

Role of Higher Education in India: Issues & Concerns

Dr. P. Venkata Subba Rao,

Dr. CSRao PG Centre, Sri YN College,

Narsapur, Andhra Pradesh

Abstract

To promote excellence in higher education the utmost essential need is to transform the regulatory environment for seeking fundamental reforms in the higher education sector. Some of the issues that need to be carefully addressed in evaluating the role and nature of regulatory reforms required are discussed in this article.

Here discusses the roles responsibilities and reforms to be made by the higher authorities concerned to first ensure the survival of all the institutions of higher education. By the by suggested is what Managements, Departments, Faculty and Students of higher education institutions could do, for us to realize the fond goals of promoting excellence

Key Words: *Quality Education, Privatisation, Liberalisation & 'Glocalisation Education.*

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Introduction

The United Nations considers knowledge as the prime mover of development for achieving its Millennium Development Goals. And the primary concern of the developing countries is, as to how we can provide quality education to large numbers at affordable costs. In the last two decades this goal has been getting realized at a fine pace. But as the reports of the Committees appointed by the UGC themselves reveal, 1/3s (35%) of the sanctioned teaching faculty positions in universities and colleges established by the central and State governments are lying vacant for years and decades together. Reports tell us that presently, in two states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, there are about 2,000 teaching vacancies unfilled in about 30 universities. At that rate, as presently there are above 300 universities including Central, State, Deemed, and Private ones, and over 2000 private institutions of higher education in the country, we may guess-estimate that the unfilled faculty positions in the 300 universities could be anywhere around 20,000 in the 29 states of our country, and the unfilled faculty positions in the more than 2000 unaided private institutions of higher education could be anywhere in lakhs. Universities and Government Colleges are forced to employ lecturers on contract basis. Funds are not allocated sufficiently for the dozens of new universities created. Lakhs of lecturers teaching in all these institutions are forced to work for meager salaries. Shortage and inadequacies of human and material resources imply that curricular aspects cannot be well taken care of to promote excellence. If this be the situation of the central and state sponsored universities and colleges, then how horrendous and staggering would be the thousands of Undergraduate and hundreds of post graduate unaided higher education institutions in the country? How proper and rightful is it then for the governments, UGC and the other regulatory bodies of higher education to ask those institutions to compulsorily go for assessment and accreditation, as they have not been giving any kind of support? How successfully can they monitor those institutions? And, at least is there sufficient incentive upon assessment and accreditation for those institutions to go for it?

Some Paradoxes in Higher Education

The greatest paradox in the higher education scenario today is that though Privatisation and Liberalisation, brought about in the last two decades, have done some good, they have also rung its death knell overall, as without any financial assistance from the governments and the UGC, majority of the institutions of higher education struggle for their survival. As such, we cannot expect them to achieve excellence in quality, and we cannot think of doing anything really substantial to improve the standards in a quick-fix manner. Reforms must be brought regarding

curriculum, fee structure, salaries, etc., in the Post-Privatisation and Post-Liberalisation phase. There are any number of challenges to face and issues to address. And many questions getting asked for last two decades, the answers for which are not forthcoming. Urgently to be addressed are the consequences of the policies of privatisation and liberalisation, as we wonder if they have become boons or banes. And the issues like fee structures and government scholarships and tuition fees. For example, it is so horrendous to think that a government-aided teacher or lecturer in the country is rewarded ten to fifteen times more than what the most talented in the unaided sector, who is as good as any (if not better) in the aided sector gets paid, for teaching the same lessons, as well (if not much better). And it is also very far from truth that all those in the government aided jobs are selected on pure merit, as without bribes and recommendation not many get to land in a government aided teaching post. And, from the admissions point of view, whereas a student studying in a University pays only two or three thousands to pursue a Masters Course in Arts, another seeking admission in an affiliated college of the same University has to pay about ten times more to study course. Again paradoxically, statistics reveal that the quality of teaching and the results got are mostly better in the unaided institutions.

Need to Brain-Storm for Solutions

We, belonging to the higher education institutions and the intellectual section of the society, should contribute as best we can to the efforts of promoting excellence in higher education, by brain-storming and ransacking for valuable ideas, and add up to the to the efforts of think-tanks of the nation. But, is there anyone in the top echelons of ‘higher education policy making’ concerned and sane enough to listen? Do we get heard? Are the channels of communication open to us, for our voices to be heard by those that matter. In the above light, this paper discusses the roles and responsibilities of the Central and State Governments, the University Grants Commission and the Universities, the Managements of Colleges and Institutes, Departments, In-charges, Faculty and Students of higher education, for us to realize the fond goals in ensuring the survival of the institutions of higher education.

In today’s globalised scenario, Higher Education world-wide, is a very complex, demanding and competitive reality. It is even more so in the India, because of its diverse languages and cultures. India is the third largest higher education system in the world, after the United States and China. Considering the range and rate of changes in the micro and macro environment of the nation, and the world that has become a global village now, it implies that we have to assess the scenario from a very broad perspective, as we have to factor-in the global and the local aspects

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playing equally important roles. Which means we have to approach and address the issues and challenges involved in promoting excellence in higher education from the point of view of the “Glocal” (a port-man-teau word created from ‘Global+Local’, that gained currency in this century).

Anyway, with globalization, privatization and liberalization of higher education, we need to address any number of issues and challenges, to keep the system relevant, as per the changing needs of the society. Otherwise, while some institutions and courses would die a natural death, most would die an unnatural death. More importantly, India has a role to play in the present global scenario, especially as it is going to be the one with the highest percentage of youth in the world, in the next two decades, and we need to empower them as best we can. Though we have already become players in the global arena in more ways than one, in the aforesaid light, we need to gear up to play a greater role in the global arena. It is inevitable that we need to review all the contents and aspects of our educational system and the quality of curriculum transaction, research and development to enhance the quality that is deteriorating by the day. However, given the present Indian scenario, deterioration is no wonder, and it is not unfair to say that as we are still trying to create opportunities for all who desire to pursue higher education, we cannot complain too much regarding achieving excellence in higher education.

The Semblance of Ensuring Quality Improvement

The National Accreditation Regulatory Authority (NARA), established by the Central Government (after factoring in the recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission and the Yashpal Committee’s suggested reforms) for registering, monitoring and regulating the autonomous accreditation regulatory bodies/agencies, of higher education [like the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and National Board Of Accreditation (NBA) that work correspondingly under the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE)]; and for keeping them free from any type of control, should ensure that all the higher education institutions get accredited, in the general interest of the public, all the stakeholders and the institutions themselves. Presently, while there are above 300 universities including Central, State, Deemed, and Private ones, and above 2000 private institutions of higher education in the country, only 1/3rd of the former and 1/5th of the latter got accredited during the last 20 years. Many famous and renowned universities and institutions evinced no interest in getting accredited, which, maybe, implies that the incentive for getting accredited is not good enough for them to seek accreditation. Accreditation of all higher education

institutions must be made mandatory for the general benefit of the society, for being aware as to where the institutions stand in terms of propagating excellence in higher education, especially in view of the consequences of privatization and liberalization of higher education. The Andhra Pradesh government has recently given a grading of sorts to the institutions of higher education in the state, in an overall manner, to ensure furthering the purpose of quality improvement for achieving excellence. The NAAC had bench-marked 'Best Practices' (the practices that add commendable value to an institution and all its stakeholders) in the form of Criterion Statements to assess the performance level and to ensure quality enhancement.

Issues & Concerns

1. Role of the Central and State Governments, University

Grants Commission (UGC), the Regulatory Body and the Accrediting Agencies:

All the above said policy making bodies should ensure that the private unaided institutions should be supported in terms of both creating facilities and giving salaries, even if not on par with the government and aided faculty. The tax-payers money is being wasted for populist schemes by all the governments, and education is being left to the winds. Instead, governments must facilitate free higher education for all irrespective of anything. They should take care of the material and human resources, first of all. For example, if we take the case of the National Eligibility Test (NET) and the State Eligibility Test (SET) for lecturers in Colleges and Universities, not many qualify in them to fill the requirement. Even if there are those qualified, the various governments conduct their own tests, but even then, the meritorious may not get an appointment due to political interference and corruption.

Governments and universities should stop taking teachers and lecturers on Ad-hoc basis, for the sheer fact that they have all the required resources so as not to compromise in appointing the eligible candidates on any given day. There is no dearth of knowledgeable, talented and skilled scholars and potential teachers in the country. Many times those appointed on ad-hoc basis do not fulfill the requirements of eligibility. But, they and sometimes the managements seek the governments to regularize them, by way of the back-door entries. This should be stopped. And then, they must see to it that the faculty of the unaided, private higher education institutions must be paid decent enough salaries, for them to work with a sense of satisfaction, and a sense of belonging. Otherwise it would be like it is said about politicians jumping from one party to another – 'Aya Ram, Gaya Ram' – a politician coming into a party and then shortly leaving or because one comes in another goes out, or as one goes out another

comes. As, for a few hundred rupees the teaching faculty would be tempted to leave one institution and go to another. There won't be stability in any of the departments. A NAAC Peer Team accrediting a private Post-graduate institution advised it to make all possible attempts to retain the senior and well qualified faculty by fair enough salaries, for them to serve more happily, without having to leave the institutions in search of greener pastures.

A serious lag in one regard on the part of the UGC is regarding NET & SET: a proper system should be created to absorb all the candidates who qualify the qualifying tests for teachership and lecturership. Rules should not come in the way to absorb Senior faculty with potential to enter into university service. Uniformity must be ensured throughout the country regarding policies and rules like those for Autonomous Higher Education Institutions. For example in Tamil Nadu, Postgraduate colleges are given autonomy and grant in aid salaries, whereas in Andhra Pradesh neither of them can be given. All such disparities between State Policies should be done away with by the Central Government and the uniformity ensured.

2. Role of the Universities

As a result of privatisation and liberalisation, not only in Colleges, but in many universities too, seats are going abegging, leading to undesirable and lenient practices. Along with the governments, universities are giving permissions to start courses and extra sections unnecessarily, not because there is need and demand, but just to improve their own finances, by way of getting different kinds of fees to be paid to them by the affiliated colleges. Universities are not following any rationale as they are giving permissions to start many departments like MBA, MCA, English etc, at the PG Level, even in a small town, pretty well knowing that there would not be any demand. All of this besides the Schools of Correspondence established in every university, which prosper at the cost of the institutions offering regular education, because there is no limit for the number of admissions per a year.

Universities – Central, State, Deemed, Private, Foreign, whatever, and the Autonomous Colleges that have the required amount of freedom to design the curricula for various courses, should ensure the relevance and currency of the same. So also, attention should be paid to the processes of evaluation, since now-a-days, the system of evaluation has been much diluted and marks awarded too liberally, whether it is by way of the mid-semester internal assessment or the external assessment. Of recent, the external assessment in many universities has become so liberal, that it is shocking for the teachers when they find students who can't even write a single grammatical sentence correctly too get passed even at the PG level. Even 50-80 percent of the

first class or 'A' Grade students in various courses do not have either fluency or accuracy in written or oral expression. Therefore, strict measures must be taken to see that there is no such degradation, and that the process of evaluation would not become a sham. This poor state is the result of the struggle for existence of the institutions of higher education, in the backdrop of permission given beyond requirement in various parts of the country. Pass percentages cannot be a big criteria for assessment.

Curriculum designing should not be stifling for either the teachers or the students. It must have a lot of scope for original, creative, innovative and inventive thinking and practice. It should be made not too much in quantitative terms (as has been happening mostly), but good in qualitative terms, focussing on the transferable and application skills; and not on cramming knowledge and preparing the students for tests and examinations that require them to depend on rote memory.

3. Role of the Managements of Colleges and Institutes

It goes without saying that the impact of the just above mentioned state falls on all the departments in the institutions, as the managements of the said institutions, in all likelihood, would force the departments to resort to unhealthy practices to boost up the results, as it is struggle for existence, and the colleges affiliated by the dozen, or by the hundreds by each university are in no way supported by the governments and the universities. Within their resources and limitations the university affiliated colleges should ensure that the knowledge and skills of the faculty are constantly upgraded for them to well cater to the needs of the students. In case they have the autonomy to design courses and frame the curriculum, they should cater to the local requirements keeping in view the regional opportunities. This however is not to say that they can neglect the global needs. Institutions themselves must resist the temptation to be liberal in evaluation. An effective system must be put in place to take the help of the parents, alumnae and the community to contribute to the student's development.

4. Role of the Students

Students should pursue their studies as a passion, but not just because seats are available, and governments give scholarships and tuition fee reimbursements. They should pursue courses after their own nature and inclination, to make it their career/profession too. Anyway, on their part they themselves should be the real pressure group for the teachers and institutions to cater to their needs of quality education properly.

5. Role of the Society / Community

The society, which is the ultimate stakeholder regarding education, on its part should function more pro-actively, as a pressure factor for the colleges to upgrade themselves, and also see to it that colleges offer courses that improve the employability of the students, therein without having to move out of their locality and culture.

Conclusion

Higher education is for the transformation of the social and economic order, and in a country like ours, for propagating democratic ways of life and functioning as a tool for nation building and social change, by generating ideas, communicating and discovering knowledge and perpetuating wisdom, by way of facilitating a creative, innovative and inventive atmosphere, with a research orientation and an atmosphere propagating holistic ambience. It is where the best of the people can give their best to the world, for one and all to learn. It is to prepare a student for the world in all regards..

Higher education needs radical perennial changes. Today the world is changing at such a fast pace that we cannot be lethargic even for a moment, in any regard. We can't be indifferent regarding quality and relevance. If the universities and institutes of higher education funded by the state continue to be the way they have been for decades and hundreds of years, they sure would lose their relevance. And while we can't forgo the benefits of privatization and liberalization, at the same time we need to do our best to overcome the limitations it creates.

For this to happen, the nature of Higher education must be changed from the predominantly liberal one to a highly professional one. It must be predicated both on the local and the global needs of the society, thus catering to the 'Glocalised' needs. It should be fully funded by the state for it to be successful. Or at least there should be a partial aiding of the institutes, asking them to take care of the infrastructure and other facilities, while the state could pay the salaries of the faculty, so that while the faculty would have a sense of security to continue to work for longer periods in an institution and groom the students with dedication, not worrying about their future, institutions can learn to improve their establishment by way of raising funds. As Prof. B.C.Muzumdar, Chairman, NBA says that by benchmarking excellence for quality education, "The parents and the prospective students will choose those programs and institutions which are accredited and employers will also get graduates from those institutions because they are well equipped and thirdly the institutions themselves can assess, evaluate and improve their quality once they get accredited. It helps the public and society as a whole." And for this to be possible, the only

solution is for the higher education system to be empowered to have more freedom and flexibility and autonomy, and more participation and free flow of academic ideas, for the various institutions of higher education to strive for excellence.

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