

Managing the Growth of Private Universities in India Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Central and state government universities in India have been quite inadequate in numbers against the educational needs of the large population and so the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of higher education also remained much lesser than required. In order to cope up with the situation, government decided to allow opening of private universities and achieve 30% GER by 2020, with the result a number of private universities opened in last two decades and now the GER has gone up to about 28% as compared to about 18% in 2000 and Private Universities constitute 40% of the total number of universities in India and their number still continues to increase. Positive growth of private universities is, therefore, now an important issue for India if it has to achieve bigger targets of quality and quantity in higher education. Development of a private university is not only in the hands of the Management of that university but depends on many other stake holders like Regulatory Bodies, State & Central Government, Students Industries and Society by and large, who are also responsible. However the initiative always lies with the management of the University. If all stake holders also contribute positively then private universities can perform even better than their government counterparts as, in the case of private universities, decision taking and implementation mechanism could be a little faster due to inherent nature of a private set up. Appointment of right kind of human resources i.e. Vice-Chancellor, Registrar, Dean academic, Teaching Staff etc is a key issue which provides a base or foundation for quality teaching learning. Growth is further dependent on faculty development, facilities, infrastructure like library, ICT structure, labs and other facilities, academic and research culture, environment and motivation available. Branding gets a boost also by the kind of innovation Ecosystem University has. entrepreneurial development it provides, skills and employability it generates and image of the University created among alumni, students and staff. HRD Ministry has drawn 5 years Vision Plan on Quality Education (EQUIP) which focuses on 10 areas and an environment of transforming higher education for new India is building in which private universities are expected to play a key role. However, there are lots of challenges for a private university, if it has to contribute significantly in improving educational landscape. This paper gives some salient aspects of these challenges and how can private universities turn them into opportunities.

Keywords- GER, ICT, Growth, Regulatory Bodies, EQUIP, Higher Education, Private Universities

I INTRODUCTION

Till eleventh century BC India was the world leader in higher education with universities like Nalanda, Vikramshila and Takshila attracting students and scholars from all over the world for quality education and research. Bakhtiyar Khilji destroyed these monuments of education in 1193. Thereafter higher education in India could not look up again and kept deteriorating with continuous invasions. At the time of independence India had only 20 universities and about 600 higher education institutes. Expansion of education and improvement in accessibility of education was one of the priorities of the government in independent India. In 1995, it was realized that desired expansion and up scaling of higher education is not possible without participation of private sector and consequently first private university was established in 1995 and now we have 398 private universities in India out of total 996 universities. In accessibility also we are close to target set at 30% for 2020. However, there is a need for drastic improvement in quality of higher education so that some of our universities could come up in world ranking and also there is need to take GER to next level and match the GER level of advanced countries which is in the range of over 60 to 90%, Ministry of

HRD has taken many initiatives and drawn 5 years quality improvement vision plan (EQUIP) focusing on 10 areas namely accessibility through opening new universities, Teaching Learning process, Excellence in quality education, Improving quality of Teachers, Reforms in Governance, Research, Innovation Employability and Entrepreneurship development Internationalization of education and Financing of universities. In ten years, opening of large number of IITs, IIMs, central institutes and research establishments and marked increase in the capacity of existing institutions of excellence, indicate seriousness of the Government for quality as well as accessibility and affordability of education. The intention is to motivate, students for admission and studies within the country instead of going abroad. Presently what these students pay abroad is more than the entire budget of higher education in India.

The New Education Policy NEP-2019 is being implemented to cater to the needs of above the focus areas. Establishment of a new funding agency RFRF (Research for Resurgence Foundation) with Rs. 1000 Crore has been set up to promote research and 10 Universities have already been earmarked for support by Government to bring them at world ranking. In all these initiatives, private universities

are a part and they will have to play an important role. Growth of private universities is therefore a key issue if India has to achieve targets in quality and quantity in education, research, innovation entrepreneurship and skill development.

II HUMAN RESOURCES – THE MAGIC OF QUANTITY AND QUALITY

Right quantity and quality of teachers in a university can be a real game changer. As a matter of fact Human Resources in the form of teachers and officials like Deans, HoDs, Registrar, VC and also supporting staff are the life line of the educational system in a university. Deficit in quantity and quality of teachers, now days, is the main worry of all the educational institutions. Even in the government institutions almost 30 to 40% of the posts for teachers are lying vacant. Private Universities, in such backdrop, are facing dual challenge; to get not only human resources right from Vice Chancellor to teachers and Registrars to supporting staff in right quantity but, also of right quality with experience and expertise as per the norms. Government University teachers have luxury of over security, lower accountability and better remuneration. For private universities therefore it becomes more difficult to attract good quality human resources as private universities have to depend on self finance and at the same time face tough competition. Still, if a private university has to build a brand, and develop in to a sought after quality destination, then it must carefully select its human resources.

Vice Chancellor is the head of the university and provides the leadership. His careful selection sets the tone for quality in general and the growth. The search committee for VC should zero on to at least 10 renowned persons by screening and short listing after detailed investigations. Good academic leaders and administrators with foresight and vision, capable of becoming Vice Chancellor should be short listed. Normally such short listed people should have long experience in teaching and research. Appointment of Registrar is also an important factor since Vice-Chancellor and Registrar are two wheels of the same vehicle. An outstanding rapport is expected between both of them. Hence any person who is academician, worked as Assistant/Associate Professor, with good number of research papers published, has administrative capability, has knowledge about rules and regulations framed by UGC/AICTE/University, general financial rules and also purchase procedure could fit the bill. Non interference by Administrative Staff in academics and letting a congenial administrative environment build in the university with extended support to teaching staff without bossing over them, can provide good growth to a private university. Appointments of Deans and HoDs in a private university are key to building a good academic and research environment. For Deans and

HoDs academic leadership and academic administrative capacity are important qualities. In addition, dedication and orientation of HoDs and Deans towards research and innovation can provide an edge to a university. **Good quality teachers can really provide a good academic image to a private university. In addition to good qualifications like PhD and NET clearance, core knowledge and hands on experience are the most important things which can make really big difference. In a teacher communication skill and concern for students are equally desired.** The problem in a private university is normally three fold. First there is tendency at administrative level to recruit lower quality people as they are available on lower remuneration; second, instead of selecting qualified people with right caliber as per laid down norms, tendency to recruit under qualified people through biased selection with personal likes/disciplines/references and thirdly; administration's undue interference in faculty selection. For a positive growth, private universities must overcome above three problems in which management has to play a key role. **The lasting solution can come only if an All India Higher Education Teachers Cader similar to other services like Railways, Revenue, Police, Administration etc is created through all India examination and teachers are appointed only from this cader.** Also it is the most important need that the human resources in the university are provided with continuous capacity up gradation, training, up scaling and value addition through various Faculty Development Programmes, Summer/Winter courses and Exchange Programmes For the basic training and subsequent refresher courses for the teachers, a number of academies could be opened TTIs that too for only Technical Teachers are unable and inadequate in numbers to discharge this task. A periodic assessment of teacher also though written test can do well. **A number of academies need to be set up for training and development of teacher for all streams.**

III TEACHING – LEARNING SYSTEM - SPIRIT OF GROWTH

Teaching learning is the main function of any university and all other functions must be in supportive role. But, in present scenario, it appears just the reverse. Admission and Examination now a days consume maximum time, efforts and energy. Quality of teaching-learning, which decides the quality of student output is currently given lower priority. Current report of CII and other employer forums put, gap between quality of students pass outs and expectation of industry around 70%. For this large employability deficit of 70%, the main contributor is poor quality of teaching-learning process. Poor quality of teachers, outdated curriculum, lack of value addition, lack of hands

on/practicals etc are key factors for poor quality of teaching- learning system. Curriculum is the base of any teaching learning system which currently is not matching the demand of the industry/employer who wants that curriculum must be updated as per the prevailing technology which is changing very fast. Employer wants that a student approaching for job should not only have core knowledge of the subject, must be aware of the current development and possess soft and hard skills like communication skill, computer skills, hands on knowledge on machines/practicals and as a matter of fact, is industry ready. To cater to this demand, not only competent teachers are required but also an efficient and dynamic teaching- learning pedagogy. Some actions initiated at AISECT group of universities numerated below, have given positive results contributing to the growth of the university:-

- (a) A Curriculum Development/Revision Committee (CDC) was formed in each department which revise curriculum every year based on feedback from all stake holders i.e. industry, recruiters who come for campus interview, IQAC, students, alumni and experts visiting for guest lectures. Revision report prepared by this committee is put to BoS which has couple of industry representatives also. Once BoS approves it goes to AC and IQAC then implemented.
- (b) It is not possible to include everything in syllabus. CDC may recommend some value addition courses/training/workshops in every semester to cater to fast growing technology.
- (c) Academic Callander is made by the department and sent to IQAC in which value addition, skill development, training needs are included.
- (d) Faculty is allocated subjects at least 3 months in advance who prepares soft/hard versions of teaching-learning plan and notes on subject file which is property of the department. Faculty enriches the file with notes, lesson plans, question papers, industry scenario etc. Year after year file is enriched and gives very good material to the faculty on the subject.
- (e) There is a weekly academic meeting of the department where all aspects of teaching-learning progress is discussed.
- (f) ICT is heavily used as part of teaching learning pedagogy. Each faculty normally uses smart board, chalk and talk, MOOCS and other internet content for teaching- learning in right ratios. Each faculty develops recorded version of his/her lecture in AISECT studio. Faculty is asked to put emphasis on practicals and providing hands on experience to the students.
- (g) Test/assignment/Quiz after each unit is organized and performance index (PI) of each student is displayed every month on a continuous basis.
- (h) A Class Mentor for each class, a Tutor Guardian for every 20 students take regular feedback and HoD/Dean/VC take periodic feedback on teaching learning out comes to initiate remedial measures.

If a private university has to attain long term positive growth then it must focus on improving teaching- learning system with a Road Map and implementation mechanism monitored by the VC on a regular basis.

IV RESEARCH AND INNOVATION – THE BRAND VALUE

Poor research and innovation environment is one of the reasons that none of the Indian Universities comes in the world top ranking. Research is a field which needs heavy investments in terms of time and money and returns are uncertain, with lot of gestation period. For a private university which has to depend on its own financial resources, promotion of research becomes a tough option. Government of India has now put its focus on research and innovation in higher education. In the current year (2020-21) it has allocated significant funds for research promotion. An independent organization i.e. Research Funding for Resurgence Foundation (RFRF) has been set up at Nagpur. Recently they conducted a two days workshop to short list topics for research with social relevance which they will be allotting and funding, to the selected investigating universities including private ones. This is a silver line for private universities. A private university must identify its focus areas for research. Accordingly it must build human and material resources and explore funding options. Choice of emerging areas like IoT, Block Chain, AI, Big Data, Food processing, Water & Environmental, Pollution, Energy etc could be potential fields. Alternately it may be area of Government plans like smart technology, digitalization, cleanliness, space, agriculture etc. A private university may consider following aspects to build research environment in the University.

- (a) Identify research area, get qualified people recruited and set up a University Research Dept/Cell (URD). Let the cell explore all options as regard to options available in the selected areas and funding agencies and start applying. There should be a person deputed to explore all potential funding agencies on a continuous basis and inform concerned Departmental Research Cell (DRC). The university may also think of developing autonomous Centers of Research Excellence in chosen area and develop them through internal funding. This has been successfully done at AISECT Group of Universities.

- (b) **To build a research orientation and culture a Research Policy must be drawn. A financial motivation policy must be made and factually implemented by the VC so that faculty takes up research work.**
- (c) Approved policy in the university must consider research papers, research projects and work done by faculty for promotion/increment and rewards.
- (d) One department one project and one faculty one research paper per year could be made a policy in the University.
- (e) Private Universities must organise research events and collaborate with other universities effectively and not leave at MoUs only on paper.
- (f) VC must insist on a presentation by all Departmental HoDs, IQAC Coordinator, URD, DRC, Exam Controller etc every month to brief on progress in all the area of their operation including research, innovation and entrepreneurship which should make a road map for innovative work with the help of all Department.
- (g) An innovation cell could be opened within IQAC to promote innovation.

V TRAINING PLACEMENT AND SOCIAL CONNECT – THE SCORE BOARD

Though knowledge should be the main concern for students and parents, and job should be a byproduct, but unfortunately the situation is other way round. In the present era, parents and students are attracted by the kind of average package students pass outs are getting in the campus recruitment, kind of companies coming for campus selection and percentage of placement. However a private university must put its main focus on quality education. At the same time due importance must be given to the byproduct i.e. jobs and employment also. For improving job opportunity, University Training & Placement Department (TPD) and Industry Academia Cell in the University play most important role. Their achievement has a close link with quality of teaching-learning and research in the institute. In absence of quality output, any amount of effort by TPD or Industry Academia Cell will not yield good result. On the other hand if student output is good then also it may not work if TPD is not making adequate efforts. Also, how a student, is socially concerned and how his/her overall development has taken place, matters a lot. Following are some of the aspects which may be looked into, in order to improve overall score on placements:-

- (a) **T PD should have adequate competent staff who should build a good rapport with employers. Industry Academic Cell also should be manned by competent people. Both these departments must work in close coordination. Entrepreneur Development Cell**

(ED Cell) also must work in close cooperation with TPD for effective outcome.

- (b) Training Cell and Industry Academia Cell (IA Cell) must organise training of students and provide proper exposure and training aligning with the industry needs.
- (c) TPD must organise workshops, training sessions, mock drills, interactions, expert lectures etc for preparing students on a continuous basis to face recruitment challenges.
- (d) Right from first year, students must get training on communication skills, rational skill, logics, computer skills, personality grooming, GD, interviews, presentation etc and it must be closely monitored/documentated by TPD and IA Cell.
- (e) TPD should have yearly plan and callander for training and placement activities and develop it in close coordination with HoDs such that academic schedule is not disturbed.
- (f) There is tendency for TPD and SAC to come up suddenly with an event. At times university administration may also come up with some events disturbing academic schedule. This should be avoided.
- (g) ED Cell must identify potential entrepreneurs by psychometric tests in first year of degree course and provide training, knowhow and plug & play facility right from the initial years so that there are some real start ups by the time students reach final year.
- (h) Through SAC, NSS, NCC should organise activities in the villages adopted if any should be organised by the university. Students must be provided social connect and encouraged to take up social work through these activities. This will develop social concern and help in overall development of the students and finally help in better placement as well.
- (i) TPD must ensure activities in coordination with other departments for holistic development and character building of students such as team events, sports, yoga, social service etc.

VI INFRASTRUCTURE & FACILITIES- LASTING IMPACT

Infrastructure, building, and facilities in a University provide the first impression to a visitor and the visitor has a tendency to make a judgment about the University by the first impression. **Huge size and large quantity may not impress a person but the quality, adequacy, functionality and authentic sense may certainly impress.** Some of the aspects which need attention are-

- (a) **A good ERP is a mirror which reflects the image of a University. There is a need to have a good ERP for a University to display culture, content, capability and growth and create a brand value.**

- (b) Lay out and building plan must be readily displayed in the campus. Direction boards and displays must be simple, elegant and meaningful. Smart and cheerful reception staff, security persons, public relation people will reflect a good image of the university. This needs real training and monitoring.
- (c) Campus should give a green look with cleanliness; energy and water conservation consciousness visible all around.
- (d) Use of solar energy, cashless and paperless environment, and concern for pollution, add positivity to the visitor.
- (e) Normally there is a general complaint in all universities about the rude behavior of non-teaching and lab staff. Private Universities can make a real difference by ensuring that accounts, admin, library and lab staff is trained on their behavior pattern and generate a high happiness index in the visitors and students.
- (f) Modern class rooms with ICT infra, well equipped labs, workshops, state of the art auditorium, seminar halls are mark of a quality teaching learning set up.
- (g) Sports facilities, recreational support, canteen, common rooms, toilets, gym, roads, parking area hostels etc make a lasting impact. Their quality will help in branding of the University. Private universities can make a real edge in facilities.
- (h) The most important feature of good infra and facilities is their upkeep, maintenance and serviceability trend. A fast response maintenance team must be developed and deployed to ensure a fully functional set up.

VII INTERNATIONALISATION, TIEUPS, MOUs AND COLLABORATIONS- A GLOBAL OUT LOOK

Quality and growth in a University can get a real boost by internationalization. In the central government budget for 2020-21, the Finance Minister clearly indicated that government is very keen to open doors for FDIs and foreign universities to collaborate with Indian Universities for offshore campus and centers. Private Universities are better positioned to grab the opportunity. **Dual degree programmes, student and faculty exchange and transportability of courses through credit system in addition to off share campus, can provide good platform to private universities to expand and grow.** There are now opportunities for private universities to execute MoUs with foreign universities to takeup collaborative project work jointly in different areas, exchange faculty and students and do joint research work. Private Universities can build network with foreign universities which will pave way for foreign funding.

VIII REFORMS IN GOVERNANCE – THE CUTTING EDGE

Private universities are supposed to primarily operate as per the provisions of Ordinances and Statutes of the University. Though the society or the trust who have established the University has only promotional role, it is quite logical that promoter or the Chair person of the society/trust would like to play a big decisive role in the management. Normally the VC who is head of the University is only for a period of 2 to 4 years maximum, there is a tendency in private universities for the senior administrative staff who are there for a much longer duration and also responsible for administration and financial dealings, to directly take control and interfere in overall operation of the University which at times may suit promoters also. In such a situation the official hierarchy and protocol starts getting diluted, leading to group politics with academics and research taking back seat. For VC, it becomes difficult to exercise proper control on academic administration and develop a good faculty structure. In such cases selection of faculty, their development and promotional avenues also get adversely affected. This tendency of interferences gets slowly in many areas of operation like examination, setting up and equipping labs, library and other academic support services. Such interference may provide short term financial benefits, but **if a private university is to grow positively such interference in academics must be avoided** and, some of the following reforms must be thought of:-

- (a) Plan to implement vision & mission, must be transparent and made known to everyone. Accordingly strategic plan and detailed development plan should be jointly made and implemented with VC fully involved and in control.
- (b) In matters like faculty selection, promotion, development, academics, research, examination, only VC should have final say.
- (c) **E-Governance should be used extensively. There should be an effort for automation of all the areas of operation right from admission to results, examination to continuous assessment, finances to record maintenance. ICT need to be promoted in a big way for teaching – learning. Outsourcing if required need to be resorted to and should not be avoided on pretext of savings.**
- (d) Governance should be on principles of participative management where all stake holders i.e. faculty, students, employers, parents, management and alumni have a say, know what is happening and feel the ownership.
- (e) There is a need to rejuvenate BoS, Academic Council, Governing Body and all other committees to function on a routine basis and not through retrospective recording for building documents at the time of need only.

- (f) IQAC (Internal Quality Assessment Cell) must be properly formed in all private universities and quality control monitoring and governance in all the area of operation i.e. academic, administration, infra and finance must be done by IQAC effectively under direct control of the VC. Self assessment on quantity basis must be done by IQAC on monthly or quarterly basis.
- (g) Academic and Administrative audits must be done effectively every year to overcome deficiencies/shortages.
- (h) **Discipline and punctuality are the most important areas in a university which provide the pulse to know health of the organization, and quality of students, faculty and management.**

Though, there may be a natural hesitation/reservation on part of the promoters/sponsors to make things transparent and provide liberty to VC to operate exactly as per the ordinances, but if it is done, even at reasonable proportion in a congenial and respectful environment, such reforms shall certainly pay rich dividends in long run. Promoters must ensure reforms in governance in such a way that academic and administrative staffs operate in harmony with VC as head of institution and Registrar in a supportive role.

IX LACK OF LEVEL PLAYING FIELD- WHERE THE SHOE PINCHES

The biggest problem in development of a private university is discrimination by regulating bodies, controlling and monitoring agencies of the government. There are various types of universities like central, state, deemed, open and private universities. Though all types of universities discharge almost same kind of functions, private universities are sufferer of discriminatory treatment. May be, it is due to the fact that private university is a relatively newer phenomenon, and rules and regulations may take time to refine and settle down amicably. Private sector normally suffers from suspicion though in education sector both private and public sectors have similar good and bad features. Following aspects are worth consideration:-

- (a) A government university is provided approval under 2(f) from day one whereas for private university it takes quite some time. Same is the case for AIU membership. As a matter of fact for everything a private university has to undergo suspicious scrutiny and overregulation every time. There are many such rules which need reconsideration.
- (b) For funding, a private university has almost no support from Government even for development. There are no soft loans available and it has to resort to loans at commercial rates. If, for agriculture, for small scale industries etc, there is provision for soft loans why not for private

universities. After all, they are engaged on a very important national mission.

- (c) For research, private universities are hardly given grants. If the quantum of government funding provided to various universities is examined it will reveal that the share of private universities is quite meager and disproportionate to their strength and potential. There is need for review of the policies.
- (d) Government Universities can have affiliated colleges from day one where as private university has to wait for 5 years to open off campus share centers.
- (e) Committees and bodies set up for framing policies by the Government have not adequate representation from private universities. There is certainly need for review.

However things are now changing for better. There is a realization at various levels of regulation and policy making. Provisions in NEP-2019 are indicators of a silver line. Still private universities will have to go a mile extra and work hard to provide quality and prove them to force policy makers to provide a level playing field. It is said that only crying baby gets milk. Private Universities will have to continue their efforts on regular basis. There is need for private universities to create a vibrant platform where all private universities could come together to take up various issues for common benefits. **There is need to create a network of all private universities and ensure better cooperation, synergy and exchange initiatives. Collaborative approach can really help in solving many problems.** With concerted efforts things are bound to change for better. During presentation of budget for Fy 20-21 the Finance Minister has clearly indicated that Education sector will be one of the governments priority and finance will not pose any hurdle for quality targets that government has set.

X CONCLUSION

The educational landscape in India is simmering and bubbling with the need for redefining and redesigning educational structure and system as the transformation is taking place in all other fields also. Educational institutes obviously have to play the most crucial role. Private institutions are now contributing to almost 60 percent of student registrations and as private universities are continuously increasing in number, at never before pace; their share of participation will keep increasing and they will have to take a decisive lead. Private Universities will have to ensure that quality and accessibility of education and research, meet the aspirations and targets set by the nation. **Battle for private universities is going to be tough and needs to be fought simultaneously on three fronts. On first front, they have to improve and grow in quality in all spheres of education and research. Second front is the discriminating policy front**

where they have to continue their struggle for a level playing field in terms of claiming equal treatment in regulations, control and governance etc. Thirdly and most importantly, they have to conclusively dispel the false impression that there is lot of scope of mal practices, short cuts and misappropriation in education sector. Private

universities will have to take a lead to reestablish education sector as an example of efficiency, quality and very high moral standards and bring back the glory to teaching- learning profession as the most Nobel and sacred occupation.

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