

Essay No. 15. August 21, 2020

**INDUCING QUALITY AND RELEVANCE IN
INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS
SOME THOUGHTS**

S C SHARMA

**Director
National Assessment and Accreditation Council
Bangalore**



**ASSOCIATION OF INDIAN UNIVERSITIES
NEW DELHI (INDIA)**

Scholarly Article from the book *REIMAGINING INDIAN UNIVERSITIES*,
Editors: Pankaj Mittal and Sistla Rama Devi Pani,
Publisher: Association of Indian Universities, New Delhi (India), 2020.

ISBN No. 81-7520-154-1

INDUCING QUALITY AND RELEVANCE IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: SOME THOUGHTS

S C SHARMA

In India, the demand for higher education is rapidly increasing along with the challenges of quality and sustenance. The focus of Indian higher education system for a long time was on establishing higher education institutions (HEIs) to give opportunity to the students to graduate themselves and seek jobs. This has led to massive increase in number of institutions and the number of students going for higher education. But the system did not get required attention towards quality and fitness of purpose. Consequently, the system grew with several gaps like skill gaps, research gaps, relevance gaps etc., which got converted into issues like access, equity, quality and employability. The system underwent several reforms and passed through several stages of transformation in order to address these issues, but still they remain unresolved to a large extent. It is high time that the Indian higher education system gears up with appropriate measures to put the system on right track. Implementation of valuable recommendations given by the education commissions and committees set up time to time in real sense of term would help in the process in a big way. The HEIs should be ready with positive mindset as well as readiness to implement the recommendations of the New Education Policy as soon as it is launched. Institutions like National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), National Board of Accreditation (NBA) which are responsible for quality assurance and act as motivators to the institutions need to be strengthened.

PRELUDE

In India, the demand for higher education is rapidly increasing, along with challenges to retain quality and sustenance, and to compete with higher education Institutions at the global level. Indian higher education has passed through several stages of transformation, in order to address the issues related to access, equity, quality and employability. Initially, the focus was on establishing higher education institutions (HEIs) to give opportunity to the students of both rural and urban areas to graduate themselves and seek jobs. This has led to massive increase in the number of students going for graduate and postgraduate courses. The number of colleges and universities has significantly increased in the field of Science, Commerce and Management, Engineering and Medicine. But quality has become a crisis. Some of these colleges lack qualified staff, infrastructure and facilities. The designing of curricula, teaching-learning and assessment are not as per the expectations of academic standards.

Development of skills such as soft skills, transversal skills, critical thinking skills and problem solving skills have not been given due importance. Research and innovation is another thrust area and essential component of higher education which failed to get required focus and attention.

There are areas such as curriculum, ICT based teaching-learning, outcome based teaching, research projects, infrastructure, employability and collaboration with foreign universities that are to be addressed to make Indian universities function on par with global universities. With reference to this, accreditation agencies like National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and National Board of Accreditation (NBA) have greater role to play in monitoring the quality of higher educational Institutions. To re-imagine the role of Indian universities as productive organisations contributing towards knowledge economy, the role of quality management agencies need to be realigned to take care of quality monitoring as well as assurance.

INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A REVIEW

India has always been a source of inspiration in the field of Literature, Astronomy Art, Yoga, Sculpture, Monuments and great historical events. It had its own unique niche in the field of education and attracted many foreign scholars. During ancient period, India was popular for its contribution to higher education with existence of universities like *Takshashila*, *Nalanda Vikramshila* and many other universities. Modern education system which is now prevailing in India was started in 1857 under colonial regime with establishment of three universities – University of Bombay, University of Madras and University of Calcutta. Since the system has been growing with ups and downs.

Ever since independence, a lot of structural and systemic reforms have taken place at different levels of education. Initially, the focus was on establishing higher education institutions (HEIs) to give opportunity to the students of both rural and urban areas to graduate themselves and seek jobs. This has led to massive increase in the number of students going for graduate and postgraduate courses as well as the number of universities and colleges. The number of universities in India at present is 1044 which can be briefly categorized into 54 Central universities, 412 State universities, 95 Institutes of National Importance, 127 Deemed to be universities and 356 Private universities. These numbers are continuously on rise. The trend indicates that by 2027, India would have the largest enrollment in higher education institutions. As of now, it is one amongst the top youngest nations in the world with the largest population in the tertiary education age bracket. Though the quantitative expansion of universities has enabled access to a large chunk of people it has led to certain problems as well. As per the reports of Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), the demand for higher education institutions is increasing day by day and there is a need to further increase the number of universities and colleges to meet these demands. Secondly, there is a paradigm shift from social science

to science education and similarly from science to technical education and at present the demand is for Information and communication technology courses.

The massive increase has further lead to a lot of issues and challenges related to faculty, infrastructure, information and communication technology(ICT), quality, employability etc. Though some institutions like Indian Institutes of technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) are doing well with well-established infrastructure and technological resources for effective teaching and learning, there are many higher education institutions without necessary facilities and resources and they find it difficult to provide good quality education. The main lacuna with Indian Higher Education System is callousness in implementation of recommendations of various committees commissions set up time to time. If all the recommendations have been implemented as and when recommended the system would have been in one the world-class ones.

Knowledge delivery and creation is the primary focus of all research programmes. Research should be given priority in order to create different forms of knowledge that helps in human development. The universities have responsibility to substantially increase the employability of number of students that have graduated. In this context, many institutions in collaboration with industries have introduced employability skills such as communication skills, critical thinking, problem solving, and entrepreneurial abilities into the curriculum.

Kumar (2018) in his book, *The Future of Indian Universities: Comparative and International Perspectives* states that, “Unfortunately, over a period of time, our higher education system lost its global competitiveness. This is exemplified by the fact that not many Indian higher education institutions feature in the annual world university rankings like the Times Higher Education World University Rankings or the QS World University Rankings.” Though some of the higher education institutions of India get credit in sending some of the world’s best talent abroad, they are however unable to attract students from other developing countries. With respect to the enrolment, India has more than 36.6 million students, which is the third largest in the world next to China and USA.

As far as publications are considered, “no one knows how many scientific journals there are, but several estimates point to around 30,000, with close to two million articles published each year,”(Altbach and Wit, 2018).Even though in India the number of publications has increased significantly, they lag behind in the quality of articles published by United States, United Kingdom, China and Germany. Majority of staff and students lack academic writing skills. According to the 2016 India Skills Report, India produces around 2.6 million STEM graduates whereas China produces 4.7 million; the 2019 report says that only 47 per cent of the available talent is Employable (Wheebox, 2019).In the light of the references made and the points discussed, India should move ahead keeping the recommendations made by various committees and the ones by global higher education institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF VARIOUS COMMITTEES AND COMMISSIONS

In order to improve the quality of higher education, many recommendations have been given by various committees and commissions set up time to time. The University Education Commission (1948-49) while delineating the aims of has highlighted the following: students should be made to realize the ultimate goals and purpose of life; to acquaint them with the social philosophy that governs all institutions; to train for democracy; to train for self-development; develop certain values like fearlessness of mind, strength of conscience and integrity of purpose; to acquaint with cultural heritage for its regeneration; to enable them to understand that education is a lifelong process; to train them in skills; and to develop in them the understanding of the present as well as that of the past. Based on these, the curriculum for higher education was to be developed and implemented in higher education institutions. But, still many of these aims are not actually taken into cognisance while developing curriculum. The recommendations given by Kothari's Report (1964), and National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 are relevant even today and give scope for action plan at various stages of education. Some of these aims are achieved by higher education Institutions that have committed for the cause of education.

The draft of new National Education Policy 2019 (DNEP-19) was submitted to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India (MHRD, 2019). The following are some of the highlights related to higher education in the draft:

- A **new vision and architecture** for higher education has been envisaged with large, well-resourced, vibrant multidisciplinary institutions. The current 800 universities and 40,000 colleges will be consolidated into about 15,000 excellent institutions.
- A broad-based **liberal arts education** at the undergraduate level for integrated, rigorous exposure to science, arts, humanities, mathematics and professional fields will be put in place. This would provide imaginative and flexible curricular structures, creative combinations of study, integration of vocational education and multiple entry/exit points.
- **Institutional governance.** This will be based on autonomy - academic, administrative and financial. Each higher education institution will be governed by an Independent Board.
- Regulation will be '**light but tight**' to ensure financial probity and public-spiritedness - standard setting, funding, accreditation, and regulation which will be conducted by independent bodies to eliminate conflicts of interest.
- **Teacher preparation programmes.** This will be rigorous and will take place in vibrant, multidisciplinary higher education institutions. The 4-year integrated stage-specific, subject-specific Bachelor of Education offered at

multidisciplinary institutions would be the predominant way of becoming a teacher. Substandard and dysfunctional teacher education institutes will be shut down.

- All **Professional Education** will be an integral part of the higher education system. Standalone technical universities, health science universities, legal and agricultural universities, or institutions in these or other fields, will be discontinued.
- This Policy aims to provide access to **Vocational Education** to at least 50% of all learners by 2025.
- A new entity will be set up to **catalyze and expand research** and innovation across the country.
- This Policy aims at appropriately **integrating technology** into all levels of education to improve classroom processes, support teacher professional development, enhance educational access for disadvantaged groups and streamline educational planning, administration and management.

The DNEP-19 highlights the importance of maintaining standards of education by insisting on reorganization of the administration; systematic supervision of the affiliated colleges; imposition of more well defined conditions of affiliation; and substantial changes in curricula and the methods of examination. The report recommends all higher education institutions to become multidisciplinary with teaching programmes across disciplines and fields. Further, it suggests that there should be three types of institutions based on differences in focus: – Type 1, which has to focus on world-class research and high quality teaching across all disciplines; Type 2 to focus on high quality teaching across disciplines with significant contribution to research; and Type 3 emphasize on high quality teaching across disciplines focusing on undergraduate education. The draft is yet to get enacted. In the light of the references made and the points discussed, India should move towards implementing the recommendations of DNEP-19 without delay once it is enacted.

INITIATIVES OF NATIONAL ASSESSMENT AND ACCREDITATION COUNCIL

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council has brought significant changes in Indian higher education system by creating impact on the various quality parameters of the Institutions. NAAC gives direction and motivates the institutions to address many of its issues through its criteria and key indicators related to quality assessment and accreditation process, such as Evaluation Process and Reforms; Student Performance and Learning Outcomes; Promotion of Research and Facilities; Resource Mobilization for Research, Innovation Ecosystem, Research Publications and Awards; Consultancy; Extension Activities; Collaboration; Library as a Learning Resource; IT Infrastructure; Faculty Empowerment Strategies; Financial Management and Resource Mobilization; Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS); Institutional

Values and Social Responsibilities; Best Practices and Institutional Distinctiveness. These key indicators help NAAC to collect evidences which in turn help to assess the quality of higher education Institutions. Nevertheless, there are a number of higher educational Institutions with A++ Grade, and are doing well keeping in view the national as well as the international perspective. Others are getting motivated in the process. In view of changing scenario and the requirements NAAC has revised its Assessment and Accreditation Framework in 2017. Some major shifts in the revised Assessment and Accreditation Framework are discussed here.

Revised Assessment and Accreditation Framework of NAAC

Revised Assessment and Accreditation Framework represents an explicit paradigm shift making it ICT enabled, objective, transparent, scalable and robust. The points of the shift are:

- from qualitative peer judgment to data based quantitative indicator evaluation with increased objectivity and transparency;
- towards extensive use of ICT confirming scalability and robustness;
- in simplification of the process, drastic reduction in number of questions, size of the report, visit days, and so on;
- in boosting benchmarking as quality improvement tool through comparison of NAAC indicators with other international QA frameworks;
- in introducing pre-qualifier for peer team visit, as 30% of system generated score (reduced to 25%, in Jan 2020);
- in introducing *System Generated Scores* (SGS) with combination of online evaluation (about 70%) and peer judgement (about 30%);
- towards introducing the element of *third party validation* of data;
- in providing appropriate differences in the metrics, weightages and benchmarks to universities, autonomous colleges and affiliated/constituent colleges;
- in revising several metrics to bring in enhanced participation of students and alumni in the assessment process.

In January 2020, further modifications were done with respect to optional metrics, percentage / number of students to be selected for Student Support Services, and the percentage for pre-qualifying in the quantitative metrics during the Data Validation and Verification (DVV) Process. Continuous feedback from the stakeholders is helping NAAC in refining the assessment and accreditation process to become institutional friendly, and at the same time to raise the quality of educational institutions.

REIMAGINING INDIAN UNIVERSITIES: SOME SUGGESTIONS

In view of the present scenario of Indian higher education system, some of the suggestions which can contribute towards re-imagining Indian universities are:

1. More rural universities and colleges need to be established to attract the rural students. This will lead to retaining the cultural heritage; nurturing the local skills and traditions and enhancing employability of rural youth. Some of rural universities which are preserving the rich cultural heritage are doing well and are being recognized at the international level.
2. India should seriously pursue the setting up the world class universities with good research culture to enable India to project itself at the International level and attract more number of foreign students.
3. All types of universities including some of the top universities and institute of national importance like Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) can have a collaboration with high ranked universities of USA, European Countries, Australia, etc., so that international best practices can be adopted in our higher educational institutions and India can have better chances to come under the world class ranking system.
4. A large number of research universities need to be established so that high quality research can be carried out in universities. A small country like Netherland has nearly 14 Research universities and contributing for quality research. India also should tie-up with top research universities like Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of California at Los Angeles, Johns Hopkins University, Texas A & M University, Princeton University and California Institute of Technology (Caltech) for the development of research culture that helps to create impact on higher education institutions. More number of exchange programmes can also be introduced with such universities for Doctoral and Post-Doctoral programmes.
5. Regional Cultural Education Centers need to be established to train the students regarding Indian culture, art, architecture and music to learn about the rich cultural heritage of India. These centers can also have collaborations with higher education Institutions to conduct certificate courses. The credits of these courses can be added to the credits of the degree programmes of the students.
6. Some of the Indian Institutions of Technology (IITs) can be upgraded to top technological centers so that the brain drain can be reduced and good brains from other countries can be attracted. This will help the youth to acquire high professional and technical skills.
7. Quality Assurance mechanisms may be implemented stringently.

8. Outcome-based teaching and outcome-based learning needs to be ensured at all higher educational institutions, along with training in soft skills, digital skills and other technical skills to ensure better employability.
9. A networking of institutions of national importance, world class universities, industries, corporate sectors, and other established private sectors be created so that more and more functional research projects can be taken up. Minor and major research projects be funded internally by the institution itself and externally by funding agencies in inter-disciplinary and multidisciplinary areas.
10. Number of high quality general, technical, medical and other professional colleges be increased as per the demand of the region. In this direction, new subjects with different combinations can be introduced at the UG and PG levels.
11. Students should be encouraged to acquire various skills through online platforms like Edx, MOOC, Coursera, SWAYAM, etc which can help students to have better employability. Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning are to be inducted into the system wherever necessary for better digital learning.

CONCLUSION

India is progressing in the field of higher education with many shortcomings. Demand for developing various types of skills including the digital skills, among the students is increasing. At this critical juncture, it is a crucial challenge to address the gaps between the skills that are imparted and the skills required at the workplace, so that the rate of employability can be increased. Similarly, higher education institutions should develop a good research ecosystem focusing on collaborative research projects to become more visible at the global level. But creating such an ecosystem is not easy, it requires intensive coordination among the government, universities and the regulatory bodies. It is high time that the Indian higher education system gears up with appropriate measures to put the system on right track. Implementation of valuable recommendations given by the education commissions and committees set up time to time in real sense of term would help in the process in a big way. The HEIs should be ready with positive mindset as well as readiness to implement the recommendations of the New Education Policy as soon as it is launched. Institutions like National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), National Board of Accreditation (NBA) which are responsible for quality assurance need to be strengthened.

References

- Altbach G Phillip and de Wit Hans (2018). Too Much Academic Research is Being Published, *University World News*, No. 519, September 9.
- Delors, Jacques (1996). Learning, the Treasure Within: Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century. UNESCO, Paris.

GoI (1986). National Policy on Education, 1986, Government of India

MHRD (2019). Draft National Education Policy, Government of India.

Kumar Raj (2018), *The Future of Indian Universities: Comparative and International Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Kothari Commission (1964). Education and National Development. Government of India.

Saidur. R, et al. (2017). *Development of Higher Education in India*, S.K. Book Agency, New Delhi.

Radhakrishnan (1948). University Education Commission. Government of India.

The Biography of the Author

S C Sharma

S C Sharma is Director, National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), Bangalore. NAAC. Prior to this, he was Vice Chairman, Karnataka State Higher Education Council. He was also Vice Chancellor at Tumkur University, Tumkur and Chhattisgarh Swami Vivekananda Technical University, Bilai. He has to his credit more than 325 research papers in international refereed journals having 10723 citations, H-Index 50, i-10 Index 378. As Director, NAAC, he gave a new impetus to the accreditation scenario in the country with the infusion of ICT enabled accreditation system. He has been instrumental in ushering in customised manuals and methodology for Indian Higher Education Institutions.