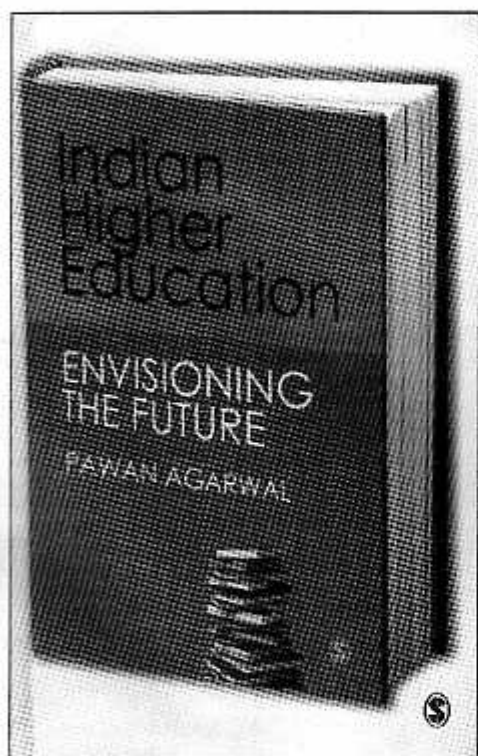


## Higher education – Understanding the Issues



**P**AWAN AGARWAL'S book, *Indian Higher Education – Envisioning the Future* is arguably the most comprehensive work on higher education in the country. It is also the best so far and is destined to remain the standard work on the subject for some time to come.

It comes as no surprise to me that Pawan Agarwal has authored such a fine book. As Director in charge of Higher education in the Government of India, and later in the UGC, Pawan, for several years, was at the centre stage of higher education policy making – from formulation to review, financing and administration. He had the opportunity to distance himself, both mentally and physically, soon after completion of his tenure in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, through a Fulbright scholarship in USA. This enabled him to reflect on his experiences, look at global practices and evolve the understandings that are so well reflected in his book. This 'distancing' undoubtedly has enabled Pawan to take a terrifically objective view of the subject. Every aspect impacting on higher education is covered in this book;

there is hardly an opinion in it, only analysis of very relevant data.

This book answers several questions – why are we lagging behind in higher education? Why are our funding and accreditation systems so cumbersome and what is the relevance of higher education for a country like India? Why do so many go overseas for higher education? How does the growing private participation in higher education impact on the higher education scene?

One of the factors of underdevelopment is the lack of adequate mass in higher education compared to the size of our population. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) is 20 % and growing in China; all developed countries have GERs exceeding 50 %, with Korea at 91 % topping the list followed by the USA at 83. India with an 11 % GER is a laggard though in absolute numbers we are huge too. The gap is growing, especially vis a vis China. It should come as no surprise to us that China is doing better than us in every way – whether it is in filing patents, or in research, or in the number of world class institutions it has, or in the number of students in higher education; the last, at 23 million plus, is double that of India and growing.

**TITLE :** INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION- ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

**Author :** Pawan Agarwal

**Page :** 488 pages

**Price :** 895

**ISBN :** 978-81-7829-941-9

**Publisher :** Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2009

Pawan tackles the issue of reservation and affirmative action with objectivity and sensitivity. In fact he devotes a full chapter of his book to issues of access and equity and gives informed suggestions, based on global experiences, to help the disadvantaged access the best of institutions. While not challenging quota based reservations he does feel that there is a strong case for a 'better policy design in affirmative action' and feels that 'affirmative action should be based on providing equality and opportunity for higher education to all, based on merit and work towards a non-divisive casteless society'. Pawan's incontestable contention is that the issue of affordability should be addressed too: 'despite affirmative action, the students from poor families will continue to be deprived of educational opportunities due to rising costs of education at all levels'.

Pawan brings out the many hurdles that come in the way of rationalizing our higher education system; the funding aspect receives particularly detailed treatment as also issues of accreditation and recognition. The need for higher education and the difficulty in forecasting which aspect to focus, in terms of employment opportunities and national requirements, is well discussed and analyzed. The experience of developed countries in this regard has been well covered and as also the various forms of skills shortage that afflict our country, impacting on its development.

The poor position we occupy in research manpower is something that should alarm all of us – against China's 708 researchers per million India has only 119; Japan tops with over 5000 and the United States follows with 4600. In a

technology driven world, India's worrying inability to produce enough technologists and scientists is also alarming, especially when countries like China and Korea, which were way behind us a few decades ago, are well ahead of us now.

Unlike the US or now, China, India does not have an enabling environment – neither for the faculty nor the student. The fixed salary structures for faculty paints the best and the worst the same, while the inability of students to carry credits from one institution to another, creates needless barriers that have long gone in the best higher education system in the world. We have no equivalent of the Bologna Process that is radically changing the European higher education scene for the better with vastly improved systems encouraging student and faculty mobility, rewarding excellence and improving access to higher education across the continent.

What is painful to note is that the slowness of our decision making systems. These are making India lose out, to not just the advanced countries, but also China and Malaysia amongst several others; the ease with which best of foreign universities are facilitated to register their offshore units through collaborations and even entire campuses in such countries, contrast sharply with what is happening in India. If it surprises us that Pakistan can keep pace with us in certain areas of technology, we know from Pawan that, that country has been sending its students abroad on state sponsorship in a very big and innovative manner, much in the same way China used to.

Since independence, we have had a plethora of commissions and studies looking at higher

education, the latest being the National Knowledge Commission. These have contributed to a much better understanding of higher education in our country as can be seen from Pawan's extensive research, very evident in his book, and vast experience.

Innovative funding, the use of technologies especially ICT amongst several other initiatives in the private and the public sector worldwide, are revolutionizing higher education, especially in the way knowledge is delivered. The blurring of borders is clearly evident with some of the best institutions in the world are setting up off-shore campuses; some Indian institutions have followed suit. These are very well discussed in the book, as also the role of institutions like the University Grants Commission (UGC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) – all very well supported by appropriate data.

At nearly five-hundred pages, *Indian Higher Education – Envisioning the Future* is not a large book on a subject that is so vast and so complex. The importance of Pawan Agarwal's work lies in the fact that his is the most comprehensive work of its kind, backed by an astonishing amount of relevant data and outstanding analysis of every aspect of higher education in the country. All this make it a compulsory read for anyone interested, not just in higher education but also in India's future. □

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