

Higher Education System: Some Reflections

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Abstract

The higher education system in India is complex. The regulators associated with governance are overlapping and entangled across various ministries and regulatory bodies. With a Gross Enrolment Ratio of 15 percent, India is still below the world average. With relatively stagnant growth of public sector, private sector now accounts for 63 per cent of the total higher education institutions and 52 per cent of the total enrolments in Indian higher education. Despite various intervention measures to address equity objectives, disparity still exists terms of gender, ethnic groups, and economic criteria and by location. Quality and efficiency policy responses and their endeavors have been insufficient accompanied by poor regulations and its subsequent implementation. Multiple regulations and measures have been envisaged by different commissions and committees to enhance the access, quality and equity to face the challenges of opening-up this sector globally.

Introduction

It is widely recognized that higher education promotes social and economic development by enhancing human and technical capabilities of society. Technical change and institutional change are key components of development. Higher education plays an important role in facilitating these changes by incorporating all of the various demographics of the population.

Higher education has been found to be significantly related to the human development index and greater for the disadvantaged groups. Similarly, the lack of such education causes the interest to occur; i.e. the greater the level of higher education in a society, through its influence on two main components of human development index; life expectancy, and GDP per capita.

In its size and diversity, India has the third largest higher education system in the world, next only to China and the United States. The higher education system in India grew rapidly after independence. Today, Indian higher education is comprised of 33,657 institutions, made up of 634 universities and 33,023 colleges; it is the largest higher education system in the world in terms of the number of institutions. With the changing demographics, political, philanthropic and economic environment, the objective of higher education has now a more focused attention on access and equity. The Indian higher education has seen three phases of funding, philanthropic to public, and then to private financing. The changing financing patterns have altered regulations, equity, efficiency and quality aspects of higher education.

Objectives

The research paper has the following objectives:

1. To understand the governance of higher education in India
2. To review the access to higher education
3. To study the financing of higher education
4. To understand the nature of privatization in higher education
5. To understand the equity related issues in higher education

6. To examine the efficiency and quality concerns higher education.

Data collection

The research paper is based on secondary data. Various sources that have been used for the same include the reports and documents of ministry of HRD various regulatory bodies like the UGC, AICTE organizations, National Sample Survey organization, Five Year plan documents etc.

Observation and findings

The observations and findings with regard to the Indian higher education have been mentioned here along same lines as the objectives i.e. governance, access, financing, privatization, equity, efficiency and quality of higher education.

Governance

In India, the Ministry of HRD, Department of higher education is the apex body of governance, acting more as an umbrella organization. Indian higher education consists of fifteen regulatory bodies performing overlapping roles in addition to influence from few other ministries too. The judicial intervention has at times complementation or contradicted the objectives associated with higher education. It thus results into ambiguity related to policy understanding, policy implementation, accountability, and answerability. It has also been often criticized that the higher education system is influenced by political ideologies. Higher education being the point responsibility of both the Central and the State governments, the state governments' shares a lion's share of about 80 per cent and to that extent influence higher education.

Access

India has the largest higher education system in the world by the number of institutions with around 634 universities and about 33,023 colleges. But it ranks third in terms of enrolments with about 17 million students. The Gross Enrolment Ratio has seen steep growth in recent past decade, which is appreciable considering the ever increasing population and thereby the relevant age cohort in absolute terms. During the last five years the GER has increased more than 5 per cent and for some if the disadvantaged sections of the population it has been much more. With a GER of 15 per cent, India still lags behind world average of developing nations. But the GER attainment of 15 per cent is a result of increase in social demand and deliberate policy efforts to improve access.

Besides low GER, There exists demand supply gap in higher education in India. On the demand front, the Rising population of the age-cohort, increased numbers of secondary education pass-outs, and increased social and private returns to higher education induce the pressure to raise the access to higher education, whereas public higher education lacks enough funding from its competing and prioritized ends. Ever since the higher education has opened up to the private sector, it has shared most of the responsibility of increasing access.

In Indian higher education, above 85 percent of students are enrolled at undergraduate level and only 15 percent are enrollment at post graduate level. Surprisingly, diploma and certificate education has a meager 1 per cent enrollment as it is considered as an available provision for those who are not able to make it in the mainstream higher

education. Unfortunately, for a nation aspiring to become a knowledge economy, a trivial 1 per cent enrollment in research would not be praiseworthy.

It has been observed that the share of enrolment in traditional courses viz., humanities social sciences and natural sciences has declined during the last one decade and the same trend is likely to continue in near future. The inclination for professional course and thereby enhanced enrolment is favoured by increased private providers and other stakeholders, who anticipate better job prospects. This is likely to hamper the basic research output. The contribution of India in research publication has increased during last one decade but compared to its contemporary developing nations its growth has not been appreciable. Further the Distance education accounts for 26 percent of the total students' enrolments and the remaining 74 percent is the share of classroom teaching in higher education.

Financing

The responsibility of financing higher education is shared by both public and private sector. Even in public it's a joint responsibility of Central government as well as State government. India being a developing economy, amongst competing governmental priorities higher education is treated as a "MERIT 2 GOOD." About 80 per Cent of the public higher education funding has been sourced from State governments and about 20 per cent from the Centre. Of the 80 per cent goes in non- plan expenditure, i.e. routine administration and maintenance and hardly in any capacity building. The central government spending is lopsided toward central universities and centres of excellence serving hardly 3per cent of the total students. While the trend has always been upward, the total public expenditure on higher education at about 1.25 percent of the GDP is by any standards certainly insufficient. The private expenditure on higher education has increased about 12.8 times during last one decade. The household expenditure on higher education shows that the share of tuition and other fees have increased to about 53 percent, which largely due to increase in the share of private institutions.

Privatization

Trends show that of the various forms of institutes of higher education that exists, the number supported by public funding have stagnated by growth and rather the numbers with private funding have witnessed a speedily rising growth. About 1 percent of colleges have been granted an autonomous status. Quiet obviously most of this growth of private higher education has happened in the more marketable professional course like engineering , medicine, management, computer applications, etc. ranging between 50 percent to 95 percent of the private institutions. In early 2000s, of the total household expenditures for higher education in India, 41 percent was bagged by tuition fees and another 10 percent by private coaching, and the remaining spared for the support system of providing higher education, but the share of tuition and other fees have crossed 60 percent during the last five years.

But the fact remains that if regulatory framework is not changed from its current form to such a framework so as to suit the objectives of the private sector, especially those related to privatization, commercialization ,autonomy regarding fees, students admissions ,reservation, faculty appointments, qualifications and salaries, allowing to earn profit, tax any such income etc. right from specifying their definitions to setting specifically their limits, one cannot expect private sector to participate in an encouraging way.

Equity

The issues related to inequity have four dimensions in India: gender disparity, geographical inequity ethnic groups base inequity, and inequity based on economic class. Equitable access of higher education is described as an unambiguous objective. The most prominent policy for promoting access to higher education has been reservations. The policy of reservation in higher education is based on the assertion that participation of disadvantaged groups has been low, and reservation would enhance their participation. The percentage of reservation varies across the states in accordance with the reserved for schedule caste and schedule Tribe students. An additional quota of 27 percent is reserved for other the backward castes in federal educational institutions. It means 49.5 percent seats are reserved for the marginalized social groups. Effective caste based seats crosses 65percent. Many states of India already have reservations above 50percent since long. Along with reservation, the government provision of scholarships, special hostels, meals, book loans and other schemes exclusively for SC and ST students have encouraged the participation.

Efficiency

Higher education is seen as one of the sources to increase private and social rates of returns thereby justifying the effacing resulting from pursuing higher education. The private rates of returns on higher education are estimated at 15.9 per cent. The returns for higher education were found to be higher for rural areas than in urban areas. Individuals with higher education are likely to participate more in labour force than those with other education levels. Females are less likely to participate than their male counterparts; and the probability of females to participate in the labour market was found to be 57 per cent lesser. A substantial wage difference was observed between, males and females. Females earn 38 per cent less than males. Also observed was the fact that STs, OBCs and SCs are likely to earn less by 14, 13 and 7 percent, respectively as compared to “others” category.

Conditions of employment may also be looked at as a parameter of efficiency. While private rates of returns on higher education show brighter picture, so is not the case by employment. Unemployment rate at graduation level is 9.4 per cent and that at post-graduation level is 10 per cent. For Urban India it was 8.2 per cent and 7.7 per cent respectively. Among SCs, graduate unemployment is 11.3 per cent and post-graduate unemployment 12.7 per cent, while for “other” the corresponding figures are 9 per cent 9.7 per cent. Unemployment among graduate and post graduate STs and OBCs is also higher than for “other”. Across social groups, graduate unemployment among women is above 25 per cent.

Quality

There are various parameters using which one can attempt to judge the quality of higher education like faculty using, infrastructure, etc. With 816,966 faculties at universities and colleges, and it being a 35 fold increase over 1950-51, the numbers prove to be insufficient and a faculty shortage is observed. At present 45 per cent of the positions of professors, 51 percent position of readers, 53 percent positions for lecturers were vacant in Indian Universities. The appointments are almost stagnated in most of the sections of the public sector, left alone expanding the faculty intake in accordance to the ever-growing higher education sector.

As for infrastructure, 48 percent of universities and 695 of colleges have infrastructure deficiencies. With high variations across institutes the institutes would have anywhere between 9 books per student to 53 books per student in IIT Mumbai.

There are three main agencies to evaluate quality of institutions; The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), National Board of Accreditation (NBA) for

technical education, and the Accreditation Board (AB) for agriculture institutions. It shows that majority of accreditation process is carried out by NAAC. But as accreditation is voluntary, except for in some states, only 161 universities and 4371 colleges have been accredited by NAAC, i.e. about 40 percent.

The accreditation grading for as many as 66 percent colleges and 52 percent of the universities settles at “B grade”. A minor 10 percent of colleges but 32 percent universities do score an “A grade”. Almost settling to a normal distribution curve 24 per cent of colleges and 16 percent of the universities score a “C grade” yet the process of accreditation receives much acclamation for the way in which the national context has been balanced with international expectations.

But it is unfortunate that such grading is not associated with either rewards or punishments. Neither is there a motivation to re-accredit as it is disconnected with funding mechanism. Rigidity and bureaucratic delays in accreditation on the part of accreditation bodies further acts as a deterrent. Unlike many other countries accreditation is largely of the institute not of a particular program per se.

In terms of research and publications, India has registered a growth of 66 percent as assessed through five years moving average with chemistry, physics, material science, engineering and clinical medicines, being the active areas of research. While declining, the percentage of papers remaining un-cited is still as high as 48 percent. 81 percent increase in the number of publications in top 1 percent impact making journals.

Policy Implications

While there are more complications facing Indian higher education, there are equal good hopes grounded on certain bills either cleared or at various stages of parliamentary approvals. Complications can be traced in the form of multiple and overlapping regulations, allowing operational efficiency to private sector with continued increased support from public sector, more efficient and prolific affirmative actions, efficient and qualitative higher education's system, etc.

Certain bills related to higher education do offer a ray of hope:

- (1) The Foreign Educational Institutions (Regulation of Entry and Operations) Bill, 2010.
- (2) The Prohibition of Unfair Practices in Technical Educational Institutions, Medical Educational Institutions and University Bill, 2010
- (3) The Educational Tribunals Bill, 2010.
- (4) The National Accreditation Regularity Authority for Higher Educational Institutions Bill, 2010.
- (5) The National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER) Bill, 2010.

Also a bill to provide for Creation of a National Electronic Database of Academic Award and its Maintenance by an Authorized Depository is suggested. The Universities for Research and Innovation Bill, 2011 provided a framework for the establishment of Universities for Innovation.

Conclusion

India is one of the largest, vibrant and oldest democracies being the second largest country by population. As the world looks east for global leadership in economic growth, India has to consistently pay attention to her higher education as a source of growth in current times of knowledge driven growth. Within these challenges, underline the promising opportunities for India to outshine on the global map.

Indian higher education has various complexities in context of regulations, access, financing, equity, efficiency, quality, internalization, etc. Regulations remain entwined resulting in lack of clarity for the ones who are supposed to implement the same. As a result, regulations associated

confusions cause apprehensions in terms perceiving the regulation to suit the individual requirements the best. Judicial interventions add fuel to the fire with at times judgments going against the very objectives set for higher education. While the aggressiveness to achieve higher rates of gross enrollment ratios still remains unfulfilled, it would be very challenging to create sufficient opportunities to assure access to every eligible candidate in the relevant age cohort. This might continue to smooth the process of increased role to be played by the private higher education sector vis-à-vis public sector struggling to meet ends on other prioritized avenues of public expenditure. Equitable access may still be a misnomer for policy framers as there are complex challenges in assuring the same. Efficiency and quality remain a cause of concern within ever-expanding higher education sector. While India struggles with such internal concerns the wave of internationalization seems to be approaching rather more rapidly amidst India's international diplomatic associations as a member of WTO and more specifically GATS. But as expected it might improve access and competition, while there are apprehensions on their "national Institutes" equivalent status, equity concerns, financing models, mistakenly allowing leeway to fly-by-night institutes, etc.

Nevertheless, India continues to walk its way forward carrying a chaotically huge but more-or-less harmonized higher education system. Higher education does hold many promises for a bright future for India in the years to come.

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