ISAS Insights
No. 474 – 1 November 2017
Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
http://southasiandiaspora.org

The Challenges of Higher Education in India

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stressed the need to improve the standards of higher education in India. This paper briefly maps the country's institutional landscape of Indian universities, examines the demand for and supply of qualitative as well as practical education, besides offering some ideas on how the issues facing India's higher education could be addressed.

S Narayan[1]

At the centenary celebrations of the Patna University in India's Bihar state on 13 October 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed unhappiness that none of the higher educational institutions in the country figured in the list of the top 500 institutions in the world, and he announced a grant of ₹10,000 crores (S$2.38 billion) towards the upgrading of 10 institutions over a 10-year period. In part, it was a political reply to the request made by Bihar's Chief Minister Nitish Kumar to raise the status of Patna University to that of a centrally-funded university but he was equally voicing concern that the state of university education in India required urgent attention.

[1] Dr S Narayan is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a former Chief Economic Advisor to the Prime Minister of India. He can be contacted at snarayan43@gmail.com. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

India's university system, as it exists today, was launched in 1857 with the founding of three essentially British-colonial institutions – the universities of Madras, Calcutta and Bombay. The focus was on education in English, in the line of social science education in the British universities, and primarily intended for preparing groups of scholars to serve the colonial administration in the various presidencies and provinces of India during that period.

In independent India, as of 2015, there were 722 universities and 35,000 colleges catering to more than 30 million students spread across every state and Union territory. As education is a state subject under the Constitution of India, state legislatures have the power to create and approve the establishment of new universities and colleges, as well as approve the courses, curriculum and manpower requirements of these institutions.

Mapping the Education Landscape

Currently, there are four types of universities in India. Central universities are public universities formed through central legislation in the national parliament. State universities are public universities formed on the basis of state legislation. The third, private universities, are those established through a state or central act, and each of them can be in the nature of a registered society, a trust or a no-profit company. They do not have the power to affiliate colleges but do have the licence to set their own criteria for admission, syllabus and for selection of academic staff. There are also deemed universities, defined as "a high performing institution, which has been so declared by the central government under Section 3 of the University Grants Commission Act of 1956". They can be either publicly- or privately-funded. For example, the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, is a public-deemed university while Manipal University near Mangalore is a private-deemed university.

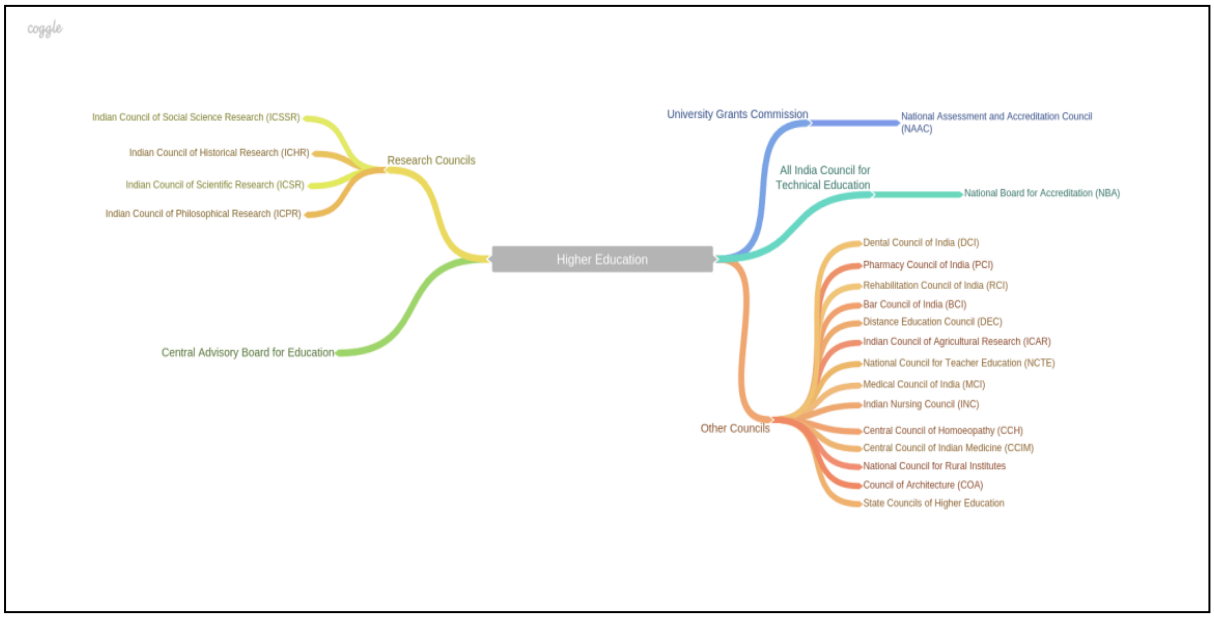
The apex regulatory body for the entire university system is the University Grants Commission (UGC), which is also responsible for the dispersal of government funding. There are a few other categories of institutions outside or only partially within the ambit of the UGC. These include institutions of national importance – the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), National Institutes of Technology, All India Institute of Medical Science and the premier Institutes of Management (IIMs) which come under the direct control of the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Others in this category are the polytechnics, Teacher Training

Institutes under the National Council for Teacher Education and Nursing Institutes under the Indian Nursing Council. These organisations require a separate study and are beyond the scope of this paper.

Quality-assurance and governance councils were established to accredit institutions and formulate standards. The largest such council is the All India Council for Technical Education whose approval is needed to start technical departments, offer new technical courses or increase the intake of students for these courses.

Research councils were established to promote research and aid in policy-formation in particular areas.

Figure 1: Flowchart of the Higher Education Bureaucracy



Source: https://thewire.in/5792/demystifying-higher-education-in-india-part-one/.[2]

As per the UGC's information, there are currently 46 central universities, 330 state universities, 207 private universities and 128 deemed universities.

Deemed universities increased rapidly betweeen 2000 and 2008. The granting of the status of deemed universities was often controversial as the criteria for these approvals were suspected

[2] "Demystifying Higher Education in India – First of a Series", Thomas Manuel, *The Wire*, 8 July 2015. https://thewire.in/5792/demystifying-higher-education-in-india-part-one/. Accessed on 13 October 2017.

to be non-transparent. A rapid growth of approvals for state universities, deemed universities and private universities occurred between 2008 and 2013, with about 15 universities being created every year. The peak was in 2013, when approvals for 30 universities were accorded.

The area around Delhi and further north around Chandigarh are, by a clear margin, the largest education hubs in the country. The closest competitor seems to be a possibly emerging hub on the highway linking Chennai to Bangalore. The next class of clusters seem to be near the capitals of various states such as Lucknow, Patna, Guwahati, Kolkata and Bhubaneshwar. The Northeast has typically been ignored in the larger story of India's development for various reasons. The university data too seem to bear that out. Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh did not possess any universities in 1980. By 2000, each of these states only had one university. In fact, during those 20 years, only five universities were established in the region.

The Kothari Commission report of 1965[3] was a hallmark in India's education sector in that it was adopted as the national education policy in 1968 and helped introduce patterns of the 10+2+3 system of primary and higher school education, as well as standardisation of curriculum across the country. The next initiative was in 1986 when the government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi introduced a new National Policy on Education (NPE). The new policy called for "special emphasis on the removal of disparities and [the need] to equalise educational opportunity", especially for Indian women, and the underprivileged Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) communities as recognised under the Constitution of India. The NPE called for a "child-centred approach" in primary education and launched 'Operation Blackboard' to improve primary schools nationwide. The policy also expanded the Open University system – the Indira Gandhi National Open University had been created in 1985.

The 1986 NPE was modified in 1992 by the P V Narasimha Rao government. The NPE of 1986 had envisaged the conduct of a common entrance examination on all-India basis for admissions to professional and technical programmes in the country. For admissions to Engineering and Architecture/Planning programmes, the Indian government, vide a resolution dated 18 October 2001, laid down a Three-Exam Scheme (Joint Entrance Examination and All India Engineering Entrance Examination [AIEEE] at the national level and the State Level Engineering Entrance

[3] https://archive.org/details/ReportOfTheEducationCommission1964-66D.S.KothariReport.

Examinations for state-level institutions – with an option to join the AIEEE). This initiative takes care of the varying admission standards for these programmes and helps in the maintenance of professional standards.

Platitudes of a Five-Year Plan

The next set of initiatives came about in the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007-12) under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who spearheaded this initiative. "The Eleventh Five Year Plan is, in fact, a National Education Plan. The Plan allocation for education has been stepped up from 7.7 per cent of gross budgetary support for the Plan, in the Tenth Plan, to over 19 per cent in the Eleventh Plan. In nominal terms, there is going to be a five-fold increase in spending on education in the Eleventh plan. This is an unprecedented increase in financial support for education in India", he pointed out. He further stated that, "We are planning to fund 30 new Central Universities, five new Indian Institutes of Science, Education and Research, eight new Indian Institutes of Technology, seven new Indian Institutes of Management and 20 new Indian Institutes of Information Technology." He also explained that, "We will ensure that annually, over 100 lakh [10 million] students get vocational training – which is a four-time increase from today's level. Detailed plan for implementing these proposals will be spelt out in the next six months."[4]

To enlarge the pool of scientific manpower and foster research in the sciences, a new programme entitled "Innovation in Science Pursuit for Inspired Research" (INSPIRE), was launched.[5] Under this programme, 10 lakh (one million) school students will be given science innovation scholarships of ₹5,000 (S$105) each. The Plan also was to support Scholarships for Higher Education (SHE), providing 10,000 scholarships of ₹100,000 (S$2,100) each per year, to attract talented students to enrol in bachelor and master's science courses.[6] There is no data about the implementation of these laudable objectives, nor whether these schemes indeed were implemented.

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4 "11th Plan to focus on education", Syed Amin Jafri, *Rediff Business*, 3 January 2008. http://www.rediff.com/money/report/education/20080103.htm. Accessed on 24 October 2017.

5 The Indian government approved this programme in November 2008 in the 11th Plan Period and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh launched it December 2008. See Innovation in Science Pursuit for Inspired Research Programme, Department of Science and Technology, India. http://dst.gov.in/innovation-science-pursuit-inspired-research-programme. Accessed on 24 October 2017.

6 "11th Plan to focus on education", Syed Amin Jafri, op. cit.

"Our strategy for the promotion of science education in the Eleventh Plan will aim at expanding and strengthening the Science & Technology base in our Universities and promoting excellence through competitively secured funding at centres for advanced research. In addition, discipline-specific education programmes will be launched in strategic sectors like nuclear sciences and space sciences to capture talent at the "plus-two" stage itself", Singh had added.

The former prime minister had said that the aforementioned plans would mark a quantum leap in the infrastructure available for good quality teaching and research. He reiterated the central government's commitment to increase the annual expenditure on science and technology from less than one per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) to two per cent of GDP in the next five years [2013].[7] He also told the delegates attending the five-day Science Congress in December 2008, "We must make science a preferred discipline of study for our students. We must attract the best and the brightest young people to a career in science. We need both a qualitative improvement and a quantitative expansion in the pool of science students in India. This means we will also need more teachers. We will need an army of teachers, especially in the basic sciences and in the field of mathematics. Shortage of good teachers is an immediate challenge".[8] At the same time, he urged the academic community to come forward with innovative ideas to help overcome this challenge effectively, "Tried and tested methods will not suffice. We need fresh creative thinking. Out-of-the-box solutions. The academic community too must be willing to think creatively."[9]

In spite of these laudable objectives, there is little evidence that these goals were indeed realised. After these announcements, there has not been any significant strategy or initiative from the central government in the field of higher education. At the level of the states, there has only been sporadic ad hoc activity to either encourage private institutions or to create new public institutions, without any focus on content or academic personnel.

In 2015, the Indian government initiated a series of consultations at the state-, block- and village-levels, including taking inputs online from the citizens. In December that year, the government then constituted a drafting committee to help frame yet another New Education Policy. A document called "Some Inputs for Draft New Education Policy 2016" was put out in

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.

the public domain to solicit public opinion. The challenges identified included accessibility, quality, employability, information and communications technology, teaching, governance and management and funding. Most importantly, the document admitted "that past policy recommendations have remained unrealised due to lack of mechanisms being put in place for effective implementation."[10]

There are a multitude of issues that need to be addressed. At one level, the need for better physical infrastructure, academic reform and adequate, qualified faculty define the problems from the supply side. At another level, the lack of access, economic inequality and the relevance of education in ensuring livelihoods at the grassroots level appear to be major issues from the demand side. In 2008, enrolment in higher educational institutions was only 17 per cent of the age cohort. This segment consisted of seven per cent ST, 11 per cent SC, 28 per cent Other Backward Classes and the rest, higher castes. Six per cent of all students were from the bottom 20 per cent income groups in the society and 37 per cent from the top 20 per cent income groups. In terms of religious affiliations, only seven per cent of Muslims went for higher education compared to 30 per cent of Christians.

The skewed access to higher education has been exacerbated with the rapid growth of private universities. This started around 1996 and, by 2013, of the institutions of higher education, 37 per cent percent were in the private sector. The top 20-per cent income categories (mentioned above) secured more than one half of the total number of seats in 2012, while the bottom 20 per cent income groups secured only four per cent. The total number of seats that went to the ST and SC were four per cent and 10 per cent respectively.

The approach in the Eleventh Five-Year plan, which has been the most recent plan to address the issue of higher education, has been to provide for a greater number of publicly-funded institutions, like the IITs and the IIMs, in a larger geographic dispersion, and also to ensure that there is active enrolment of different castes through the reservations of seats. There is no data on how successful these interventions have been but it is clear that the problems have to be tackled in a multifaceted manner.

[10] "Opportunity in decades: What India's New Education Policy must not miss?", M Aslam, *Tech Observer*, 20 October 2017.

The Supply-side and Demand-side Issues

On the supply-side, the first set of issues relates to infrastructure and academic staff. In the public universities, the provision to modernise infrastructure is subject to the state governments' budgetary constraints. It is true that central institutions like the IITs and IIMs are more autonomous and have better infrastructure, but the barriers to admission are steep and, hence, these institutions only benefit a small percentage of the students. The announcement by the present prime minister of a ₹10,000-crore grant (S$2.38 billion) is a necessary step, but it may not be adequate to upgrade the infrastructure of all the public institutions. An option is to create some designated debt instruments, guaranteed by the state, for infrastructure development, to be paid back through the earnings of these institutions through fees and other revenues. A provision to subsidise the fees for economically weaker sections could be a part of the state-level as well as the central budget.

Equally important is the quality of faculty. There is a debate in India about research and teaching, and it is an issue that has been debated in several universities across the world. The introduction of modern syllabi, simultaneously with a credit- and semester-system, would help identify the practical relevance of subjects as well the competence of faculty. There is reluctance among the universities to revise the curriculum and to modernise it because a new curriculum, especially in the sciences and engineering, also requires new physical infrastructure as well as the acquisition of new skills by faculty. This is a problem that needs to be tackled urgently.

While the supply-side issues can be handled through policies and governance interventions, the demand-side problems seem more intractable. Access to higher education remains skewed towards the better-earning families. There are examples of some states, especially Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where parents from even poor rural backgrounds invest heavily in the education of their children, even to the extent of selling or mortgaging assets in order to do so. However, this is a result of the special socio-economic patterns of these states. Tamil Nadu is a highly urbanised state, with 42 per cent living in urban habitations of half-a-million or more people, and jobs in urban areas require education and skills, in that order. It is also a rain-deficit state, and agriculture is waning as a proportion of the state's GDP and it is, therefore, natural that parents consider other livelihood options for their children. In Kerala, the density of population

and the fragmentation of land parcels have made agriculture in the traditional sense unattractive. The focus in the primary sector is on cash crops like rubber and spices, which require some degree of sophisticated management. The large Christian community, with its schools and educational institutions, serves as a pathfinder for students of this community to pursue higher education. The large migration of people and their remittances from abroad are also patterns over the last four decades which have exposed the population in Kerala to developments in the rest of the world, more than the people in any other Indian state, and there is a tendency in Kerala to pursue higher studies.

This may not be the case in the agrarian-dependent, Hindi-speaking states, first because of lower degrees of urbanisation, and second because of the existence of fertile soil and the availability of water which ensure that agriculture continues to address the livelihood concerns of most families. To bring a higher degree of qualitative education to these states remains a challenge.

Two other challenges remain. The first is the need to use education as an instrument to reduce economic inequality. This requires that there should be affirmative action to provide access to the higher institutions to those that come from poor and underprivileged backgrounds, and that the good students from these categories are not left out merely because they do not have the means. The requirement is primarily a financial incentive and measure that ensures that these youngsters have access. In the case of public institutions, this could be through scholarships or subsidies and, in the case of private institutions, this could be through a requirement of setting apart a certain number of seats at lower admission costs. The second challenge relates to the medium of education. Increasingly, many rural students leave school having studied in the regional language, and find it extremely difficult to cope with English text books at the university level. Japan, soon after the war, took on a massive project of translating major text books in all subjects into Japanese. A similar exercise is needed in India, with the number of languages being several.

There is a final caveat in providing access to higher education in India. For the poor and the disadvantaged, higher education is less about acquiring knowledge than about securing livelihoods for themselves. It is important that attention be paid to the content of the curriculum in order to ensure that it is relevant for ensuring livelihood. Relevance of the curriculum is

becoming important. The National Skill Development Council is attempting to do this for skills – there should be a similar initiative for higher education.

Higher education serves a larger purpose as well. In a diverse and complex society like India, there is need for education to sensitise the students on issues of inequality, poverty, democracy, equity and gender justice. As the Indian society is becoming fragmented, this purpose has acquired greater significance.

India's higher education requires urgent reforms if the country wants to meet the demands and aspirations of its people and if it wants to address its socio-economic challenges. The solutions appear to lie in better curriculum and better text books in regional languages, improved academic staff, and a greater awareness of happenings elsewhere through global collaboration and exchange of staff and students.

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