Higher Education in India–Seriously Challenged

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Higher Education in India is seriously challenged. It is confronted with globalization even as it struggles to overcome the inadequacies created by colonial rule and to meet the demands of development.

India acquired freedom from British colonial rule in 1947. In British India, access to school and university education was restricted. In contrast, the constitution of independent India promises schooling to all children up to the age of 14 and opportunities for further education to all. To honor this commitment, the university system inherited from the British is continuously being diversified and expanded. Reserved admissions and other facilities are provided to advance the education of castes and tribes, traditionally excluded from education. The British were indifferent to industrialization in India, and did not provide facilities for technical education at Indian universities. To support the country's planned program of economic development through industrialization, technical education is now firmly promoted at Indian universities. In addition, special national-level centers of excellence have been established to provide world-class education in engineering, technology, management, medicine, law, and other fields. This is complemented with a range of research institutions. Several bodies have been set up to monitor standards. As the government of a welfare state, the government of independent India takes responsibility for these provisions. The government's share accounts for 90 percent of the total expenditure on higher education, up from an estimated 50 percent in British India.

There were three expectations from this investment: first, ample access; second, that the manpower needs of development would be adequately met; and third, that the country remain in the forefront of knowledge. It is interesting to look at higher education in the light of these expectations.

Access

When India achieved independence, only a few thousand students were enrolled in higher education. Today, with 250 universities and approximately 8 million students, India has the world's second-largest system of higher education. Unfortunately, the students enrolled account for barely 6 percent of the population of the relevant age group. This figure is disturbingly low as compared to the countries of North America (60 to 70 percent) and Europe (40 to 60 percent), or the recently developed Asian Tigers (33 to 55 percent), with which India needs to compete as globalization advances.

Despite the massive increase in student numbers, the fact that enrollment (as a percentage of the population of the relevant age group) remains poor in India illustrates how development is defeated by the phenomenal increase in the population of the country since independence—one billion according to the latest (2001) census, up from about 33 million in 1947. At the same time, it is important to recognize that enrollments in higher education suffer because of the slow progress in primary and secondary schooling. With great effort, the country recently achieved 100 percent school enrollment, but 40 percent of the children drop out before they complete primary school and only an estimated 20 percent complete high school.

Although enrollment is inadequate by comparative standards, the growth in the demand for higher education has been unmanageably large, rapid, and pressing. The centers of excellence have been protected. But the universities that constitute the backbone of the system have been stretched, their standards of teaching and of evaluation compromised in order to accommodate demand. As a consequence, education at Indian universities has deteriorated into an examination-driven, certificate-oriented exercise. The faculties of the arts and the humanities, which account for 60 percent of the total enrollments in higher education in the country, have fared the worst. This is a cause for concern.

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While the demand keeps mounting, the government has recently admitted its inability to provide financial support on the scale required. At the same time, it is reluctant to accept privatization for fear that it will lead to commercialization and put students with limited means at a serious disadvantage. This is understandable, but it could well be that the government is unwilling to relinquish, or even share, the power that financial control over higher education brings.

As the government dithers, disorder grows. "Unrecognized" private institutions spring up and flourish. By using political leverage, they eventually get

themselves recognized. As a consequence of the globalization of higher education, North American, European, and Australian universities provide degree courses through websites, distance education programs, or conventional instruction. Some of these courses are of dubious quality. But nothing can be done as they lie outside the jurisdiction of regulatory bodies set up by the government. In any case, they do a brisk business, because dissatisfaction with universities runs high, because institutions that provide quality education are unable to meet the demand for admissions, and because there is blind faith in education coming from the developed nations.

Meeting Manpower Needs

In 1857, the British established in India the first three universities for European education. Simultaneously, as part of their policy of cultural colonization, they withdrew their support for indigenous learning and cut the colony off from traditions of higher learning dating back to the Brahmanical universities (1000 B.C.). Subsequently, India depended on Europe and North America for knowledge and expertise in every field. Today, India has the world's third-largest stock of technically and professionally trained manpower. The country has achieved impressive industrialization and modernization and even developed nuclear power. Professionals and technologists educated in India are respected and in demand all over the world. There are other successes, too.

The plan included a selection of about 100 leading research centers in the country, chosen for their relevance to economic and social development and to higher education reform.

But there is a measure of mismatch between the manpower produced and the country's needs. The economy is unable to absorb all of this sophisticated work force, which has led many highly qualified Indians to emigrate. At the same time, positions in different fields remain unoccupied due to lack of suitably qualified personnel. The system has been spectacularly successful in contributing to the industrialization and the modernization of the country, but it is unable to produce the manpower required to advance the traditional occupations, which account for the employment of nearly 80 percent of the population of the country. These occupations, deeply anchored in indigenous knowledge, range from forestry, fishing, agriculture, and related occupations to the manufacture of textiles, jewelry, and other handcrafted goods, the practice of medicine, the fine and performing arts, and a host of services. It was hoped that these occupations would modernize as industrialization advanced, but this did not happen. Economists now warn that the growth of the Indian economy hinges on the advance of this sector, and higher education is challenged to pay special heed to its needs.

A New Dilemma

Meanwhile, globalization has generated a new dilemma. With the resources now available, the country must choose between two options. It can promote advanced technical and professional education and research to be self-sufficient and to remain in the forefront of knowledge. Alternately, it can concentrate on providing a variety of vocational and technical courses to equip the population to take advantage of the employment opportunities that are generated as multinationals locate labor-intensive production processes in India. The second alternative may create dependence, but it will enable many Indians to earn well. The challenge is to combine government funding with privatization, to build the resources required to accomplish both options, and optimize the country's gains from globalization.

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China's Plan to Promote Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences

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With the exponential growth of Internet use in China and China's accession to the World Trade Organization, many signs indicate that China's open door policy is only going to continue. Chinese universities are thus further confronted with an international context. Within this context, one urgent task is to improve the level of internationalization in the humanities and social sciences. Due to the varied ideologies, paradigms, and discourses inherent in these fields, and the high dependency on language to convey their meanings, dialogue with the international community is far more limited. This article reviews China's current initiatives to restructure research strength and infrastructure.