

## **INDIA: Time for a serious higher education rethink**

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Barely 11% of the relevant age group were enrolled in higher education in India in 2007. The Indian state has been so under-invested in education as a whole since independence in 1947, that higher education was bound to arrive at this juncture. During the 11th-plan period (2007-2012) the objective is to increase the enrolment rate to 15%. The government of India has raised allocations for higher and technical education to five times the allocation made during the preceding five-year plan period. However, major constraints remain toward achieving this otherwise laudable objective.

### **Narrow pyramid**

The first problem involves the narrowness of the education pyramid in India. Primary school enrolment was only universalised earlier this decade, and enrolment at the upper-primary level is not yet universal. Worse still, school education quality is so low and learning outcomes so poor, that dropout rates at the end of the primary cycle remain significant, and by the end of the upper-primary cycle the dropout rates are 52%.

Not surprisingly, secondary enrolment rates (grades 9-10) are only 57%, and higher secondary (grades 11-12) only 23%. With such a narrow pyramid, the possibility of rapidly expanding enrolment at higher education levels seems difficult.

These problems of a narrow education pyramid have risen from historical neglect of public education in government budgets. In India's federal constitution, education was for many decades a state subject, and although since the mid-1970s it became a subject on which the central as well as the state governments can legislate, 85% of total education expenditure is still accounted for by state governments.

Most universities are controlled by state governments, although there is a small but growing number of central universities.

### **A highly segmented system**

Nevertheless, education as a whole and school education for the masses was neglected for 40 years (until about 1990), which has created a highly segmented higher education system.

Students who come to the higher education system from the high-quality, relatively expensive, private English-medium schools join the elite higher education institutions of the country - the globally known Indian Institutes of Technology, the Indian Institutes of Management, and good medical schools.

The remainder of the higher education system, especially the degree colleges linked to universities, consist merely of degree-awarding bodies with little monitoring of quality of education by the overseeing universities.

### **Low-cost recovery**

Quality is also affected by the fact that most degree colleges and universities recover less than 20% of their per student costs from fees levied on students.

After 1990, with governments turning their attention seriously to elementary education, public funding for higher education tended to stagnate. Thus, an already highly skewed higher education system - with elite institutions at one end of the spectrum and low-quality, degree-awarding mass colleges on the other - became even more inefficient as a provider of skilled manpower to a growing economy.

A small number of the colleges are very good (for example, Elphinstone College in Mumbai, St Stephen's College in Delhi, Madras Christian College in Chennai, and Presidency College in Kolkatta to name a few). However, the narrow skill base has resulted in salaries for skilled staff growing sharply in the last decade or more - increasing rural versus urban income inequalities and intra-urban income inequalities as well.

The mass of students in higher education have always been provided with relatively low-cost public education.

This system appears in complete contrast to a high-achieving economy like South Korea, which ensured from the 1950s onwards that most of its students in higher education attended private universities. This trend continues to be the case today (while children in primary schools have always attended well-funded government schools).

Private higher education in India has expanded rapidly in response to growing incomes and the demand derived from that increase. This growth is particularly true for the southern states of India, especially in the fields of medicine and engineering. This region has thus served as a magnet for students from the north

who have failed to get admission into publicly funded institutions in the northern states.

Private provision has, of course, increased in the northern states as well in recent years - thus absorbing the demand from the upper-middle classes in the north. Nevertheless, as yet private provision nowhere meets the levels that are needed.

### **The disconnect between research and teaching**

As another major structural problem, a near-bifurcation exists within the higher education system between teaching and research. A lot of research in the sciences, in fact, is not located in universities.

In 1996-97, nearly three-fourths of the central government's Research and Development expenditure went to the department of Defence Research and Development, the Department of Space and the Department of Atomic Energy (and included 9.3% for the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research).

Similarly, in the social sciences research has remained concentrated in the research institutions funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, which funds in each state at least one research institution largely focused on the research requirements in that state or its neighbours. These research institutions all function quite independent of the university system.

Universities have ended up becoming undergraduate teaching institutions, especially those that have a large number of degree colleges linked to them. The heavy teaching load provides little time or energy or even funding for research.

This bifurcation between research and teaching results in a disconnect between teaching and research, quite unlike what prevails in most OECD countries. Not surprisingly, no real world-class universities are in place.

One outcome is that the upper-middle classes have been deserting the Indian university system, sending their children abroad for undergraduate education - a phenomenon that did not exist on a large scale until the early 1990s. Until then, most Indian students going abroad would do so only to pursue a masters degree or a doctorate. The desertion by the upper-middle classes has further taken the pressure off the public higher education system to provide quality education.

### **The 11th five-year plan (2007-2012)**

The central government has responded in the 11th five-year plan by increasing central allocations for higher and technical education five-fold compared to the 10th plan. Seven new Indian Institutes of Technology, six new Indian Institutes of Management, and 30 new central universities have been provided for.

The pace of expansion in the new few years may well turn out to be frenetic. The most serious problem that this sudden expansion will entail is finding faculty of appropriate quality in the public higher education system.

Therefore, an initiative to be seriously considered involves giving greater financial autonomy to universities, to enable them to mobilise resources from sources other than the government - partly to attract Indian academics teaching abroad back to India.

Salaries have risen sharply recently, thanks to the Sixth Pay Commission's recommendations to make returning home attractive to non-resident Indians. However, the requisite autonomy of universities is also needed to encourage them to attract faculty back to India.

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