Higher Education at the Crossroads

The debate around higher education today may have been prompted by immediate concerns, but the issues that are being addressed have been in the making for a long while. The following collection of six articles focuses on some of the current challenges.

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There is recognition today that the system of higher education is facing major challenges. Though these challenges have a historical origin, in recent times and especially in the context of globalisation these have increased.

Higher education's early growth was associated with colonialism and its later expansion was a consequence of the post-independence project of realising social development through education. Thus in the earlier period education was considered an instrument of the colonial state and its access was partial; its teaching and limited research programmes were oriented to colonial state policies. Liberal education as we know of today had a limited institutional expression.

After 1947, the post-independent state promoted education as an instrument of social development. As a result both the central and the state governments encouraged the establishment of universities and colleges in their areas of jurisdiction. Today there are around 300 universities and equivalent institutions together with 13,000 colleges with 8.8 million students. Though such an expansion has democratised higher education, (40 per cent of students are from low socio-economic strata together with 35 per cent being women) and also increased the reservoir of scientific and technical professionals, it has given rise to numerous problems including the most important of them all: state dependence for funding.

Additionally higher educational institutes are now beset with new problems arising out of the uneven spread of higher education institutions in terms of lack of funds for infrastructure, research and salaries, outdated curricula and political interference in the day-to-day functioning of universities. Added to these is the changing character of the market. Together the two have had an impact on the demand for subjects; there has been a declining student interest in traditional subjects such as fundamental sciences, social sciences and humanities and a shift to applied areas. These issues have raised anew the debate on the learning process and the commitment to it given by both teachers and students.

The issues noted above are not particular to India. In different ways these manifest in other countries and regions. In this paper I draw on the proceedings of the workshop (the six following papers were presented at this workshop) to discuss the following issues: challenges faced by higher education in terms of the impact of globalisation processes, the changing nature of state policies to privatisation of higher education and lastly the implications of these before mentioned changes to the process of learning.

Does the state have a consistent and a long-term policy on higher education? Does it only take decisions at an ad hoc level? What are its initiatives today? Is it legitimising a gradual withdrawal from higher education and on the other introducing some form of privatisation? Tilak[1] argues that the state has no policy and its interventions may be termed 'laissez faireism'. An indicator of this attitude is the changes made by the government recently wherein it initiated expenditure cut on higher education because of the structural adjustment programme. As a result outlay per student declined from Rs 7,676 at 1993-94 price levels to Rs 5,873 in 2001-02 (budget estimates). The government also appointed two committees to recommend a new financial structure for investment in higher education. Both committees recommended that state funding to higher education should continue. However, the state paid more attention to the committees' four measures that would mobilise non-government resources, namely raising fees, promoting consultancy with industries thereby raising funds, introducing self-financing courses and promoting student loans than in implementing the new financial regulation. It naturally follows that the government does not seem to have a coherent policy on the value and the plan for higher education.

A critical element regarding state's policy is the confusion between the intent and the actuality of the UGC Act, which governs the relationship between UGC and universities and affiliated colleges. Originally the constituent assembly had recommended that education be a central subject and thus the original bill to constitute UGC held two provisions, both of which gave the UGC and thus by implication the center more powers. The first provision stated that no university could be established without the approval of the UGC and the ministry of education. Secondly it also affirmed that the UGC had the authority to derecognise any degree.[2]

However, just before the act was passed these two key provisions were eliminated and the UGC became merely a coordinating body that invoked standards rather than being a monitoring and regulatory institution. The result was disastrous. There was an unregulated increase in colleges and universities by the state and central governments with a subsequent lowering of standards of quality of teaching and learning. An indication of this is the way universities have mushroomed in the new state of Chhattisgarh. In this situation, the universities become, as Andre Beteille, so aptly stated, "a degree giving institution concentrating on conducting examinations rather than becoming a system that transmits, generates and interprets knowledge".

Additionally the state has complicated matters by establishing professional councils such as AICMR or AICTE to oversee medical and technical and scientific education. These evolved their own rules for training and imparting of higher education including requirements of infrastructure, which are often in conflict with the guidelines given by the UGC. As a result the courts are flooded with disputes. Another unchecked and unregulated aspect of higher education system has been the proliferation of self-financed universities for imparting education which charge extremely high fees, thereby destroying one of key goals set out by the Nehruvian state in India – education for all. Because the state has not introduced legislation on this regard private universities have functioned without any controls whatsoever. Again it has been the court judgments that have given some

policy directions to these institutes and their structures. Does this mean that the state is encouraging privatisation of higher education through the backdoor to resolve the problems of the system?

Privatisation of Higher Education

Within Indian academia there have been two contradictory positions on the issue of privatisation. The first not only accepts but also promotes the policy of private control of education on the grounds that the state has no longer any funds for higher education and that through private initiatives alone there could be an improvement in accountability and efficiency in the management of colleges and universities, which are in a state of complete decay. Some commentators have, instead, argued that one part of the contention is wrong – the state has funds for public institutions, but has no political will to mobilise and utilise them in the best interest of the public. Arun Kumar has contended that if the black economy (40 per cent of GDP) is tapped and taxed the state would have enough liquid funds to invest in education.[3] Thus this position is highly sceptical of the role played by private sector in higher education suggesting that the state is the only body, which can define and manage public goods. It argues that because corporate houses or private trusts work for their own interests, there is no reason to believe that would eschew doing that in case of higher education. .

This can be seen from the report of Ambani-Birla committee set up by the prime minister's office. While giving a new vision for higher education, it wanted to convert education into an industry and encourage the growth of private universities with its own fee structure. It wanted the UGC to curtail financing higher education except in the field of liberal arts. It is important to note at this juncture those most self-financing universities and colleges tend to promote engineering, medicine and management education. Why? Is liberal education based on humanities and social sciences not to be taught or is it because it has no commercial value? Should commercial viability be the criteria for the promotion of higher education? In this context there is a need to discuss the Naidu plan in Andhra Pradesh to close down history departments in AP colleges. Will this not create a new stratification within universities where already social sciences and humanities are relegated to the background? Will social sciences and humanities lose their significance and importance?

Self-financing institutions, it has been argued, have no alternative but to charge high fees because they have to attract the best in quality available in the market. On the other hand because the state subsidises education the public institutions do not face this difficulty. Additionally, to what extent will such privatisation make university education restricted to a few? With the dismal statistics of only 7-8 per cent of the India's population between 17 and 23 was enrolled in colleges and universities, how will such privatisation and raising of fees affect the goal of education for all? Will the experiment in democratisation that India envisioned after independence lose out and the deprived groups once again barred from education?

Two more questions can be brought into focus in this debate. One is historical. When did such private institutions start? Institutes such as Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics were set up by private trusts during the late 1930s and 1940s. The need then was to develop a social science for nationalist needs. In the post-independence period, at least in Maharashtra, these, emerged in early 1980s as a response to the paucity of state institutions in medical and engineering areas.[4] (In Karnataka private institutions had been set up by the 1960s). But this raises another problem. Were private institutions in the colonial period sponsored by private trusts, which had a public interest and thus did not act for commercial interests? Is the situation different now when these institutions are being sponsored directly by corporate groups? Is all privatisation commercialisation or can we distinguish these on the basis of which group sponsors it? Why is it that private trusts do not sponsor higher education institutions any longer?

After Globalisation

It is now acknowledged that globalisation has changed radically the structure of higher education as the trade in this service now crosses national boundaries. Earlier education encouraged the movement of people across borders. Thus in order to access quality education, there was migration outside underdeveloped regions such as India. Now education migrates from its location to new locations in search of clients. This change affects not only the organisational structure of institutions of higher education, especially in underdeveloped countries like India, but also the way institutions of higher education perceive education, and thus reorganises their authority structure. A comparative study on the implications of globalisation on India and the other on a developed country, such as Canada, cay be attempted to grasp the complexity of the impact of this process.

In the case of India we should consider the changes in the shift in demand for applied education especially in IT areas as an opportunity and not dismiss it off hand. Based on the premise that globalisation was inevitable and that India has to build on the existing resources. IT thus could have a positive impact on a country like India wherein education was limited to a few. It could act as a catalyst in expanding the potential users of higher education, because as a technology it has a potential to make education truly democratic, and give opportunity to students in remote areas and from deprived communities to have access to education.

Additonally it can be argued that the recently released UGC's Tenth Plan document is sensitive to knowledge industry and the knowledge controlled world economy as well as to the demand of utility oriented education. The document also urges universities to introduce internationally equivalent examination and teaching systems. In this context UGC and the NAAC play an extremely important role in nudging higher education institutions to improve their profile and make their structures related to the new emerging demand from the market.[5] In this context, the recommendations of the UGC committee for the Promotion of Indian Higher Education Abroad (PIHEAD) may be deliberated. The UGC has identified twenty universities that can project itself abroad as dispensers of quality education. Should the UGC get involved in marketing Indian education internationally? Should it become a marketing agency?

There are more critical positions on globalisation and its impact on Indian educational system. Over the years,there have been two kinds of flows of human capital from India. The first took place prior to globalisation and led to emigration of knowledge workers to feed the western market. The second occurred after the inauguration of the new trade regime of WTO and GATS and involves new strata of students who are now being trained by western educational institutions based in India or established through a system of franchising. These institutions coach Indian students in western curricula so that they can find placement in the global market. Three negative issues were highlighted in the recent trends. The first was the amount of fees to be paid for

obtaining degrees from these branches of western universities. Second the nature of learning done by the students as the curricula is completely oriented to western needs. Lastly, these institutions create new human resources completely identified with life styles and needs of western countries. This leads to subversion of the nationalist goals of higher education.[6] There may be three pertinent issues on globalisation. Is globalisation inevitable? Who benefits? Who are the losers and what happens to brain drain? Although globalisation is inevitable, certain articles within GATS can help participation of developing countries on an equal footing. Can the GATS articles be invoked to protect the interests of the nation? Has the Indian government been able to evolve a coherent policy and programme to deal with the challenges confronting it and the institutions of higher education as a result of GATS?[7]

What is the situation in other countries, specially that of the developed world? For example the Canadian state has started encouraging the universities to play a role both in the labour market and through global competition. The state has argued that there is a value in higher education showing a preference for market and market-like activity. It is also promoting reliance on private revenues as a result of the decrease in public funding. In this context, the university policies and practices have been harnessed to the processes of commodification, commercialisation and privatisation of higher education. The university administration now self-consciously urges departments to develop commercial research and business/vocational curricula. This has led to commercialisation of research and teaching in terms of collaborations between industrialists and academic researchers and administrators, particularly in the areas of technology and science. Also this has helped to convert education from learning to online courses These trends have led to the reorganisation of recruitment, evaluation and promotion system of teachers as new sets of criteria are introduced. Within the university these efforts have led sometimes to the displacement of academic considerations and the increasing importance of managers in decision-making processes.[8] Another fall-out of these trends have been the disadvantaged position of many academics who are from minorities and women as authorities have reorganised the system and stopped new recruitment, and/or recruiting faculty at lower rates and on contractual jobs as well put new pressures on faculty on promotion.[9]

University as a System of Learning

There is a fundamental problem regarding the present crisis that relates to the public psyche and confidence in institutions. Andre Beteille has argued insightfully that for the first time in India there is a serious lack of confidence in the university system. Nehru had suggested at one time that if everything is good with the universities then all will be good with the nation. The process of institutional collapse first started in the post-emergency period and now after twentyfive years it has enveloped the entire nation. Today's crisis of legitimacy of the nation reflects itself also within the university.

Crucial to this decay is the lack of recognition of the distinction in teaching and learning between undergraduate and postgraduate systems in India. The latter prepares the students for research and is responsible for helping them to develop an interest in knowledge itself, and to train them how to think in context of received methods and methodologies. Over time, Beteille has argued, this distinction has been worn out with postgraduate teaching becoming note driven, rule driven and examination-oriented. The contemporary situation of post graduate studies has got further complicated with the state deciding to lessen its financial role in higher education, thus affecting government investment in infrastructure including most importantly the libraries. However, the government has allowed an increase in salaries. This has led to further contradictions and conflicts between undergraduate and postgraduate teachers as the former are now given the same salaries as the latter. This equivalence has dragged down the quality of postgraduate teaching and research, as all teachers have now to teach as much as undergraduate teachers. There is no time for research and upgradation of knowledge.

There is a discerning suggestion that the whole model of the university (university as a system of affiliated colleges) as a way to build knowledge and to impart learning, be rethought. There were two models that emerged in Europe. The first developed out of an experiment at Humbolt university in Germany where teaching and research were both practised and had an organic relationship with each other. The second was the model of schools developed in France, which were mainly networks of researchers who contributed to new knowledge. In the US they followed the German model. However in the US, dual financing was practised – while the state financed community colleges and state universities large corporate trusts backed new universities, which soon became the elite institutes in the US given their large financial base [Beteille 2004].

What are the indicators of this decay? Is it teachers who are not available in the departments and who teach from notes made decades back and who are not interested in upgrading their knowledge and doing research? Is it students who do not attend classes, are not interested in learning anything new and only interested in obtaining degrees? Is it the syllabi, which teachers teach and students learn which are outdated and have no relevance to contemporary society? How does one build commitment among teachers and students?

A microeconomic framework put forward gives a new dimension on the above subject. The teaching, necessarily, is the result of two inputs – teaching time/effort and the services from the stock of knowledge or human capital. Thus it follows that the productivity of the time spent on teaching will be higher when the stock of human capital is higher. The procedure for emoluments in Indian academia is more a reward for the initial human capital acquired and time spent on teaching. This system fails because of the lethargy that creeps into the system and lack of motivation to increase the present stock of knowledge through research undertakings. One way to overcome these lacunae is to follow the contractual arrangement for teachers, where they are judged on a regular basis. Thus this alternative is to set a time bound and goal bound contract that would ensure the maintenance of quality.[10] But there exist certain intrinsic problems even within this arrangement. Hiring of talented faculty is seen as a threat by the established authority and therefore there is a space for discrimination on ideological grounds. This could lead to self-censorship of the temporary faculty.

However how does the university promote reflexive thinking? Can the classrooms become a vibrant public sphere where students are made better citizens and is it pertinent that we preserve this tradition? What role can and should mother tongue play in the teaching process at institutions of higher education? What role does imagination and idealisation play in everyday interaction? And how does the classroom make possible the growth of these attributes and thus enhance intellectual capacity of students?[11]

While academics in humanities and social sciences have the methodology to think out these issues, within the sciences,

specially applied sciences, there is an absence of these knowledge practices. To be able to evolve these practices, not only is there a need for sciences to go back into a reflection on fundamentals of nature but also they need to integrate a holistic approach in learning and teaching practices together with developing collaboration and interaction between various science, art and humanity disciplines in order to evolve the new building blocks of the stock of knowledge.[12]

Higher education is certainly at the crossroads today. The earlier vision of higher education as institutions of learning is fast changing to it being a commodity in the market. With the market showing interest in converting this institution as a location for imparting information rather than an institution of knowledge and learning process; quantity has found privilege over quality and the global system over national concerns. What is at stake is the very vision of higher learning and universities as an institutional expression of this vision. Will we in India and in the world be able to preserve this notion or move over to its marketisation? This is today's challenge for higher education. EPW

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Notes

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1 See his paper 'Towards Laissez Faireism in Higher Education in India' included in this issue.
2 See Amrik Singh,'Challenges in Higher Education Today' in this issue.
3 See Arun Kumar, Higher Education in India: The Contemporary Challenges Facing It', Paper presented at the workshop on 'Challenges in Higher Education Today', University of Pune, 2004.
4 See U B Bhoite, 'Private Initiative in Higher education in Maharashtra', Paper presented at the workshop on 'Challenges in Higher Education Today', University of Pune, 2004.
5 See Rajen Harshe, 'Globalising India and Challenges of Higher Education', Paper presented at the workshop on 'Challenges in Higher Education Today', University of Pune, 2004.
6 See Binod Khadria, 'Globalisation of Embodied and Disembodied Education: Political Economy of Emerging Changes and Implications of Higher Education Policy', Paper presented at the workshop on 'Challenges in Higher Education Today', University of Pune, 2004
7 See Rohini Sahani and Sumita Kale's paper, 'GATS and Higher Education – The Journey So Far' in this issue.
8 See Daiva Stasiulis, 'The Impact of Globalisation on Higher Education in Canada' Paper presented at the workshop on 'Challenges in Higher Education Today', University of Pune, 2004.
9 Vanaja Dhruvarajan, 'Challenges in Higher education Today: Experiences from Canada and India' Paper presented at the workshop on 'Challenges in Higher Education Today', University of Pune, 2004.
10 See Errol D'Souza, 'Contractual Arrangements in Academia: Implications for Performance' Paper presented at the workshop on 'Challenges in Higher Education Today', in this issue.
11 See Probal Dasgupta's 'Language, Public Space and an Educated Imagination' in this issue.
12 See Naresh Dadhich, 'Indian Science Experiment' in this issue.