



Overview of the Recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission

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Abstract

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) was set up in 2005 by the then Prime Minister, Dr.Manmohan Singh to prepare a road map for transforming India into a knowledge society. As a high level advisory body, NKC has given a mandate to guide policy and direct reforms in higher education sector of India. The commission has made far reaching recommendations and submitted a report in the month of January 2007. After the NKC submitted its report, it received significant attention of the academia. Some called it a panacea of all ills, whereas others commented it as an old wine in a new bottle. But, there is no second opinion to feel that the formation of NKC is the need of the hour and a very important step to guide the nation's higher education sector in the times of neoliberal economic policy. In this paper a small attempt is made to overview the recommendations of NKC which has triggered a further debate over the issues of its relevance and implications of its recommendations.

Key words: Knowledge Society, Higher Education, Independent Regulatory Authority, Neoliberal Economic Policy.

Introduction

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) was set up in 2005 by the then Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh to prepare a road map for transforming India into a knowledge society. As a high level advisory body to the Prime Minister of India, the NKC has been given a mandate to guide policy and direct reforms, focusing on certain key areas such as education, science and technology, agriculture, industry and e-governance etc. Easy access to knowledge, creation and preservation of knowledge system, dissemination of knowledge and better knowledge services are core concerns of the commission.

The Commission has made far reaching recommendations and

submitted a report to the nation in the month of January, 2007. It is really unfortunate that not many people in India know about the NKC website which gets only a few visitors, in spite of the fact that countries like Portugal and Mexico have already started working towards building their knowledge commissions on the lines of ours. Before we analyze the recommendations of the NKC it is pertinent to consider the present state of higher education in India and what are the maladies that gripped the Indian higher education over a period of time.

Present status of higher education in India :

At the time of independence, the number of universities was not more



than 20, of colleges around 500, faculty strength of 15,000 and the total enrollment was less than one lakh. By the end of the tenth plan, the Indian higher education system has grown into one of the largest in the world with 417 universities, 20677 colleges, a faculty strength of five lakh and an estimated enrollment of 140 lakh students. Obviously, the institutional capacity of higher education has increased by several folds. Similarly the gross enrollment ratio (GER), i.e. persons entering into the higher educational institutions in the age group of 18-23 was hardly 1% which increased to 10% at the end of the tenth plan period. The investments made in higher education in the 1950's and 1960's has given us a strong knowledge base in many fields and contributed significantly to economic development, social progress and political democracy in independent India. On account of the above investments, India at present has made rapid strides in information and communication technologies, defense and satellite technologies and as a result the country became an investment and outsourcing destination. Striking advances in medical care at the high end have led to India being a destination for affordable, sophisticated medical treatment and it has been emerging as an important player in bio-technology. Along with the Government the private sector played a larger role in the expansion activity which is evident from the fact that of 977 engineering colleges in the country 784 colleges i.e., 78% and out of 1349 medical colleges 1028 colleges i.e., 76% were established in the private sector. At the same time the share of private unaided higher education institutions increased from 42.6% in 2001 to 63.21% in 2006. Their share of

enrollments also increased from 32.89% to 51.53% in the same period.

In spite of the rapid progress made in different spheres, only 10% of our youth in the age group of 17 to 23 years are joining the institutions of higher education, which is not even half of the world average of 23%. Corresponding figures in Canada 100%, Korea 86%, Australia 83%, USA 80%, Britain 65%, France 56%, Germany and Japan 51%, Singapore 34% Thailand 20%, China 19%, South Africa 16%. The average GER in developed countries is 54.6%, where as it is 13% in developing countries. Small countries like Vietnam, Myanmar and Sri Lanka are having better GER than India. As per expert's opinion, 20% GER in higher education seems to be critical threshold for countries to become economically advanced.

While the GER, is low, there are incredible differences in GERs of rural and urban, state and districts, male and female ratio. For example out of 600 districts, 350 districts are having the GER lower than the national average and in 29 districts the GER is less than 5%, while the GER in union territory of Chandigarh is 29%, it is less than 4% in Tripura and other north eastern states. Rural, Urban divide quite evident in higher education in India. Most of the colleges and Universities are located in urban or semi-urban areas. As result, only 16 out of every 1,000 students were college graduates in rural areas as against 111 out of every 1,000 in urban areas. The GER in rural area is 7.5% where as in urban area it is 24%. Higher education in the country is thus largely a prarich and urban phenomenon.

Equally important problem confronting the higher education in



India is the declining quality of education. Among the world top 200 higher institutions none of the Indian universities are found, except IIT Delhi and IIT Bombay in 154 and 174 positions respectively. The rankings are based on five Parameters such as number of noble laureates from the university, number of highly cited researchers, articles published in science journals, number of articles in science citation index and academic performance of faculty. As per the UGC report, 6000 colleges out of 14080 colleges and 167 universities out of 224 state universities are eligible to receive UGC development grants under the five year plan period. In the same way out of 3192 NAAC accredited colleges and 140 universities, only 9% of colleges and 31% of universities obtained A grade, 68% got B grade and rest got the lower grades. The two factors that are responsible for the deterioration in standards are the availability and quality of facilities and the quality of faculty appointed. The quality of faculties suffered as there is ban on recruitment. Poorly paid adhoc faculty with PG qualification teaching PG courses is seen every-where in Indian higher education platform. India today boasts of producing three million graduates a year and this army of graduates that we produce every year happened to be the third largest with only USA and China ahead of us. However, in terms of quality very few of our graduates have any use for the degrees given to them. They could not guarantee them a responsible job and the courses are found to be irrelevant and outdated. The tragedy lies in fact that even this 10% of enrolled youth in higher education institutions are ill-equipped in subjective skills, logic, rationality, analytical thinking and soft skills. Besides the above the higher

education in India has been suffering from the maladies like gaps in infrastructure, collection of high fees by private colleges and the state's poor control over them, stringent budgetary allocation and delay in disbursement of funds, institutional inefficiency and corruption.

Against this backdrop it is appropriate to study the recommendation of the National Knowledge Commission.

NKC's recommendations:

The NKC report appears to be a unique document and it needs to be debated seriously. Infact, the changes suggested are overdue and need to come in at the earliest, though certain recommendations are controversial. The NKC feels the foundations are crucial so that a strong and vibrant school education is a pre-requisite to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to enter the world of higher education. The commission is of opinion that higher education needs a systematic overhaul so that we can educate much larger number without diluting academic standards.

The NKC recommended the establishment of 1500 universities national wide to enable India to attain a GER of at least 15% by 2015 as seven million people are to be educated. Considering the population of our country, the number of universities were less in number and the following figures tells us the same fact. For a population of twenty seven crores, there were 2364 universities in USA, 684 universities for a population thirteen crores in Japan, 330 universities for population of eight crores in Germany, 104 universities for population of six crores in Briatrain and in India for population 121 crores there were only 417 universities. There is an



urgent need to expand the base by opening up of more and more colleges and universities. With high academic standards and potential. It is good to observe that the Government of India made proper allocation in the eleventh plan for establishment of thirty central universities, eight IITs and seven IIMs and 6000 schools of excellence.

India has a demographic advantage with about 70% of population below 35 years. But this advantage can only be realized if we expand opportunities for our youth on massive scale in diverse fields such as basic science, engineering and technology, health care and architecture, management etc. This is possible only we initiate rapid expansion along with long overdue reforms in the higher, technical and professional educational institutions.

The NKC in its report stated that the present regulatory system is flawed in several respects. There is multiplicity of regulatory agencies where mandates are both confusing and overlapping. The system as a whole is over regulated and under governed. Therefore there is a need to establish an Independent Regulatory Authority Of Higher Education (IRAHE) which must be at an arm's length from the government and independent of all stakeholders.

Another major recommendation concerning the entry of foreign institutions in India. Stating that competition from foreign institutions with Indian universities will be more qualitative than quantitative. The commission has recommended that all rules applicable to domestic institutions shall apply to foreign institutions also. The NKC recommended that since government financing would remain the cornerstone, its support for higher

education should increase to at least 1.5% of GDP, out of total of at least 6% of GDP for education.

The neoliberal economic policy being perceived by the state since 1991 saw education in a different light. Higher Education was termed a non-merit good. In the perception of policymakers, the social rates of return on higher education were not high enough and subsidizing it only resulted to benefit the already 'better of students' and could not actually promote egalitarianism.

In relation to the financing of higher education we are far behind the target of spending six percent of GNP on education and 1.5% on higher education as recommended by the Education Commission (1964-66). And in the recent years the relative share of higher education in allocation of funds has also declined primarily due to resource constraints. Although the overall government contribution has been increased throughout the plan periods, it has not kept pace with the rapid rise in enrollment and escalation of prices. Often inadequacy of financial resources leads to poor infrastructure and physical facilities, low investment in research and development having adverse impact on the quality of higher education. Private sector participation is desirable, if it is philanthropic in nature but it should not lead to commercialization of higher education, the NKC opined.

The NKC recommended fifty national universities of highest standards without any affiliated colleges. They should have autonomy to set students fees levels and tap other sources for generating funds. In respect of reservation the commission recommended the system of admission based on 'deprivation index' taking into



accounts a number of factors in addition to social backwardness to determine the nation and extent of deprivation. This recommendation apparently aimed at diluting the reservation system which generates fresh controversy.

To improve the quality of higher education, the NKC recommended the revision of curriculum at least once in three years. Quality can be improved by frequent curriculum revision, a shift to course credit system and continues internal assessment.

Conclusions:

Formation of NKC was probably the most important initiative taken by the Government of India to improve the education system of our country. After the commission submitted its report, it received significant attention of academia. Some called it a panacea of all ills where as others felt it is an old wine in a new bottle. As pointed out by NKC there is an urgent to expand the base by opening up more and more colleges and universities and the education should be inclusive to covered the marginalized sections of community.

The Government of India as now opened up the education sector for international competition. The presence of foreign universities are colleges pose a great threat to the domestic educational institutions. Therefore the survival of Indian education institutions depends largely on how they gear up to face the challenges of foreign universities. There is an urgent need to reorient the syllabus to cater the needs of the market and then only it is possible to attract more number of foreign students as well as to retain domestic students. And it is an urgent responsibility of academia to carry further debate over the issues of its relevance and implications of its

recommendations. The recommendations of the NKC should be considered seriously for expanding the access and improving the quality of higher education in India

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