# Undergraduate versus Postgraduate Education

*A significant issue that the Knowledge Commission cannot avoid addressing is that of the affiliating system in universities that was introduced in 1857. Despite considerable efforts, autonomous colleges have not been set up as an established part of the university system while the universities' role has been reduced to that of only conducting examinations. On the other hand, the extraordinary and unbalanced growth in the number of colleges has affected the standard of higher education. A revision of the UGC's role and greater centre-state cooperation can salvage the situation.*

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Two developments are likely to influence, even shape, the next round in higher education. One is the appointment of the Sixth Pay Commission. As on earlier occasions, the issue of the scales of pay of university and college teachers will be taken up for reconsideration.

The second development is equally important. The Knowledge Commission appointed by the prime minister is at work. It is likely to report within the next few months. What it is going to say is anybody's guess. But if this commission is to discharge its obligations in the manner it is expected to, it cannot but go into the question of the affiliating system which was introduced in 1857.

While the 1857 acts of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras followed the model of the University of London, the latter changed its system a year later. In 1858, the kind of system which we had taken over while establishing the first three universities was given up by the University of London. But, in our wisdom, we continue to follow that model even a century and a half later. That this should have been allowed to happen is both ironical in the extreme and a comment on how earnestly we have gone about the job of formulating our educational policies.

As a matter of fact, we follow this system so resolutely that if the number of affiliating colleges grows, the first thing that a state government does is to establish another university. We witnessed the latest manifestation of this phenomenon only recently. Since the Andhra University had approximately 500 colleges to look after, the state government decided to establish two new universities. By doing so, the government underlined the fact that the main job of a university is to conduct examinations for colleges. If it does some teaching also, that is only incidental and is generally done at the postgraduate level. This is not true in all cases but, on the whole, this is the general pattern.

Today, we have about 150 affiliating universities and around 17,000 colleges. The total student enrolment has already crossed the 10 million mark. If recent developments are any indication, this trend of increasing enrolment is likely to grow stronger and stronger with every day that passes.

Some four decades ago, when the Kothari Commission submitted its report, it went into the question of the expansion of numbers though not in much detail. It could see that the job of the university was in essence no more than to lay down the syllabus and conduct examinations. Everything else was done by the colleges. In recognition of this undeniable fact, the Kothari Commission suggested a via media and that was to set up autonomous colleges in addition to affiliated colleges.

For over two decades, nothing got done. At the initiative of Malcolm Adiseshiah, then vice chancellor of the University of Madras, some colleges in that university were given the status of autonomous colleges. As more affiliating universities got established in the state of Tamil Nadu, the practice was taken over by other universities as well. For some decades, the number of autonomous colleges however remained frozen at 100 plus. During the last couple of years, some progress has been made and now the number is over 300.

Without having to beat about the bush, it needs to be recognised that unless we understand why, despite considerable efforts, autonomous colleges have not been set up as an established part of the university system, we will not understand the basic problem in higher education. The 1986 policy on education had not only reiterated its support to such colleges, it even laid down a target figure of 500 by the end of Seventh Plan. But the target remained unfulfilled.

The plain fact is that when the scales were revised in the early 1970s, the number of teachers at the university and college level was around a lakh and a half. Today, approximately half a million are already in position and unless one is seriously wrong in one's calculations, this number is likely to grow. The bulk of them are in colleges. The then decision-makers felt that, unless the whole lot of them were brought under the new scheme, there would hardly be any impact. In order to achieve that objective, the decision-makers also made a crucial, and academically wrong decision. That was to equate the standing of both categories – those who teach at the undergraduate as also the postgraduate level. In order to see the distinction between these two levels of teaching, one has to take into account the peculiarities of Indian education as a whole.

In my piece entitled, 'The Law of Academic Deficit' (*The Challenge of Education*, 2004), two issues were analysed. The first one was that, towns apart, the bulk of teaching in the rural areas failed to ensure that children became literate even after having spent five years at the primary level. In this regard, some recent data confirms what has been long suspected. A non-governmental organisation named Pratham issued its first Annual Status Education Report (ASER)

in 2005. Approximately 20,000 student volunteers had surveyed 485 out of 603 districts in the country. According to this report, almost 60 per cent children in the age group of 7-14 cannot read even a paragraph of class I difficulty level. Nothing so negative and so decisive has come to light during recent years and these findings need to be studied carefully.

A second question which played a notable role in this entire scheme of things was when and how to introduce the teaching of English at the school level. Until 1947, except for less than 50 or so public schools which used English as the medium of instruction, everywhere else English was introduced after the primary stage. During recent years, the situation has changed in two respects. For one thing, the number of such schools has proliferated to the extent that perhaps the number of students who study English as the medium of instruction runs into a million, or possibly more. For another, a couple of states have introduced English right from class I. Wherever suitable teachers were available, the situation did not go out of hand. Everywhere else, it is chaotic and the children learn neither their mother tongue nor English properly. The 60 per cent non-learners referred to above belong to this category.

## I
## Academic Deficit

All this has therefore created a confused situation and except for those who go to reasonably well equipped and well-staffed English medium schools, everyone else has to blunder along. This, in turn, has created that academic deficit which was referred to above.

That this academic deficit is carried over both to the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, even up to the PhD level, is obvious. There is one other factor which has further aggravated the situation. Normally speaking, out of those children who go to the upper primary and middle levels, a certain proportion would more or less automatically acquire some form of vocational skills. But because of our traditional reluctance to do manual work and the tyranny of the caste system, a certain kind of perversion creeps in. A large proportion of these students who would have normally acquired the right kind of attitude (which is to say that, whenever necessary, they would have worked with their hands) now fail to do so.

To put it another way, if the standards of performance at the undergraduate level are unsatisfactory, a good deal of it is owing to the kind of defective schooling at the earlier stages of instruction. It should not be necessary to go into further details except to recognise the further fact that the levels of performance at the school level are downright unsatisfactory. No wonder the level of performance at the undergraduate level is also unsatisfactory.

In its report submitted in 1966, the Kothari Commission had acknowledged this uncomfortable fact. Despite that, no corrective steps were taken and anybody who completes the undergraduate level of instruction gets only some academic credit if he goes anywhere outside India. Though the situation varies from country to country, as a general proposition, it may be stated that an Indian bachelor's degree is not equated with the bachelor's degree in another country. This is something which the Kothari Commission had also touched upon.

Our colleges, the majority of which operate at the undergraduate level, cannot be compared with colleges in other countries. One important explanation for it is the fact that a fairly high proportion of students seeking admission to the undergraduate colleges is distinctly unfit for study at this level unlike what obtains in other countries. While equating undergraduate and postgraduate teachers, this fact was completely overlooked. This has led to a situation where, when the question of revision of scales of pay is taken up, the interests of the overwhelming majority (more than 83 per cent) belonging to the undergraduate category cannot be overlooked. Also, by now the teachers are strongly unionised and, during the last quarter century, no government has had the courage to draw a line of distinction between the two categories of teachers.

The whole thing is linked with the stipulations governing the system of promotion adopted in universities and colleges. If it may be said, the NDA government went to the extent of conceding the professor's scale of pay to undergraduate teachers in Delhi University. It is only when the matter was challenged in a court of law by an ex-vice chancellor of the university that the ministry of human resource development chose to withdraw that questionable order. It was said in an undertone that the decision had not been cleared by the cabinet. Therefore, the decision could not have been defended before the high court.

It should not be necessary to go on with these details any further except to say one thing more. During the last few years, in almost every state, something like 15-20 per cent of appointments to teaching positions have not been made as per rules. Instead, a teacher is appointed either on a temporary or an ad hoc basis; sometimes he is appointed on a per lecture basis and so on. This was done mostly owing to the shortage of funds. The situation may get remedied in the next round of decision-making though it is difficult to imagine how the states would be able to find additional funds of the required magnitude at the college level.

## II
## Autonomous Colleges

Till the growth of the private sector, mainly in professional education, undergraduate education functioned on the presumption that since the economy was not growing and not enough jobs were being created, the general run of affiliated colleges served a useful, though limited purpose. For one thing, the college kept the young people out of mischief, so to speak. And for another, it enabled a substantial number of them (it can be estimated at being anywhere around 40-50 per cent), to learn something. Most of the students who joined came from families which were able to support them.

Whether they were interested in study or not was an open question. Most of them were interested in the college as a kind of youth club where they could go and attend classes if they felt like it. If they did not do so, it did not seem to matter. The syllabus was not demanding in any case and the system of examination was the traditional type where a student was free to answer any five questions and that was that. The tuition fee was more or less pegged at what had been fixed half a century or more ago. Even Ashok Mitra's recommendation to the West Bengal government to raise the tuition fee marginally did not get implemented. Despite all these factors, approximately only half the students manage to pass the examinations.

It was the early stages of developments which the Kothari Commission had encountered. It tried to save the situation by proposing the establishment of autonomous colleges. But the teachers' unions which opposed the whole idea of autonomy dug their feet in. Their hostility could not be ignored, for they called the shots.

Having got the same scale of pay as the university-appointed teachers were getting, they were apprehensive about any kind of change. In academic terms, therefore, the focus remained on the status quo rather than any kind of improvement. If no changes have taken place at the undergraduate level all these decades, the explanation was broadly as indicated above.

The pressures of professional education, more precisely engineering and medicine, however, led to a situation where the Supreme Court had to intervene repeatedly. In two well known judgments given in the early 1990s and, then again, a decade later, a situation arose where standards of performance, even at the professional level, were sacrificed to some extent and a substantial number of students got admitted to some of the ill-equipped and grossly under-staffed professional colleges that had come to be established. We have not heard the last of this problem so far. The next few years are going to be full of academic turmoil and confusion. We already have seen some evidence of it and much more of it would become visible in the near future.

The Knowledge Commission, if it has to do an honest job, cannot overlook this downright unsatisfactory situation. The growth of the IT sector has certainly made the job situation easier than before. But the lack of growth in agriculture, as also the sluggishness of the economy as a whole, at least till recently, created a situation where issues which had been pushed under the carpet over the decades have now surfaced again with a degree of assertion which cannot be ignored.

## III
## School Education

It is customary to refer to the situation in UK and the US, two English-speaking countries about which we in India know a great deal. There is a certain degree of parallelism between our situation and theirs but not beyond a point. This is something that needs to be acknowledged, though not in any detail.

To be more precise, in UK, something like 40 per cent of children who complete compulsory schooling (till the age of 16) opt for vocational courses. The variety of courses that are offered to them is phenomenal; something like 500-600 at that level. Each minor specialisation can be learnt and mastered and there is a provision for it. There are instances where students take years before they finish the course, though something like one quarter do it at the first shot; but not the rest.

In the US, colleges are of two types; two years and four years colleges. Four-year colleges are strong at the academic level whereas two-year courses are essentially vocation-based. In terms of proportions, many more take up two-year courses and less than half of them go for the four-year courses. That country's economy can afford a substantial number of young persons going in for higher education. But a country like ours cannot do so.

We have been neglecting vocational education right from the beginning. To opt for it at the college level would neither be feasible nor consistent with the existing trends and the state of organisational or academic arrangements.

In short, we have created a situation where we do not have a clue as to what we should do. The greater part of the

levels, even up to the PhD level, is ob-

impact is felt in the rural areas where the bulk of the population lives. To say no more about it, the fact of the matter is that without radically reordering, indeed remodelling, the earlier levels of education, we will neither be able to help the economy nor ensure high quality education.

This reference to high quality education is not incidental. It is not an accident that, except for one or two professional institutions, no Indian university figures among the first 500 in the world. In respect of scientific research, we are going backwards whereas China is steadily moving forward. Even South Korea, a small-sized country is performing very well. One reason for all this is our not being exacting enough either in respect of scholarship or scientific research. The other equally weighty reason is that we have not remodelled our educational system all these decades.

The various committees and commissions that have gone into these issues have been overcautious and have not recommended anything which would require us to restructure our system. When we are looking into the future, we have to ask ourselves a few basic questions and those questions have been addressed to the Knowledge Commission and not to any other institution.

Three issues that will have to be analysed thoroughly would be (a) the state of school education, (b) the extraordinary (indeed unbalanced) growth in the number of colleges, and (c) the performance of professional bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC). The last issue will, to some extent, bring in the role of the state governments also for discussion. While no change in constitutional arrangements is required, the resounding failure of different state governments in discharging their constitutional obligations will have to be analysed.

Elsewhere, I have ventured to describe the state governments as the weakest link in Indian education. In a sense, their role and performance cannot be said to be different in terms of impact from what the different professional councils have done or, more precisely, failed to do. At the higher and professional levels, the centre has an overriding role which is duly sanctioned by the Constitution. There was a gap in respect of the school system, however. When the UPA government decided to levy the special educational cess, the centre (without planning to do so) armed itself with the financial whip . If this power has not been used during the last two years, as it could have been used, it is an instance of under-governance and not the incapacity to intervene. And now the details.

## IV
## State of Colleges

It is not proposed to discuss school education here except to make one point. Till the UPA government came along, school education was the exclusive charge of the state governments. If they did not perform well, the centre had no constitutional mechanism to influence them. When for instance, the Sarv Sikhsha Abhiyan was launched some years ago, the centre could play a role mainly because it was offering special funds for the purpose. For the rest, the state governments were free to act as they chose to act.

Today, the centre can, without any hesitation, ask the state governments to discuss their annual budget for education with the ministry of HRD. If this has not been done so far, it only goes to show that the centre too is a victim of the same disease from which the states are suffering. In the pre-2004 period, the centre could intervene only if it invoked its concurrent powers in respect of education which it had taken over in 1976. But then the centre, in its wisdom, chose not to do so.

What has been said above is equally applicable to various other issues. The poor performance of the numerous professional councils is an obvious instance. Councils like the Bar Council, the Medical Council or the Indian Council of Agricultural Research are handled by ministries other than the ministry of HRD. If there is no coordination amongst them, that is because, a National Coordination Council of Higher Education as recommended by the 1986 policy, amongst others has not been established so far. This is a conceptual and organisational failure which the Knowledge Commission cannot but make note of and even dilate upon.

One reason why different state governments have not been able to perform as well as they should have is that, having inherited a certain system of governance from the British, hardly anybody chose to innovate or break new ground. With numbers expanding and the need to universalise education ( from the age of six to 14 years), it was important to examine what structural and administrative changes were required to be made in order to keep in step with the changing times. Nothing of this kind happened, so much so, that as of today, why we are not performing better is largely because we remain wedded to rules and procedures that should have been long abandoned. One of the things that illustrates this statement is our adherence to the obsolete affiliating system at the college and university level. This system is to be found only in the Indian subcontinent and nowhere else in the world.

What is happening today, if one may say so, is an instance of the tail wagging the dog. Today, almost half the universities are operating as if their principal function is to look after the colleges affiliated to them. This has pulled the universities downwards rather than enable them to forge ahead. Before these issues are discussed any further, two facts which have a hearing on what is under discussion may be referred to.

The first one is that most of the colleges, instead of seeking to improve the quality of instruction at the undergraduate level, prefer to focus on starting postgraduate courses. Two-thirds of students in Indian universities are enrolled in colleges. In certain states, Tamil Nadu for instance, two-thirds of the colleges, are doing postgraduate teaching. Not only are their libraries and laboratories (for the most part) grievously under-equipped, the quality of those engaged in teaching is utterly mediocre and on the whole unsatisfactory. And this leads to the second point.

Does all this make for high quality education? The answer may be seen, amongst other things, in the shockingly low percentage of those who qualify for the national entrance test (NET). The pass percentage of those who qualify ranges between 1 and 3 or 4 per cent. This has been happening for years together. Eventually it has led to the appointment of a UGC committee which is yet to report. Obviously it is not possible to anticipate its findings. But whatever these be, its observations cannot be complimentary to the system of postgraduate education, when the bulk of the students are enrolled in colleges which do not measure up to the required standards.

The truth of the matter is that most of our colleges – something like two-thirds of them – are poor in performance and not at all up to the mark. But their number keeps on growing year after year. Out of approximately 17,000 in number, not even 6,000 qualify for recognition by the UGC. The requirements for recognition are not formidable. Indeed the conditions

prescribed are not at all stringent; still almost two-thirds of them are unable to fulfil them.

To put it no more strongly, the overall academic situation is so unsatisfactory that, apart from everything else, it is difficult even to define what college education implies. It is a stage of instruction in India which is difficult to define. At one level, colleges are still doing what ought to have been done at school. At another level, though only in certain cases, some advanced work is being done. The honest truth is that we do not have one system of education. Rather, we have two parallel systems which are simultaneously at work. In certain cases, competent scholars and scientists are being produced. In certain other cases, there is only a pretence of study and little more than that. And yet, remuneration to teachers in both cases is the same. Before this issue is discussed further, something needs to be said about how the UGC has gone about in its dealings with colleges.

## V
## Performance Standards

The picture is beginning to be clear by now. A number of factors have combined together to depress standards of performance at the college and university levels and at least some of the wounds were self-inflicted. Amongst other things, the law of academic deficit is relentlessly at work. A very small proportion of students is able to escape its deadly grip. Those who manage to cross the hurdle of mastering the use of English at the school level do not have to worry too much about their future. Even in the rest of their career, they will have access to the best of the Indian educational institutions. A certain number of them will also be able to go abroad.

As to the rest, private initiative (especially in respect of the IT sector) has unlocked many openings which in earlier years would have eluded thus in most cases. Even in the field of engineering and technology, some of the Indian institutions perform at a reasonably competent level of performance and take care of a substantial number of ambitious and earnest students. The spread of open and distance learning has also played a helpful role.

Many more such details can be provided. What requires to be understood is that in certain areas which attract international attention, India is beginning to measure up to the demands being made upon it but the general average is far from satisfactory. In other words, as far as the needs of the expanding economy are concerned, there would not be too many problems in the next few years. But when it comes to being original or inventive or increasing our productivity, particularly in the agricultural sector and small town industry, the situation would continue to be depressingly unsatisfactory. And that should be a cause for serious disquiet.

If we have to remedy this situation and, equally important, improve the general level of performance as also take care of unemployment, we have no choice except to improve the level of schooling, ensure that manual work is not looked down upon and, no less important, strengthen the levels of instruction as well as testing at the college level. Today we have more colleges than polytechnics and ITIs put together. This is a thoroughly unhealthy situation. In order to set things right, we will have to get to the roots of the problems as argued above. To dilate on it any further would amount to repeating what has been said earlier. One issue however calls for specific mention.

College teachers (they constitute a little less than 80 per cent of the total teaching strength) have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. While in the late 1980s when the scales of pay were revised for the first time after the earlier radical revision, there were hardly any discordant voices. In any case, most of the states which had conceded the higher scales of pay reluctantly and under considerable union pressure were not inclined to take on the teachers. To put it somewhat provocatively, most of them felt intimidated by the teachers. By the 1990s, the situation had changed though the states were still afraid of a confrontation with the teachers. What saved the situation for the teachers was the far from creditable performance of the ministry of HRD, however. Never were the teachers' unions more powerful than during the tenure of NDA government.

At the end of that period, what was left of the wreckage was a far from flattering record of performance by the states. They responded by engaging 15-20 per cent of the teachers (both at school and college levels) on an ad hoc basis. In the situation which is now emerging, the states would be prepared to adjust to any new formula that might be advanced by the centre. Despite all that the teachers are saying and will continue to say, they would be prepared to fall in line with whatever comes from Delhi. The onus of decision-making will fall upon the centre therefore.

What will the centre do? It is difficult to answer this question. The right kind of input from the Knowledge Commission could prove helpful. But the basic decision would be made by the prime minister in consultation with his cabinet colleagues. The minister for HRD believes in the status quo and cannot be accused of having a lively vision about the future shape of things. As to the teachers, they will fight as well as they can but will eventually accept whatever decision is made by the political masters. To speculate any further would be pointless.

In conclusion, it is important to underscore two points. In the short run, it is going to be a crisis of quality. In the long run, it would be a crisis of social justice. On both counts, decisive remedial action is called for. The country cannot continue to neglect her educational future for another decade or so. This neglect may not lead to a major breakdown. But a slowing down of the rate of growth is not unlikely. In any case, the continued neglect of those who are lagging behind even today will be unforgivable.

The next round in higher education, particularly the need to redefine and specify the status and performance of the colleges, is thus going to determine many issues which have remained unresolved for six decades. We have discussed the problem from a variety of angles. To not pay any heed to it and to continue as before is not an option that is available to the country. EPW

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