

Knowledge Commission and Higher Education

There are a number of serious problems with the recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission. Many are not based on any analysis and are without supporting evidence. This article critiques some important observations of the Commission.

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A few striking features of the report on higher education in India submitted recently by the National Knowledge Commission to the prime minister are too conspicuous to miss: first, the report does not seem to have been based on any in-depth analysis of the higher education system in India. Second, the Commission seems to be strongly favouring privatisation of higher education, the growth of private and foreign universities, and correspondingly and more importantly a drastically reduced role of the state. Third, while some of the recommendations made by the Commission are important, familiar and less controversial, many are not supported by any evidence – theoretical or empirical, nor are their strengths and weaknesses even discussed. In this short article only a select few of these aspects are critically examined.

The Commission notes that there is “a quiet crisis” in higher education in India which runs deep, though no single feature of the crisis is analysed in depth. The Commission admits, “It is difficult enough to provide a complete diagnosis of what ails our universities. It is even more difficult, if not impossible, to outline a set of prescriptions for our universities”. Yet, the Commission lists a set of major recommendations.

A neat diagnostic analysis of the present higher education system as it developed over the years and the socio-economic and political milieu in which it is situated is missing in the report. One need not necessarily make a fresh analysis. But a fair understanding of the analysis available is necessary. Substantial research exists on higher education in India and the reforms needed for improvement therein. Even in the recent past, quite a few committees have discussed in detail some aspects, such as autonomy and financing of higher education. Hardly any feature of

the existing system or as it developed over the years has been noted in the report, except for making a few highly general, pedestrian observations on the quality of higher education or on the governance of universities. No reference could be found in the report to any earlier research or reports.

University Enrolment

The report starts with a factual error that currently only 7 per cent of the relevant age group population enters the world of higher education in India.¹ According to the available official statistics of the ministry of human resource development (MHRD), the 10-million plus students in higher education account for a gross enrolment ratio of nearly 10 per cent in 2003-04, the latest year for which such an estimate is available (see the table).² The ratio ranges between 5.8 per cent in Jammu and Kashmir and 32.2 per cent in the union territory of Chandigarh. In as many as 11 states/union territories the enrolment ratio is above 10 per cent. That the Commission did not care to discuss any issue with the MHRD or the University Grants Commission (UGC) or others at any time cannot be the reason for this factual error relating to the gross enrolment ratio in higher education. Perhaps the Commission did not care to look at any available database.

The error is seemingly a minor one but such errors may lead to setting wrong targets for the future. The underestimate of the current enrolment ratio has in fact led the Commission to set a target of a 15 per cent enrolment ratio by 2015,³ which according to the Commission means doubling the enrolment ratio in about a decade. But actually, the target is only about 50 per cent higher than the current level. Thus, the targets, and also the recommendation on the number of new universities to be set up are based on a questionable base.

The Commission recommends the expansion of the number of universities to 1,500 in the country. This, it is believed, would enable India to attain a gross enrolment ratio of at least 15 per cent by 2015. Increase in access to higher education does require an expansion in the number of universities and colleges but the question is: do we need 1,500 universities? The recommended number is not based on any detailed analysis. No clear rationale is provided. It is based on very simple logic that as there are about 350 universities in the country with a current enrolment of about 10 million students, a four times increase in enrolment to about 40 million would require a four times increase in the number of universities. The figure of 40 million is also not supported by any detail or reason. Note that the UGC (2006) has found that the enrolment may have to increase to 22 million, about double the current enrolment, by 2011-12 to reach a gross enrolment ratio of 15.5 per cent. A detailed diagnostic analysis of the existing higher education system would have helped the Knowledge Commission to come up with a more reliable and credible recommendation.

Further, even if the enrolment has to be increased to 40 million, it seems too simplistic to believe that an increase in enrolment by four times would require an increase in the number of universities by four times. Such a recommendation can be accepted only if we refuse to acknowledge the evidence that shows that many universities are much below any “optimal” size that one can think of. The average enrolment size of the universities in India may be around 6,000 but there are several universities with a very small level of enrolment. For example, while the total student enrolment in Jawaharlal Nehru University is 4,890 and Viswa-Bharati 5,020, it is as low as 790 in Mizoram University, 627 in Tezpur University and 280 in Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University – all central

Table: Gross Enrolment Ratio (Enrolments as Per Cent of the Age-Group: 18-24) in Higher Education in India

1950-51	1.0
1960-61	2.0
1970-71	3.9
1980-81	5.4
1990-91	4.3
2000-01	7.9
2003-04	9.2

Source: *Education in India and Selected Educational Statistics*, MHRD (various years).

and also somewhat better funded universities. More than 100 of the current 367 universities are institutions deemed to be universities, which are mostly single faculty universities or specialised institutions with a very small number of students on roll, sometimes making a mockery of the very concept of “university”. Among the deemed universities some have enrolments as low as 40 (Devi Sanskriti Viswavidyalaya); in many it is around 1,500. It is not just special/professional universities such as the National Law University (Jodhpur) and Tamil University which have an enrolment of only 85 and 265 respectively, there are a good number of central and state universities with an enrolment of below 3,000 [AIU 2006].⁴ Enrolment in many state (and some central) universities is high, essentially because they include enrolment in affiliated colleges.

Is Bigger Better?

In general, small universities may turn out to be, as is the case now, academically and economically “unviable” institutions. The point is that there is a lot of scope for strengthening small universities and helping them to grow into bigger universities which would function academically as well as economically efficiently. If one adopts such an approach and makes a detailed analysis, one may come to the conclusion that we may not need as many as (or more than) 1,500 universities.

But, surprisingly, the Commission argues that we need smaller, “appropriately scaled and more nimble” universities, ignoring the well-recognised fact that there are economies of scale in higher education. It is desirable to have a fewer number of large universities, with sprawling campuses, and excellent facilities in terms of high quality teachers, libraries, laboratories, classrooms, playgrounds and other infrastructure, with large areas of student and faculty residences. Such large campuses may provide a better, more vibrant and stimulating learning environment, attracting students and faculty from various corners of the country and abroad to study various disciplines, ensuring a true culture of an ideal university. In addition, this will help in efficient utilisation of physical, financial and human resources and in reaping scale economies.

Similarly, the Commission recommends the establishment of 50 national universities – by the government or by private

sponsoring bodies that set up a society or a charitable trust or a section 25 company. The 50 is also an arbitrary number. Of the 50 – a long-term goal – the Commission recommends that 10 will have to be set up in the next three years. The recommendation to set up national universities is not a new suggestion. The Education Commission (1966, p 542) recommended the development of some “major” universities, where first-class postgraduate work and research would be possible and whose standards would be comparable to the best institutions of their type in any part of the world. Note that there is a difference between the national universities proposed by the Knowledge Commission and the Education Commission’s proposal on major universities. The now proposed national universities are also not like national universities in Japan, where national universities mean state universities funded by the government, in contrast with private universities. The Education Commission had proposed liberally funded high quality public universities, having close links with other universities. The Knowledge Commission’s proposed national universities can be public or private, in principle, but the Commission’s preference seems to be in favour of private universities.

Another major recommendation that the Knowledge Commission makes is the establishment of an Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE) holding all powers and responsibilities, and a re-defined, reduced role for the UGC, the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the Medical Council of India (MCI), the Bar Council of India (BCI) and such other bodies. It clearly argues for the abolition of the AICTE, and limiting the role of the MCI, BCI, etc, to work as professional associations, conducting nationwide examinations to provide licences.

Governing Universities

Of late, it has become very fashionable to suggest setting up new bodies rather than strengthening and restructuring the existing ones. After all, the suggested structure of governance of the IRAHE – starting from setting it up by an act of the Parliament, the appointment of the chairperson and members, their tenure etc – is more or less the same as that of the UGC. The UGC and similar bodies were all set up with noble ideas but they were not allowed to function autonomously; they were given limited funding, they were

subjected to all kinds of avoidable interventions and distortions and now we say that they have become defunct and should be replaced. If the UGC was not provided with sufficient funds, how could it adequately fund various universities, command respect from universities and perform its functions properly? If the UGC has deteriorated over the years, then how do we ensure that the IRAHE will not deteriorate to the same level of the present UGC in years to come? The rationale for setting up the IRAHE and the mechanism that will ensure its superior functioning compared to that of the UGC are not clear. Instead of arguing for the setting up of another organisation, one might favour strengthening and even revamping an organisation like the UGC to ensure its autonomous efficient functioning as was originally conceived and for it to strive for maintaining the quality and standards in all levels and types of higher education. In fact, the UGC may be entrusted with the larger responsibility of coordinating the development of the entire higher education system in the country, with the help of other bodies.

Some of the recommendations of the Commission are not altogether new, though they might look like fresh proposals. As the Commission does not refer to any earlier recommendations, it is probably not aware that such recommendations were made in the recent past. For instance, the Commission recommends that government support for higher education should be increased to at least 1.5 per cent of GDP, out of a total of at least 6 per cent of GDP for education. It is the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) Committee (2005) on financing higher and technical education, that, for the first time argued (not necessarily based on any detailed calculations on the financial requirements of higher education sector but recognising the need for balanced development of the total education system) for the allocation of 1.5 per cent of national income to higher education (1.0 per cent for higher general education and 0.5 per cent for higher technical education), out of 6 per cent of national income for education. The recommendation to allocate 6 per cent of national income to education was made long ago by the Education Commission (1966). Also, the Knowledge Commission recommended that student fees should meet at least 20 per cent of the total expenditure of universities. This was also a recommendation made by the Justice Punnayya Committee

on central universities [UGC 1993] and the Dr Swaminadhan Committee on technical education [AICTE 1994]. However, the recent CABE Committee (2005) has recommended that this 20 per cent should be regarded as the maximum, as increases beyond this limit would jeopardise equity in higher education. The Knowledge Commission emphasises at least 20 per cent and favours no limit on this.

The Commission remembers that “public finance is an integral constituent of universities worldwide”, and recommends financial support from the government, including “substantial *allocation of public land*, in excess of its spatial requirements”, even to private universities. The Commission fails to note that many private “not for profit” (and of course “for profit”) universities in north America, western Europe and east Asia do not depend upon state support but generate huge funds on their own without substantially relying on student fees. The Commission further recommends autonomy for the universities to set student fee levels, tap other sources, and also for the commercial use of university facilities. Land grants are recommended as a mechanism to attract “more” not-for-profit private investment, and develop public-private partnerships in higher education – the government providing land and private sector the finances. This indirect method of subsidisation of private universities has no justification, particularly if these universities are to be “autonomous” in setting fee levels, admission criteria and in all their functioning, as proposed by the Commission.

A somewhat new recommendation made by the Commission now is to use the land available with universities as a source of finance. But this can create more problems than it can solve. The use of land as a source of finance might mean either sale or renting (or leasing) out land to the private sector for commercial purposes. This means that land received either free or at a highly subsidised price from the government will be put to commercial use, essentially for the benefit of the private sector. This cannot be justified. Further, there is a danger that the universities and government may eventually be fatally attracted to note that the use of their land for commercial purposes would yield higher returns than its use for academic purposes. Other suggestions related to mobilise alumni contributions and encouragement of philanthropic contributions are often made earlier. The Commission, however, now goes

further and suggests that universities should be allowed to engage professional (private) firms to generate alumni contributions and licensing fees – contributing to further privatisation of the system!

The overall approach adopted by the Commission is largely pro-private, and even anti-public. Noting that college education in engineering, medicine and management is de facto privatised, the Commission favours similar privatisation of university education – setting up private universities and enabling public-private partnerships. The Commission feels that “it is essential to stimulate private investment in higher education as a means of extending educational opportunities”. The Commission also recommends the entry of foreign institutions into India, promotion of Indian institutions abroad and

formulation of appropriate policies to promote competition in higher education. The underlying assumption that increases in the number of private (and foreign) institutions will increase substantially, if not proportionately, the educational opportunities in higher education is not based on any empirical evidence. For example, while private universities account for 75 per cent of all universities in the US, they account for only 35 per cent of the student enrolment; in Uruguay private universities account for 89 per cent but only 12 per cent of the student’s enrolment; in Mexico the respective figures are 73 and 42 per cent. Even in countries like Thailand, where nearly half of all universities are private only 17 per cent of the students are enrolled in them [PROPHE 2005; OECD 2004].

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In this context, it is important to note that (a) only very few strong and vibrant higher education systems in the world have large private higher education systems, (b) higher education systems even in market economies in north America and western Europe are predominantly public, and (c) many economies with a large share of private higher education continue to remain as developing countries, with social and political unrest for several decades [Tilak 2006].

Financing Higher Education

Lastly, an important assumption widely circulated and shared by the Commission is that the government will not be able to finance the needed massive expansion of higher education in the country, and hence feels the need for privatisation. Some detailed, though tentative, calculations reveal that an increase in the allocation as per cent of GDP from 0.65 per cent in 2007-08 to a little above 1 per cent may enable us to reach the enrolment ratio of about 15 per cent by the end of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan [Srivastava 2007]. The CABE Committee (2005) recommends an allocation of 1 per cent of GDP to higher education and 0.5 per cent to technical education; and the Knowledge Commission also recommends allocation of 1.5 per cent of GDP to higher education. While this 1.5 per cent of GDP may not necessarily satisfy all the needs of the higher education system, it clearly shows that government can finance the needed massive expansion of higher education to a great extent, if it so desires, without necessarily depending upon private sector or on the foreign universities.

Basically, the Knowledge Commission does not recognise the importance of public education and the significant role that the state plays in the development of higher education for it to contribute to national development in most civilised parts of the world. What a pity! **EPW**

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Notes

- 1 According to a member of the Commission, the ratio was only 3 per cent; and it should be raised to 8 per cent! Chandrasekhar and Ghosh (2005).
- 2 According to the National Sample Survey, the estimate of gross enrolment ratio in post-senior secondary education in the country can be above 13 per cent and according to the census it could be nearly 15 per cent [UGC 2006].
- 3 The UGC (2006) also seemed to be setting a

target of 15 per cent enrolment ratio but by the end of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, i.e. by 2012.

- 4 AIU (2006) provides some useful information on each university. But all the universities do not necessarily provide up-to-date or detailed enrolment data. Most of them do not separate the enrolment in affiliated colleges from enrolment in university departments; and many do not provide any information on enrolment at all.

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