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Higher education in India: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

The vision and mission of higher education in India is to realize the country's human resources potential to its fullest in an equitable and inclusive manner. Indian higher education system is the third largest in the world, next to the United States and China. Since Independence, India as a developing nation, is continuously progressing in the field of education. The higher education sector, in recent decades, has witnessed a phenomenal growth in many aspects such as its enrolment, institutional capacity, teacher-student ratio, etc. The rapid expansion of the higher education system has brought up several relevant issues related to equity, efficiency, and access to higher education in the country. The present paper holds an immediate significance of creating awareness about many issues of concern to be taken care of by the stakeholders on the national as well as the global platforms.

Keywords: Higher, education, Challenges, opportunities, platforms

Introduction

Higher education is very important for a developing country like India, and it encourages growth of human development. Higher education in India has experienced immense expansion since Independence. India's higher education system is the world's third largest in terms of students, next only 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 15 per cent of its youth in higher education as compared to 23 per cent in China. At present there are 993 government-recognized Universities in India out of which 54 are Central Universities, 126 are Deemed Universities, 13 are Open Universities and rest are State Universities. Most of these Universities in India have affiliating colleges where undergraduate courses are being taught. According to the Department of Higher Education in India, there are 36,308 colleges, including 2200 exclusive women's colleges functioning under these universities and institutions. The total enrolment in higher education has been estimated to be 37.4 million with 19.2 million male and 18.2 million female enrolments. Thus, females constitute 48.6% of the total enrolment. The total number of teachers are 14,16,299, out of which about 57.8% are male teachers and 42.2% are female teachers.

Today, knowledge is power. The more knowledge one has, the more empowered one is. However, India continues to face severe challenges. Despite growing investment in education, 25% of its population is still illiterate; only 15% of Indian students reach high school, and just 7% graduate (Masani, 2008) ^[2]. The quality of education in India, whether at primary or higher education level, is significantly poor as compared to major developing nations of the world. As of 2008, India's post-secondary institutions offer only enough seats for 7% of India's college-age population, 25% of teaching positions nationwide are vacant, and 57% of College Professors lack either a Master's or Ph.D. degree (Newsweek, 2011) ^[3]. As of 2011, there are 1522 degree-granting Engineering Colleges in India with an annual student intake of 582,000 (Science and Technology Education, 2009) ^[4] plus 1,244 Polytechnics with an annual intake of 265,000. However, these institutions face shortage of faculty and concerns have been raised over the quality of education therein (Mitra, 2008) ^[5].

Challenges in Higher Education in India

It is our 75th year of independence and yet, our education system has not been developed fully. We are not able to list a single university in the top 100 universities of the world. Various governments changed during these six decades. They tried to boost the education system and implemented various education policies, but they were not adequate in matching the educational standards of the developed nations of the world.

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UGC is continuously working with a focused approach on quality education in the higher education sector in India. Still, we are facing innumerable problems and challenges in our education system. Some of the basic challenges in higher education system in India are discussed below:

Enrollment: The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of India in higher education is only 15% which is quite low as compared to the developed as well as other developing countries. With the increase of enrolments at school level, the supply of higher education institutes is insufficient to meet the growing demand in the country.

Equity: There is no equity in GER among different sections of the society. According to previous studies, the GER in higher education in India among male and female varies to a greater extent. There are regional variations too. Some states have high GER whereas some are lagging the national GER. This reflects a significant imbalance within the higher education system.

Quality: Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional, multilevel, and a dynamic concept. Ensuring quality in higher education is amongst the foremost challenges being faced in India today. Despite the government continuously focusing on the quality of education, there are several colleges and universities in India which are unable to meet the minimum requirements laid down by the UGC. Consequently, our universities are not able to mark their place among the top universities of the world.

Infrastructure: Poor infrastructure is another challenge to the higher education system of India. The institutes run by the public sector specially suffer from poor physical facilities and infrastructure. There are many colleges which are functioning on second or third floors of a building where readymade hosiery or photocopy shops occupy the ground or first floor!

Political Interference: Most of the educational Institutions are owned by the political leaders, who are playing a key role in governing bodies of the Universities. They are using the innocent students for their selfish means. Students organize politically motivated campaigns, forget their own objectives, and begin to develop their careers in politics.

Accreditation: As per the data provided by the NAAC, as of June 2010, "not even 25% of the total higher education institutions in the country were accredited. And among those accredited, only 30% of the universities and 45% of the colleges were found to be of quality to be ranked at 'A' level"

Research and Innovation: There are very few scholars in our country whose writing is cited by famous western authors. There is inadequate focus on research in higher education institutes. There are insufficient resources and facilities, as well as limited numbers of quality faculty to advise students. Most of the research scholars are without fellowships or not getting their fellowships on time which directly or indirectly affects their research. Moreover, Indian Higher Education Institutions are poorly connected to research centers. This constitutes a major area of challenge to higher education in India

Structure of Higher Education: Management of Indian education faces the challenges of over-centralization, bureaucratic red-tape and lack of accountability, transparency, and professionalism. As a result of an increase in the number of affiliated colleges and students, the burden

of administrative functions of universities has significantly increased and the core focus on academics and research has been diluted (Kumar, 2015) ^[8].

Opportunities in Higher Education

India is a large country, with an estimated population of young people aged between 18 to 23 years to be around 150 millions. The sheer size of the market offers huge opportunities for development of the higher education sector in India. India now boasts of having more than 33,000 colleges and 659 universities, which has been quite a remarkable growth during the last six decades. Unfortunately, the educational infrastructure of India is inadequate to handle such huge volumes. Despite the government spending extensively on the educational sector, it is still too insufficient to meet the growing requirements. Therefore, the higher Education sector in India has now been identified as one of the promising areas for private and foreign investments as it offers immense investment opportunities in both non-regulated and regulated segments (Nexus Novus, 26 July, 2013).

Indian higher education system is growing very fast irrespective of various challenges. There is no reason why these challenges cannot be overcome with the help of new-age learning tools. It is relatively easy for a country like India to overcome these problems and bring a paradigm shift in the country's higher education sector. In such a vibrant country, if a huge population is properly educated, the possibilities are endless. If knowledge is imparted using advanced digital teaching and learning tools and society is made aware of where we are currently lagging behind, our country can easily emerge as one of the most developed nations in the world. There are opportunities for strategic engagement and capacity- building in higher education leadership and management at the state level. There are arenas for India to collaborate at national and international level in fields of systemic reform, including quality assurance, international credit recognition, and unified national qualifications framework. Equality of educational opportunity in higher education is considered essential because higher education is a powerful tool for reducing or eliminating income and wealth disparities. The idea of equalizing educational opportunities also lies in the fact that "the ability to profit by higher education is spread among all classes of people. There are great reserves of untapped ability in the society; if offered the chance they can rise to the top. A great deal of talent of the highest level is, in fact, lost by an inegalitarian system of education" (Balachander, 1986) ^[10].

The need to enhance the employability of graduates is presenting entry points for collaboration in enterprise education and entrepreneurship, links with industry, research skills and a wide range of transferable skills, including English. The emerging interest in Indian higher education institutions in the vocational skills market provides areas for potential engagement with international partners. There is a need to build stronger relationships and increase mutual understanding in higher education by increasing support and participation in platforms such as conferences, workshops, seminars, which enable debate and dialogue with other countries of the world. (British Council, 2014).

Suggestions for Improving the System of Higher Education

There is a need to implement innovative and transformational approach from primary to higher education level to make the Indian educational system globally more relevant and competitive. Higher educational institutes need to improve their quality and reputation. There should be a good infrastructure of colleges and universities which may attract national as well as international students. Government must promote collaboration between Indian higher education institutes and top international institutes and generate linkages between national research laboratories and research centers of top institutions for better quality and collaborative research. There is a need to focus on the graduate students by providing them such courses in which they can achieve excellence, gain deeper subject knowledge to get jobs in companies after graduation, which would reduce the unnecessary rush into higher education. Both public and private Universities and colleges must be away from political affiliations, favoritism, and money laundering to cleanse the education system. There should be a multidisciplinary approach in higher education so that students' knowledge may not be restricted only to his own subjects.

Conclusion

Education is a process by which a person's body, mind and character are formed and strengthened. It is bringing together of head, heart and mind and thereby enabling a person to develop an all- rounded personality, identifying the best in him or her. Higher education in India has expanded very rapidly in the last seven decades after Independence yet it is not equally accessible to all. India is today one of the fastest developing countries of the world with the annual growth rate going above 9%. Still a large section of the population remains illiterate, and many children do not get even primary education. This has not only excluded a large section of the population from contributing to the development of the country fully, but it has also prevented them from utilizing the benefits of whatever development has taken place for the benefit of the people. No doubt India is facing various challenges in higher education, but to tackle these challenges and to boost higher education is of utmost importance. India is a country of huge human resource potential. To utilize this potential properly is the issue which needs to be urgently studied and discussed. Numerous opportunities are available but the method of getting benefits from these opportunities and the path to making them accessible to others is a matter of concern. To sustain a steady rate of growth, there is need to increase the number of institutes and the quality of higher education in India. For us to reach and achieve these future requirements, there is an urgent need to reevaluate the financial resources, access and equity, quality standards, relevance, infrastructure and finally to gauge the responsiveness to these measures.

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