

Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future

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Too many chiefs, not enough jobs

A sprawling system needs more democracy and opportunities for graduates, Nayanjot Lahiri writes

Fortuitously, Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future has appeared when the academy is high on the list of national priorities. As Pawan Agarwal points out, the decade preceding 2009 (when this book was published) saw landmark changes in the policy and practice of Indian higher education. He should know.

When Agarwal joined the Ministry of Human Resource Development as a civil servant in 1998, he recalls, he was disappointed to be assigned to the Department of Higher Education, which was then given much lower priority than primary and adult education. However, by the time he finished writing this book during a sabbatical at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations, there had been a ninefold increase in state expenditure on the sector.

Agarwal's book considers the gamut of institutions that make up the map of higher education - from colleges and universities set up by central and state governments and private institutions to research bodies and regulators - along with their contradictions and weaknesses.

The system is both large and small. India has the greatest number of higher education institutions in the world - 18,500 of them - yet they are highly fragmented and sub-optimally organised. Thousands are relatively small, with about 550 students on average. Naturally, an important policy objective is to widen participation and expand the rate of university attendance from the current 11 per cent.

But fixing participation targets, as the book points out, is of little value unless they are in sync with the economy's occupational structure and absorptive capacity. Like China, India has thousands of graduates who are either under- or unemployed. Unemployment rates are lowest among illiterate Indians, but rise progressively with education.

In fact, graduates with more than 12 years of education suffer the highest rate of unemployment. In short, India fails to provide jobs for its PhDs. This means that the base of doctoral education will remain small. In comparison with the US, which has 4,484 researchers per million people, and China, which has 708, India has 119.

How has growth in higher education been sustained? In the public domain, it is government initiatives that are usually discussed. These include several new central universities, as well as elite institutions of professional education, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management. In spite of this, central government's contribution to higher education makes up about 10 per cent of funding, compared with roughly 30 per cent in the US.

Moreover, India's expenditure is skewed in favour of a small number of students. About 3 per cent of them study in the 130 or so institutions that between them receive 85 per cent of central government's total funding.

The most dynamic segment in India, as Agarwal highlights, is not government-driven higher education, but the expansion of private professional education. Currently, 43 per cent of institutions, accounting for 30 per cent of enrolment, are private institutions that receive no state funding. A large proportion of them offer programmes in professional streams such as business administration, engineering, hotel management and pharmacy.

But there are concerns about unscrupulous private providers' exorbitant fees and the poor working conditions for faculty. Consequently, notwithstanding their rapid growth and contribution to the higher education map, private providers continue to have a poor public image.

Image issues also plague the key regulators that govern higher education in India, including the University Grants Commission and the All India Council of Technical Education. The proliferation of regulators is a major concern as well. While central government discharges its responsibilities primarily through the Ministry of Human Resource Development, there are also 15 other ministries and departments that finance and regulate universities. For example, medical education comes under the remit of the Ministry of Health, and agriculture and research are overseen by the Ministry of Agriculture.

So it remains to be seen how the proposed "super-regulator" - the seven-member National Commission for Higher Education and Research - will improve the mess that has been created by multiple and questionable regulators.

Gautam Desiraju of the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru noted in Nature India that the only way to ensure that the present rotten structure is not replaced by another one with "seven Mughal emperors" would be if the government vested the body "with the primary mission of democratising our universities and removing the shackles of bondage".

Agarwal thinks that rather than creating the body, the government should move to devolve various regulatory functions in a fair and transparent manner.

This advice is not likely to be music to the ears of Kapil Sibal, the minister for human resource development, who has been tone-deaf to the idea of a democratic and

decentralised regulatory system. Nevertheless, one hopes that Agarwal has presented his book to Sibal so that the honest and balanced treatment the author has accorded to higher education can inform the ministry's planning.

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