

Issues for Parliamentarians

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Parliamentarians' Forum on Economic Policy Issues (PAR-FORE)

Ensuring Quality in Indian Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Though quality is an important declared objective of India's higher education policy it is not backed by necessary steps to engage requisite faculty and infrastructure and develop quality consciousness across the learning process. The pursuit of quality is hampered by a lack of quality teachers, updated syllabi and adequately endowed libraries, laboratories, and computer terminals.

India has about 21000 colleges providing general and professional education to about 10 million students. General colleges can be recognised by the University Grants Commission (UGC) if they meet certain minimum conditions in terms of physical and academic facilities. Only around 30 percent of these colleges have got such recognition. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has laid down even more stringent standards for ensuring quality. Only 20 percent of colleges and 40 percent of universities have so far been accredited by the NAAC.

According to the NAAC, only 9 percent of colleges are of high quality, 66 percent of medium quality and the rest (around 25 percent) of low quality. Library facilities are available in more than 90 percent of colleges but the number of books in a college library ranges from 6500 to 15000 titles. The availability of books per student ranges between 7 and 10. About 78 percent of colleges have computer centres but a terminal is

shared by 145 students in 'A' grade colleges, while in 'C' grade colleges 546 students struggle to use one terminal. This indicates the poor status of physical infrastructure in colleges. It is important to note that these colleges facilitate higher education to 87 percent of all students enrolled for such education leaving 13 percent with the universities where the situation is not much better.

WHY QUALITY IS POOR?

The implementation of quality attributes is hampered by the governmental or quasi-governmental system of governance of higher educational institutions with its reliance on inflexible curricula and pedagogy-based examination systems. The system does not foster creative thinking, innovation and competitiveness. As a result, the institutions continue to indulge in practices that neither create academic excellence nor produce suitable candidates for the labour market.

The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) clearly addresses certain valid concerns about the quality of education. Faculty and infrastructure have been sources of worry for Indian higher educational institutions. The following are some of the key factors responsible for the deteriorating quality of higher education in India:

- The universities are established and aided by the Government and as a result they are effectively under the control of the Government. Such

universities are influenced by political and bureaucratic interference in their decision making processes and generally the decisions are taken on non-academic grounds.

- The infrastructure in higher education is on the verge of collapse. The allocation of public funds for higher education has been very low. While demand for higher education grew at a fast rate, the Central and state government's financial support to higher educational institutions declined in real terms. In addition to this, a lion's share of budgetary support was allocated towards revenue expenditure leaving a negligible share for capital expenditure. Thus, most of the expenditure was used to meet running expenses, such as salaries, administrative processes etc. The result has been felt in terms of outdated and crumbling physical infrastructure and poor quality of faculty. The rich have opted out of the public higher education system and sought admission in foreign educational institutes abroad or some private institutions within the country. The common people have no option.

While the Government funding for higher education went into decline and consequently public institutions faced a financial crunch, these institutions were not even allowed to mobilise additional private resources through higher fees, charity, alumni etc. This resulted into the deterioration of the higher education system.

- A lack of quality faculty is plaguing higher educational institutions. The number of quality entrants into the teaching community has been reduced by better remuneration elsewhere; the same opportunities are also leading to attrition among existing faculty. The real concern is regarding how quality faculty with interest in and dedication to

research and ability to generate quality human capital through their teaching can be attracted.

- The UGC's policy on promotions has also discouraged the involvement of good faculty in research. A person is automatically promoted from the post of lecturer to senior lecturer to reader and finally to professor after completing fixed tenures in each post. In such a situation, faculties are not motivated to do research which is one of their main responsibilities. The quality of research is affected as over the long run seniority yields the same results as merit.
- Affiliation of colleges to the university is a major source of poor quality. India is perhaps one of the very few countries that still have the system of affiliating universities. While teaching takes place in affiliated colleges these have no control over curricula or evaluation which is the responsibility of the affiliating university. This practice of centralising education runs contrary to the spirit of decentralisation and innovation as well as flexibility in curricula in higher education prevailing elsewhere in the world.
- The curricula of universities and hence colleges are not being revised according to the requirements of the market and often remain unchanged for decades. Most of the universities are still stuck with rote-based examination systems. As the labour market gets more and more diversified and requirements for new specialisations crop up every year the portfolios of courses in universities and colleges are not evolving adequately to keep up with such demands.
- The university degree has lost its utility in the job market. As a result, both students and teachers are not serious about quality teaching and research and much of the human

capital in university faculty is under utilised and continuously deteriorating.

- There is insufficient competition between the universities because of barriers to entry. A university can only be set up through Parliamentary/Assembly legislation. The various requirements for establishing a university constitute formidable obstacles and make entry a cumbersome process. The non-vocational sector, particularly, suffers from a lack of competition because of institutionalised barriers to entry created by the Government itself, resulting in both inadequate quality and quantity of higher education institutions. India can learn from the experiences of South Korea which has deregulated its higher education system (see Box I for the Korean experience). In contrast, there is sufficient competition in vocational education but it is almost unregulated.

Thus, Indian higher education is still considered to be sub-optimally organised and highly regulated, which limits initiatives for change and stifles private efforts. The NKC in its report concludes, “The existing regulatory

framework constrains the supply of good institutions, excessively regulates existing institutes in the wrong places, and is not conducive to innovation or creativity in higher education”. Thus, regulatory arrangements inhibit both the reform of higher education and the mobilisation of additional resources, particularly private resources, for its further development.

The educational institutions also lack financial autonomy. The Government regulates fees to facilitate equitable access and does not provide any leeway to the institution. The basic requirement for quality education is good infrastructure and faculty which involves heavy cost. To recover the cost, the institute has to generate resources through fees charged from students. The Government should realise that if it want to make higher educational institutions centres of excellence, the entry of competent private players is to be allowed into this sector. For this, the Government has to now see higher education as legitimate commercial activity and provide more freedom to facilitate competition. To ensure access to education by all, easy availability of subsidised educational loans to needy students is a better option than regulation of fees.

Box I: Regulating Private Higher Education in South Korea

Private higher education in South Korea grew in an environment marked by very tight regulations. Until 1995, South Korea not only had strict guidelines on how to establish and operate a higher education institution, but also controlled the number of students in each department of each educational institution, as well as student selection methods. In most cases, student quotas and institute licences were rationed to those institutions that could demonstrate to the government their capabilities of providing quality education. Naturally, the strict regulations created substantial rent-seeking activity, while leaving little room for individual educational initiatives among institutions.

Recognising various problems arising from heavy regulation, in 1995 the Government started to loosen controls. Among other things, private universities were allowed to regulate the number of students as well as the distribution of students within the institution. The rules to establish a new institution were liberalised. The Government also provided small incentive grants to reward performance. In short, the Government introduced competition among universities and colleges by making them more autonomous and more competitive. The outcome is the improved quality and access to higher education in South Korea

Source: Kim Sunwoong (2005), ‘Political Economy of Massification of Higher Education in South Korea: Public Policy Choice of Elitism Versus Accessibility and Private-Public Mix’.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- ◆ How can the quality of higher education be ensured? Is monitoring of outcomes/ results a suitable and viable method? How can outcomes/results be quantified or measured?
- ◆ Accreditation is an important tool for monitoring the quality of higher educational institutions but the accrediting body should be truly independent. India is a rare case as the regulator and the accrediting agency serve under the same governance structure. Is it essential to de-link the accrediting agency from the regulatory authority and make it independent?
- ◆ Do you think accreditation by international bodies to promote independence of accrediting bodies should be encouraged? Should institutions be allowed to choose any recognised accrediting agencies?
- ◆ What remedial action should be taken if quality of a higher educational institution is not found satisfactory?
- ◆ How can it be ensured that the design of higher education is in sync with market demand? Can updating the syllabi regularly according to the requirements of market help?
- ◆ How does one ensure equity along with quality in higher education? How does one finance the education of needy students without imposing too much of a burden on either the Government or the needy student?
- ◆ Do you think autonomous status of colleges can help to improve the quality of higher education?
- ◆ Should efforts be made to attract and retain good quality faculty by providing better working conditions and incentives for performance? Do performance based salaries to faculty constitute a practical solution?
- ◆ Does UGC's time-bound promotion scheme for faculty work as a de-motivating factor for the faculty seriously interested in research?

For further information, please contact

CUTS
International

D-217, Bhaskar Marg, Bani Park,
Jaipur 302 016, India.

Ph: 91.141.228 2821

Fx: 91.141.228 2485

E-mail: c-cier@cuts.org

Web Site: www.cuts-international.org

To post comments, please write to:

PAR-FORE@yahoogroups.com