
Book Review

Valuable resource for a progressive policy for higher education in India

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Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future by Pawan Agarwal. 2009.

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Higher education in India is at the crossroads. Yashpal Committee set up by the government for renovation and rejuvenation of the Indian higher education has submitted its report. The new government at the centre has released its 100-days plan. Amongst other things, overhaul of regulatory arrangements is proposed. A new national commission on higher education and research would replace and subsume roles of the existing bodies like UGC, AICTE and DEC and take over academic tasks of other professional bodies. Publication of this book at this juncture is timely and relevant. The book provides an overview of the complex structure of the Indian higher education and gives insight into the problems faced by it. It provides a base to build a progressive and forward-looking policy for higher education.

The book is neatly organized into nine chapters covering a large spectrum of issues. The chapters are, size, structure and growth; access and equity; private higher education; financing and management; workforce development; research and higher education; regulatory framework; quality management; and perspectives. While, each chapter builds on discussion in the previous ones, yet the chapters can be read independently as well as in conjunction with each other. Contemporary and relevant issues such as internationalisation and student mobility, affirmative action, growth of foreign providers, private tuition and coaching, tuition and fee policy, student aid and loans, institutional management, issue of autonomy and accountability, skill shortages, science and math education, postgraduate and doctoral education, world-class universities, regulating private higher education, streamlining admissions, fee regulation and regulating foreign providers, GATS and higher education, rankings and league tables, brand orientation, faculty shortages, use of new technologies are all discussed in the relevant chapters.

Last chapter on perspectives examines the challenges faced by the higher education in India in the context of country's changing socio-economic and political circumstances. Finally, the book provides an overview of the status and prospects of Indian higher education in terms of three crosscutting themes – access and expansion, equity and inclusion and quality and excellence. The epilogue breaks several myths about higher education in India and suggests that strategic interventions with an incremental approach are required for reforming the Indian higher education.

The book is the result of long and sustained research carried out by the author over a period of eleven years, when the author served in the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the University Grants Commission. Later on sabbatical from the government, the author was Fulbright New Century Scholar on higher education from India at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations at New Delhi, the Harvard University and the Emory University in the US. Thus, the book is written from the vantage point of an insider as well as a detached observer and academic researcher. The book has evolved from a working paper (ICRIER Working Paper No.180) entitled "Higher Education in India: The Need for

Change” by the author in the year 2006. This working paper was widely circulated and commented upon. Thus the present book has benefited from valuable feedback from many people from the academic both from India and abroad.

Given the fact that the author was in key position in the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the University Grants Commission, he had access to large volume of useful data that he has presented in comparative perspective with other countries in the book. Thus, the arguments in the book are not merely based on perceptions, but are supported by hard facts. Each chapter has a large number of references and endnotes making it a very useful resource for further research on Indian higher education. An appropriate quote at the beginning of each chapter sets the tone of the chapter.

In all, the book is a very valuable resource for policymakers, researchers, and academic community. It is equally relevant for people in general who wish to acquaint themselves with the current state of higher education in the country and make a sense of the high-pitch debate on reforms in the Indian higher education. The book provides a overview of the complexity of the Indian higher education, and provides a single point source of up-to-date information with in depth analysis. This would thus be immense use to the international higher education community in general.
