

Higher education: *quo vadis?*

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The central concern of this note is to examine the performance of Indian higher educational institutions (HEIs) with emphasis on state universities and to identify key sectors in education, governance and ethical domains that are key to the transformation of our higher education. As higher education has been evolving, the expectations of stakeholders are also changing and, therefore, diagnostic tools and benchmarks for institutions also need to be dynamic and innovative. Readers may note that some of the comments made here are applicable to the state universities, and not all HEIs.

At present, we have 900+ university-level institutions and 40,000+ colleges across the country, with a tremendous heterogeneity of niches occupied by different institutions, with different levels of autonomy. Policies for governance, funding, student admission, quality assurance in faculty recruitment, teaching–research infrastructure, student support systems and so on, drastically vary among these HEIs, guided by the concerned regulatory bodies.

The New Education Policy (NEP-2019) has recommended a reduction in institutional diversity, proposing only three categories of institutions: (1) research, (2) research and teaching, and (3) teaching. Moreover, an overarching body, the National Higher Education Regulatory Authority, will be the only regulator for higher education, including professional education.

Historically, an unfortunate development has been the birth of many new institutions with an inadequate number of faculty. Some of the branches like education, commerce, management, engineering and biotechnology have outnumbered other more basic, sister programmes. Among the disciplines, the worst hit are humanities and social sciences, literature and basic sciences, resulting in a severe academic imbalance in the system. Consequently, NEP-2019 has recommended that all existing institutions must become multi-faculty within a specified time-frame; it has also emphasized the importance of liberal arts.

As of now, degree-granting powers are vested only with universities. According

to NEP-2019, this will change. All institutions of education and research, public as well as private, will be allowed to award degrees in their own names as autonomous entities. By 2032, all degrees and diplomas shall be granted only by accredited institutions. This implies that the affiliation system of the state universities will gradually be phased out. This will have a profound financial as well as academic impact on state universities and their affiliated colleges, which are the backbone of higher education in India.

Almost all institutions today claim to offer ‘Choice-based credit system’ (CBCS) programmes. The success of these programmes is contingent upon the availability of quality faculty to offer various courses. The greatest lacuna here is that even the sanctioned vacancies remain unfilled in most HEIs. In many departments of state universities, the faculty strength is reduced to an extent that it is almost impossible to offer even one course, rendering the issue of CBCS doubtful. Besides, universities envisage many of their courses as interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary in character. Even the centrally funded institutions are facing severe shortage of faculty. In spite of repeated deadlines by the University Grants Commission (UGC) to recruit adequate faculty, the response has been extremely disappointing. Concurrently, new programmes and also new universities are being started without adequate human resource and with minimum infrastructure. Students are admitted, courses are offered and degrees are awarded in such institutions. The strength of HEIs is the quality of the faculty; they are the academic parents of the students. Since many institutions are not self-sufficient in terms of both human resource and infrastructure, in order to answer the demands of stakeholders, national and international inter-institutional collaborations in teaching and research need to be in place.

Vertical growth of universities with substantially original contributions to new knowledge to attain a globally recognized leadership stature is not seen in any branch or discipline. This is sufficiently and repeatedly seen in the annual global ranking of institutions and also in the subject-based rankings. Let us hope

the recommendation of NEP-2019 of the National Research Fund to promote research in HEIs as well as MHRD/UGC’s recognition of 20 Institutions of Eminence by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India/UGC with huge grants and greater autonomy will yield desirable results. NEP-2019 has suggested remedial measures and prescribed a timeline for appointments; it has also suggested a new governance structure. One looks forward hopefully for its implementation. Therefore, to save HEIs from further deterioration, at least some recommendations of NEP-2019, incorporating the suggestions and comments received during nationwide consultation, need to be implemented on a priority basis.

Technological advancement is transforming the world around us. Education is one such sector getting transformed. Technology has promoted the wide and efficient dissemination of knowledge, facilitating the concept of e-classrooms and e-universities. Therefore, teachers need reskilling to handle new technology, learning to unlearn and relearn. NEP-2019 has addressed this with a few recommendations to get ‘energized, engaged and capable faculty’ in the institutions. Technological innovations combined with social, economic and cultural forces have influenced the evolution of the education system. The new innovative knowledge created in the evolving education scenario has, in turn, impacted technological developments. In future, these technological developments may take over some of the repetitive and programmable human tasks. Therefore, the challenge before universities is how they will adapt to remain relevant for the future tasks so that their graduates will be ‘work ready’? What will be stakeholders demands of our universities in the future? How will universities contribute to solving the challenges of the transformative age? Higher education has to survive today and also get ready for tomorrow, and the universities should not have a ‘conservative attitude’.

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