



Promoting Excellence in Higher Education-Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

The higher education system in India has successfully addressed many challenges and difficulties, but it still faces many more. In order to provide context for these challenges, understanding the system and how higher education is organized is necessary. The vision of higher education in India is to realize the country's human resources potential to its fullest with equity and inclusion. The higher education sector, in recent decades, has witnessed a tremendous growth in many aspects such as its institutional capacity, enrolment, teacher-student ratio, etc. The rapid expansion of the higher education system at the same time has brought several pertinent issues related to equity, efficiency, excellence and access to higher education in the country. The present paper holds an immediate significance of creating awareness of many issues of concern to be taken care of by the stakeholders in the national as well as the global levels. The study is also unique in the sense that it brings about better understanding of the present scenario in the higher education system in the country and its pattern of growth given the opportunities and challenges to the system under consideration. The present study throws a gainful insight on financing schemes and enrolment aspects of higher education in India.

Keywords: Higher education, Opportunities and challenges, Enrolment, Privatization.

Introduction

The higher education sector, in recent decades, has witnessed a tremendous growth in many aspects such as its institutional capacity, enrolment, teacher-student ratio, etc. The rapid expansion of the higher education system as a whole has brought several pertinent issues related to equity, efficiency, excellence and access to higher education in the country. Though contributions of private unaided colleges and universities in meeting the demand for higher education are appreciable, the mushrooming growth of these institutions has resulted in the largest system of higher education with the weakest quality. The vision of higher education in India is to realize the

Country's human resources potential to its fullest with equity and inclusion, the nation has embarked upon initiating a number of development-linked strategies to promote higher education. The vision of higher education in India is to realize the country's human resources potential to its fullest with equity and inclusion. The higher education sector, in recent decades, has witnessed a tremendous growth in many aspects such as its institutional capacity, enrolment, teacher-student ratio, etc. The rapid expansion of the higher education system at the same time has brought several pertinent issues related to equity, efficiency, excellence and access to higher education in the country.



This paper presents a bird's eye view of the structure and salient features of higher education sector prevalent in India. An attempt has also been made in this paper to discuss the trends in the growth of enrolment and funding of higher education in India. The basic problems facing higher education in the country includes inadequate infrastructure and facilities, large vacancies in faculty positions, low student enrolment rate, outdated teaching methods, declining research standards, unmotivated students, overcrowded classrooms and widespread geographic, ethnic and socio-economic imbalances. The structure of higher education institutions is cumbersome primarily due to affiliation and funding sources. Moreover, the database relating to higher education is inadequate. In the absence of proper information on the relevant aspects of higher education, it is not possible to take a stock of the past achievements and ensure future development of this sector. It is in this background, the present paper relies on the outcomes of the reviews and reports of various government and nongovernment agencies.

In the light of the issues discussed earlier and the available literature relating to status of higher education in India the following specific objectives are framed to present this macro level study.

- To analyse the present status of higher education system in India
- To highlight the opportunities and challenges faced by the higher education system in India.
- To examine variations in the enrolment in higher education across states, gender and social groups.

- To discuss trends in the financing of higher education To suggest measures to overcome the issues relate to enrolment and financing of higher education.

The present paper is a macro level and descriptive study in nature, based on secondary data collected from the published and unpublished records, reports and contributions of several institutions, organizations and individuals in India. Specifically, the secondary sources include Annual Reports of UGC, Planning Commission, Education Department of Ministry of Human Resource Development, Economic Survey and other journals, books and websites. As these secondary sources have obvious limitations of sampling and dimensional studies, the present study could only be a macro analysis of higher education system in the country as a whole.

India is one the oldest civilizations on earth. Also known as Bharat and Hindustan and officially termed as the 'Republic of India', it is the largest liberal democracy of the world. India is divided into 28 states and 7 union territories. India is also the land of the Vedas - the oldest scriptures in the world. It is divided in four-volumes and is regarded as the storehouse of national thoughts. Today, India is the world's seventh largest country in terms of area and second in terms of population. The sights, the ancient temples and the lush paddy fields make the country unique and amazing. It has 22 major languages with 844 dialects, making this country and its people culturally diverse. The secular nature of India has attracted philosophers and researchers from across the globe to explore India.



India possesses a highly developed higher education system and it is the third largest in the world next to China and United States. Higher Education in India refers to the education obtained after completing 12 years of schooling or equivalent and is of the duration of at least nine months (full time) or after completing 10 years of schooling and is of the duration of at least 3 years. Also, India has the advantage of English being the primary language apart from the respective regional languages in higher education and research. In India, unlike in western countries, higher education is predominantly a public sector activity and it is perceived as public good. In response to increasing expectations of the people in the country, the central government continues to play a leading role in the formulation and implementation of educational policies and action plans. At the apex level, the University Grants Commission is the main governing body and it embodies the enforcement of its standards, advises and makes recommendations to the government.

India has also developed an Open University system to encourage distance learning. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was the pioneer and now there are 14 open universities in India. The Distance Education Council of India (DEC), New Delhi regulates these universities, maintains the standards, encourages and organizes the activities of Open and Distance learning (ODL) in the country. Higher education sector has expanded due to distance mode of education supported by new information and communication technology (ICT) as it costs 66 per cent less and the students need not leave their homes or profession. The internet and satellite technology are

being put to use to further the cause of distance education.

Higher education benefits the individuals specifically as it equips young people with skills to cope with the rapidly changing labor market needs. It gives individuals powers to get better employment, higher salaries and higher propensity to consume and save. Altogether, investment in higher education enhances the labor power in order to trade it for higher wages. For all these good reasons, a country that provides educational opportunities to its citizens is far more likely to reduce poverty and promote economic growth and thereby achieve social inclusion and India is no exception in this regard.

One of the greatest challenges to higher education in India is providing access to the growing segments of the population demanding post-secondary education. The government data reveals that one out of seven children in India goes to college. It indicates that the nation suffers from both a crippling quantity and quality challenge as far as the higher education is concerned.

Next, equity is more a difficult challenge than access to higher education. Historically equity has been the major concern of the planners in India. The disparity is found to be due to urban-rural divide, inequality in income distribution, gender and religion, etc. The geographical spread of higher education institutes remains highly skewed with a large concentration in big cities and towns. During 2007-2012, overall institutional density increased from 10 to 14 institutions per 1000 sq.km. At the same time, a large number of habitations and settlement clusters with a population between 10,000 and 100,000 are without any proximate



institution of higher education. Furthermore, the higher education sector suffers from imbalanced growth across the country. The rural areas, which represent about 65% of the total population, have just 20% of the total professional colleges.

The growth trends in enrolment in higher education are examined in this section with the help of the data collected from secondary sources as mentioned above. The macro-level estimates regarding the number of students enrolled in higher education are presented in this section. According to 2010 data, India's GER was a meager (13.8 percent) compared with the global average of around 26 percent. Australia, Russia and the U.S., to name a few examples, have Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) upwards of 75 percent. The Ministry of Human Resources & Development had set a target of a 30 percent GER for India by 2020. In the last four decades the student enrolment in higher education has grown 12 times and a GER reached close to 18 per cent in 2011-2012. However, the problem is that the existing capacity to absorb the increasing numbers coming out of the high school system into the college system is inadequate and cause massive mismatch between demand and supply frontiers. However, given India's demographic and socio-economic conditions, the growth with respect to enrolment is quite impressive.

Higher education in India includes various stages like graduation, post-graduation, diploma/certificate and research. Hence it is significant to analyze the stage-wise enrolment at the level of higher education. Table-III shows the Stage-wise Enrolment of students in higher education indicating that the

enrolment in all stages has increased considerably in the last few years. Privatisation and commercialization of the higher education in India is a major concern as it will retard our human resource development at least in two ways (Mallick 2005). First, by shaping education prohibitively expensive and thereby making it unaffordable for the vast multitude, and, secondly, by determining the education priorities, not according to our national needs but to those of a minuscule minority of blood-suckers. The Central and State Governments jointly fund higher education. The Central Government's share is about 30 per cent while the State Government's share is 70 per cent mostly under the non-plan head. Overall, central funding of State Institutions is meager. State universities and colleges face serious financial difficulties that often result in poor quality. The decline in public funding in the last two decades has subsequently affected the standards due to increasing costs on non-salary items and emoluments of staff along with decline of resources. Although government plans to augment the public funding for education by 30-40% in the 12th Plan, the government is looking at ways to attract private & foreign investments into the sector to achieve the target without compromising on quality and relevance.

Education loans have become a popular method of funding higher education in India as the higher education is becoming expensive. It came into existence in 1995 started by SBI Bank and after that many banks started offering student loans. The spread of self-financing institutions that have no funding from the government for higher education in fields of engineering, medical and management charge higher



fees than their government aided counterparts. This tempts the students aspiring for professional degrees to go for education loan. Large public sector as well as the private sector banks offers these educational loans.

From the data analyzed and discussed so far, it is observed that the higher education system of India is characterized with the following features.

- Higher education is the shared responsibility of both the Centre and the States.
- The Indian higher education system is inflicted by large rural-urban and gender divide. Higher education institutions are largely located in cities and main towns.
- The students enrolled in colleges located in remote rural areas are from socially and economically backward families.
- About 70 per cent of them are scholarship holders.
- Vast diversity among the institutions in terms of structure, courses offered, faculties and departments.
- Lack of flexibility to students in selection of the courses and subjects of their choice
- Lack of autonomy to the private institutions in fixing the fees, curriculum designing etc.

Conclusion

The present study revealed the current scenario of higher education in India. The key challenges related to demand-supply gap, enrolment,

privatization, etc. indicate that the situation of higher education sector is not praiseworthy. However, the key initiatives from the government side provide comprehensive solution though not adequate. Accordingly the thrust of public policy for higher education in India has to be to maintain the high standards of education keeping pace with developments that take place in the fields of knowledge and technology.

Suggestions: The following suggestions are put forth for the improvement of quality of higher education in the country.

- Need based job-oriented courses should be provided in colleges and universities that would fulfill the skill-based educational needs of the society.
- Students from economically backward families must essentially be given fully subsidized education.
- Special grants to universities and colleges in backward areas should be provided to improve their infrastructure and facilitate innovations and thereby become internationally respected.
- Liberal funding of higher education and creation of funds through donations, upward revision of fee structure, raising funds from corporate sources should be considered by the governments in the Centre and States.

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