

Excellence in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

That education and development are closely related is obvious, however the extent of relationship is perhaps a matter of deeper research.

India, clearly a developing country got its independence in 1947 and was handed down an impoverished and ravaged economy. The national priorities were hunger, drought, internal and external security. Obviously education merited a lower priority. However, the efforts have been laudable.

India has evolved a time-tested and robust educational philosophy and system of education. We have developed a strong system of academic governance. The implementation however has left some gaps.

The paper looks at the relationship between education and development. An attempt has been made to understand the relationship between the two in the Indian context and make some suggestions for future direction.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic Growth does not automatically improve people's lives, either within nations or internationally. Growth on its own is not sufficient- it has to be translated into improvement in people's lives, Economic growth is not the end of human development. It is one important aspect.

Economic Growth of the industrialized countries has come at a price. In the industrialized countries the greenhouse effect is 4 times that of developing countries, 42 kg of pollutants are emitted per 100 people each year and 100 metric tons of hazardous and special waste generated per square kilometer annually. However, the wealth has resulted in higher life expectancy, adult literacy and schooling.

The Divide

	Population (million)	Life Expectancy	Adult Literacy	Mean Years School	Range of HDI
World (160 countries)	5,280	64.7	74	5.0	0.98-0.05
Developing Countries (127)	4,070	62.8	64	3.7	0.92-0.05
Industrialized Countries (33)	1,210	74.5	98	10.0	0.98-0.73

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Education in India:

India has had a great tradition of education. India's distinctiveness rests on its great foundations. India's renaissance, which began in the last decades of the 19th century, has been marked by multisided awakening, creativity, renewal and reconstruction enabling the country to make valuable contributions in the services of her people and the people of the world. Our culture has always stood for universality and common fraternity of the entire human race, and our aspirations are reflected in the educational field in creating, strengthening and developing a national systems that should be geared to the highest ideals of universal peace, unity and harmony.

India has maintained that education is a liberating force as also an evolutionary force, which enables the individual to rise from mere materiality to superior planes of intellectual and spiritual consciousness. Education is a dialogue between the past, present and the future, so that the coming generations receive the accumulated lessons of the heritage and carry it forward.

Despite serious handicaps of means and resources, the country has built up during the last 50 years very large system of education and has created a vast body of people equipped with a high order of scientific and technological capabilities, robust philosophical thought and creativity.

Growth of Education:

When India became independent, it had only 20 universities and 500 colleges located in different parts of the country. It enrolled around a hundred thousand students in higher education. Participation of women was limited and those who graduated annually were no more than a

couple of hundreds or so. The policies and aspirations of people influenced the development in the following decades.

In the post-independence period, higher education has expanded fast, and it is mostly public in nature. Today, India ranks very high in terms of the size of the network of higher education institutions, with 6.75 million students enrolled. The teaching force numbers about 321,000. Student enrolment increased from 263,000 to 6,755,000 by 1996-97. It grew at an estimated rate of 7 percent between 1987 and 1993 but has now declined to 5.5 per cent compound rate of growth, with 14 states (out of 23 States and 1 Union Territory in India which have Universities) having a lower rate. In spite of this phenomenal growth, the total enrolment, however, forms only about six percent of the relevant age group (IT-23) population.

The number of students per 100,000 population has increased significantly since independence. It was only 48 per 100,000 in 1951 increasing to 613 per 100,000 in 1997.

India's higher education system compares favorably with the other countries of South Asia in its enrolment, while our South East Asian neighbors show much higher enrolment such as in the Philippines (27.8%), Thailand (19.0%), and Malaysia (10.1%). Hence, in spite of the rapid expansion of the system in 50 years, access to higher education still remains an issue as the pressure of India's very youthful population continues to bear on it.

With this scientific and technical manpower India has the potential to become the largest reservoir in the world. Compared to the situation that the country inherited from the colonial rulers about half a century ago, these numbers mark a phenomenal expansion of the system.

Growth in Higher Education in India

Institutions	1950-51	1990-91	1996-97	2002-03
Universities	30	117	214	394
Colleges	750	7346	9703	12,543
Enrolment ('000s)	263	4925	6755	9875
Teachers ('000s)	24.0	272.7	321	432

Note: includes institutions deemed to be universities, but excludes other institutions.

Source: UGC Annual Report 1996-97 (New Delhi: University Grants Commission); and Selected Educational Statistics (New Delhi: Ministry of Human Resource Development) relevant years).

The Challenges:

That the educational initiative of the government, whereas laudable in approach has been woefully inadequate in obvious. Undeniably, given the burgeoning population of the nation, the task of educating the masses has been huge. Given the pressing issues of poverty, unemployment and national security, higher education has perhaps not got the inputs necessary for its development.

Also, given the democratic set-up of the country, the limited resources have been spread extremely thin. Many of our efforts have therefore been well below the critical mass. A clear sufferer has been the quality of the programmes. Also, the disparity between the good institutions (the NTs & the 11 Ms) and the others has been large. Programmes are run with inadequate infrastructure and resources. Some of the institutions lack supplies and laboratories and many do not even possess the basic infrastructure in terms of buildings, furniture and library.

Quality:

Whereas the emphasis has been to make education available to the masses, quality has

taken a back seat. Though pockets of excellence exist, they are primarily due to the anomalous initiative of an individual and not as a system requirement. One of the reasons for poor quality of education is absolute lack of accountability. At the school level (class X and XII), more than half the enrolled students do not even manage to qualify. At the college level, it is not even debated. The system holds no responsibility for the performance of the students. The entire onus is on the student (and sometimes the parents).

R&D:

While there are initiatives to upgrade the quality of the curricula as well as the teacher competencies, the efforts are few and far between. If a surgeon was to enter the operation theatre with the tools of the last decade and knowledge of two decades prior, he would perhaps not be permitted to operate upon the patient. An aircraft pilot with the training of the past decade would not be permitted to fly the aircraft. However, teachers often teach the same material for decades.

With an extremely low level of industry-academia interaction, specially in non-metro towns, the teaching process is often independent of the practising world. Also, given that supply is less than demand (except in few areas like IT and management), there has been no competitive pressure to improve.

Management:

The academic governance system and our policies seem fairly robust on the drawing board, the reality on the field seems to be a very poor reflection of it.

With the very drivers of performance, namely accountability and competition missing, the quality of implementation leaves much to be desired. Excellence for the sake of excellence and

academic fervour seems to be a dreamy idealism, which is not witnessed in reality. There are instances of outstanding academic leadership, but they are few and far between. The Higher Education System has not been impacted by the developments in management theory and continues to be organised in much the same manner as it was before the advent of it.

Globalisation:

The sector is under threat from global players, both indirectly and directly. We are losing good and rich students and faculty to international players. The year 2001 saw more than 60,000 students go overseas for higher education. The biggest draw was the U.S., followed by Australia and other developed countries. It is important to note that whereas the pull for the U. S. was largely due to strong brands, the pull to Australia can be said to be the outcome of a very successful and well co-ordinated marketing program.

We are also seeing global players offering programs on the Indian soil and most of them do so without any direct investments into the country. By and large, they locate an Indian partner who conducts the program, more or less independently and the degrees are awarded by the foreign institution. That they have significantly contributed to the quality of the education in India is not evident.

Though the foray of these players has largely been restricted to IT and management, since these disciplines allow a favourable business modeling, other vocational programmes and any other programmes that suggest a viable and profitable model shall be offered in the near future.

While the government has put a strong impediment in their mushrooming growth by

not recognising their degrees for admission to Indian Universities and for the purpose of government jobs, it may be noted that: -

- a) The government recognition of the degree is not important for a section of the society.
- b) There are serendipitous methods of obtaining a government recognised degree and
- c) The market has huge gaps that enable these foreign players to mop up revenues in spite of an unfavourable legislation

It is also worth noting that the entry barriers for players wanting to enter the sector in terms of investments (as required as per government norms) and time frame to satisfy the government committees are fairly daunting. To many entrepreneurs, the foreign affiliation route is a simpler and a faster route to take.

Add to this, the government nominees to be placed on various committees (including the finance committee), and the proposition to operate in the government-approved sector is not necessarily a very promising one. A number of successful entrepreneurs have chosen to stay out of the government ambit, NUT, Aptech, ISB, Kirloskar to name a few.

None can deny the need to regulate the sector, but a selective opening up is now called for to combat the global challenge. The belief that the government is the sole harbinger of quality has not been found to be true by many economies. It is perhaps time to begin a withdrawal to enable a meaningful participation of the private players. (A 'Private Universities bill has been pending for over 4 years). It is the contention of this paper to suggest that protectionism and over-regulation is not an

adequate approach to combat the challenge of globalisation. To ignore it would be fool-' hardy and that, if taken by the neck, it would be a great opportunity for India.

Suggestions :

1. Strengthen the higher education
2. Make curricula relevant and Include 'value' education as part of curricula
3. Build accountability and assessment into the system
4. We must allow private sector to operate meaningfully in this sector. Privatisation of education shall both enable the necessary resources to flow into the sector as well as build a semblance of competition within the country. It will also give impetus to India seeking global opportunities.
5. Use technological innovations in teaching like powerpoint presentations etc.
6. Train the teaching staff.
7. An attempt should be made to arrest student and teacher flows from the country.

One approach could be to develop 'student exchange and 'teacher exchange programmes. This coupled with credit transferability shall go a long way in arresting student and teacher flows. †

8. The government must take pro-active steps in establishing the transferability of credits and recognition of study periods. While we have signed bilateral agreements with Russia, Germany and Egypt, we need to do so with the other countries. The structural and educational differences between higher education systems in different countries are a severe barrier against the development of educational co-operation.
9. India as a destination for education should be aggressively marketed. It should be treated as a product and with the support of Chambers of Commerce, the Indian embassies abroad effort should be made to penetrate foreign markets. The aggression of Australia and the British Council should be an eye-opener for India. The strong brands of the Indian Education Sector such as 'NTs' should be leveraged upon.