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Some Current Developments in India's Higher Education

N. K. Uberoi

N. K. Uberoi is director, Center for Professional Development in Higher Education, Delhi University, Delhi 110 007 India.

The Challenge to Education (1985), a document produced by the Ministry of Education of the Indian Government states that "the whole process of higher education has become warped, disoriented and dysfunctional, producing a number of unemployable young men and women." It may appear odd to quote this as an opening statement of an essay on India's higher education system, but there is no other objective way of introducing the subject. The statement and what follows refer to postsecondary college and university systems, and excludes nonuniversity and professional institutions of higher education. In India, higher education is faced with deteriorating conditions resulting from expansion and worsened by an affiliation system and shrinking resources. Lately, these and other issues, such as declining quality, inadequate facilities, and a mismatch between education and human power requirements, have become crucial themes in current social and political debate. However, this is nothing new - a number of education commissions and committees appointed since the country became independent in 1947 have identified these maladies and made recommendations to revamp the system. The latest reform attempt is the New Education Policy of 1986 (modified by the Parliament in 1992), which repeated what the earlier commissions had stated. But the problems of India's higher education system seem to defy solutions. The system continues to remain entrenched in an outdated tradition established by the colonial rulers in the 19th and early part of the present century for a specific purpose suited to them. The system still remains at the periphery.

While examining the issues stated above, one is immediately struck with the phenomenal expansion. There are today 200 universities, 8,000 colleges, 5 million students, and 27,000 teachers in higher education. The figures are high and impressive, but the first casualty of the expansion phenomenon is the quality. The quality could not be maintained because of the absence of proper planning, adequate facilities, and above all clarity of purpose. It may be worthwhile to note that India needs more expansion in higher education because out of 800 million people in the country only 6 percent of the relevant age group study in colleges and universities. But any further expansion has to proceed differently.

Now, about the shrinking finances for higher education: in India, except for a couple of private universities, all universities are financed by the national or a state government. The colleges are also largely funded by government. The students pay a nominal fee that constitutes less than 10 percent of the budget of the institution. Thus, higher education is currently heavily subsidized.

Faced with a severe resource crunch, the government and the University Grants Commission (UGC) are encouraging colleges and universities to generate their own funds and ultimately become self-reliant (a utopian idea.) Developments during the last two or three years indicate that the government is seriously considering privatizing higher education. According to a report, the prime minister is soon going to make an announcement launching a privately funded university in memory of the late prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi. The concept of privatizing higher education is being advocated in view of the changing economic policy of liberalization and globalization launched three years ago. The latest issue in the debate on financing higher education is that norms of funding are being revised and institutions may receive reduced grants. The academics and the educational administrators, on the other hand, have expressed a strong feeling that government must not abandon its responsibility of liberal funding of higher education. However, there is consensus in favor of upward revision of fee structures and the creation of a fund by the institutions through donations and other sources, for the development of the institutions. Lately, the issues relating to the resource crunch and, in general, the funding of higher education in the Indian context have brought into focus a vital issue of university-industry interaction. At present, there is hardly any interaction between the two, except for the management faculties of half a dozen universities. As mentioned, changed economic policies have resulted in globalization and liberalization in trade and industry, resulting in the need for more trained human power and an increase in research and development. (India invests only one percent of what Japan devotes to research and development). Many multinationals and joint ventures have already launched projects that demand employment in a particular sector. University-industry interaction, therefore, has become a very important aspect of higher education. We must not miss the opportunity of such interaction.

Another recent development is the reiteration of the need for vocational education at the higher education level. There is a feeling that general undergraduate education in India imparts perfunctory knowledge of a few subjects, with the result that students neither develop employable skills nor become fit for self-employment. To enhance employability, in 1994-95 the UGC launched a scheme of vocationalization of first-degree education as recommended by the T. N. Dhar Committee (1993). Until now, formation of vocational skills has been a neglected area in India's higher education system. The present scheme offers a better opportunity for employment without undermining the existing undergraduate academic programs. (The policymakers have realized that any disruption in the existing structure is going to be resisted). It is hoped that the scheme of vocational education does not become another example of well-intentioned but badly managed and poorly implemented programs. The most important aspect of this program is the training of the students at the plant. This, so far, has been a weak link in the Indian system. The university system in India is not in a central position, hence it is not able to give direction either to the society or to the government, rather it is at the receiving end. The latest proof of this is the formation of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) at the initiative of the UGC, which is all the same an exciting development. Established in September 1994, the NAAC would function as an institution for grading institutions of higher education and their programs. It would help the institutions to realize their stated objectives, encourage self-evaluation, help improve teaching and research, and introduce other reforms. The establishment of the NAAC is a laudable step toward quality assurance and would make the system more transparent and accountable. Let us hope it works.