality affordable education for all who want it. The Directive Principles of State Policy as enshrined in the Indian Constitution in actuality make it imperative for the state to intervene frequently in the realization of the same; unfortunately factors such as lack of political will, corruption and the sheer inability of the political class to do it has seen to this objective remaining unachieved or just barely achieved. Despite the dismal status of education in India, things are gradually seeing a turnaround. The reason is the pressure on government is huge to bring in the much-needed change and government bodies are expected to come out of their stupor and begin to take cognizance of the fact that if India does not provide the necessary push now, countries like China and South Korea will do just that. It is a reality that many smaller countries have long overtaken India in growth and development, leaving her to merely scramble after crumbs that are left over. This requires the state to step in and provide the thrust to give momentum to higher education in India; otherwise we stare at certain brain-drain all over again.

Says CN Krishna, retired professor of Anna University, in *The Hindu* "If the states do not participate more in decision-making in the higher education and research sector and all policies are decided around central institutions, not much can be done to stop the precipitous downward slide of the nation's higher education and research sector."

Methodology

The strength of the paper lies largely in culling information from secondary data pre-existent in public domain. A careful perusal, analysis and filtering of the said data has opened up a clear understanding of issues related to higher education in India and elsewhere. Much of the understanding comes from MHRD reports and Planning Commission reports that have meticulously documented state intervention in higher education in India. Added to this are many articles and journal write-ups that further enhance our knowledge on the concerned issue.

Discussion

Though India has been (traditionally) and is still seen as a knowledge-based society, it is also a society where caste, class, language, ethnicity, region, rural/urban status have created many divides, preventing knowledge to be accessed by most and restricting it to only a select percentage, especially higher education. The impact of social development initiatives and pro-education programs undertaken by the respective governments in India post-independence have been small and slow. The need of the hour is to make a great, grand move to convert India into a thriving and enervating knowledge society.

The potential of a knowledge society is there for all to see – politicians, business houses, policy makers, and media institutions. If India wants to contribute to the 21st century world economy in any way, it has to be by finding solutions to problems such as economic deprivation, unemployment, environmental disaster, immorality and corruption, and social exclusion. This can happen only through building India into a knowledge society. The state has worked sincerely towards this goal as can be seen from the several steps taken towards the creation of a knowledge society.

The Planning Commission in its report 'India a knowledge super power: Strategy for transformation' asserts that the 21st century will be the century of knowledge and only those nations will survive and succeed which will build themselves by understanding the dynamics of knowledge and create a true knowledge society.

The important factor here is to tap into the resources locked up in the millions of young Indians that represent a huge demographic entity, which pay huge dividends in the years to come. It is estimated that India represents a big percentage of people feeding into the higher education domain, touted to be almost the third largest in the world and has the capacity to overtake the US and China in the coming years to become the largest entity of higher education in the world. Though higher education in India is riddled with many problems, if tweaked to the country's advantage it will surely pay rich dividends.

Says Sharad Jaipuria of the Jaipuria Industries and Jaipuria Business School, "A major concern for India is creation of employable workforce to harness our demographic dividend. According to Industry reports supported by NASSCOM, only 25% of technical graduates and about 15% of other graduates are considered employable by IT/ITES industry. Another survey conducted on 800 MBA students across different cities in India revealed that only 23% of them were considered employable. Hence, there is an immediate need for a holistic and symbiotic association between industry and academia to make employable graduates. There is also an immediate need for moving from 'generic model' of education to a 'learner-centered' model

of education. The students should be mentored to make their careers in the areas of their strength and abilities."

The All India Council for Technical Education in collaboration with the Planning Commission in its report says, "Despite the expansion that has occurred, it is evident that the system is under stress to provide a sufficient volume of skilled human power, which is equipped with the required knowledge and technical skills to cater to the demands of the economy. The accelerated growth of our economy has already created shortages of high-quality technical manpower. Unlike the developed countries, where the young working age population is fast shrinking with higher dependency ratios, India has a demographic advantage with about 70% of the population below the age of 35 years. But this advantage can only be realized if we expand opportunities for our youth on a massive scale and in diverse fields of basic science, engineering and technology, healthcare, architecture, management, etc. This is possible only if we initiate rapid expansion along with long-overdue reforms in the higher, technical, and professional education sectors."

It further goes on to state that "Expansion, inclusion, and rapid improvement in quality throughout the higher and technical education system by enhancing public spending, encouraging private initiatives, and initiating the long-overdue major institutional and policy reforms will form the core of the Eleventh Plan effort. Our long-term goal is to set India as a nation in which all those who aspire for good quality higher education can access it, irrespective of their paying capacity."

Conclusion

From the discussion, it is very clear that India is on the cusp of realizing great achievements and the only factor that seems to be an awkward obstacle is access to higher education. If there is judicious state involvement and intervention in providing the deserving individuals access to higher education, then the dream of establishing a knowledge society is not too far. It requires the concerted effort of the state machinery, private players, educators and knowledge lovers to make this happen. We see a clear move made by subsequent governments to bring about this change but other stake holders have to do their bit as well towards this objective.

As professor PS Sreejith of Cochin University of Science puts it, "In this century, when knowledge has become the most important component for economic and social development, the job of a university is not limited to awarding degrees. It has to impart a sense of self-respect and confidence to its students. Every student should come out of the university as a person who can stand on his or her own, confident enough to enjoy an independent life while contributing his/her bit to society."

The above analogy, if viewed at a macro level, hints at the collective effort of all towards making India a strong contender for the position of a country with an independent voice, making it clear that India matters in the global scene on all fronts – political, economic and social. This can happen only if Indians are backed by both skill and knowledge and India is able to project itself as a 'knowledge society'.

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