

# What Ails Indian Higher Education System

Prof. V.K. Verma

AISECT University, Bhopal (M.P.) India.

## I INTRODUCTION

For almost last one decade the wind of change is blowing as never before. The youth today is questioning every system in existence. Youth – which forms 65% of country's population making India the youngest country in the world. Though these systems have been corrected, modified and remodified in the past, still they have not been able to deliver desired results, which makes the youth restless and agitated. Be it politics, be it agriculture be it administration or be it industries- for every system, demand for change is getting stronger day by day. Slow process of improvement is not satisfying today's youth. There is a strong desire for a drastic change, to the extent of almost replacing the current structure with fresh ones- more transparent, more efficient and more technology oriented. Out of all the ailing systems, the higher education system tops the list. Every day new revelation, fresh scams and need for frequent intervention of judiciary in higher education are some of the issues, which put a big question mark on efficacy of the present education system. It appears that mostly we try to plug the hole on discovery, normally in a reactive and repair mode rather than having a proactive approach. In recent times there have been many initiatives to improve higher education - Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), new regulations of UGC, higher ever allocation of funds for higher education in 12th plan, large number of bills on higher education tabled in the parliament and so on and so forth – Will so many initiatives do justice to the demands? Will they bring desired transformation? Will they remove all the ailments and take our higher education back to the twelfth century's glory when India was world guru in education? These are big questions and answer in a positive affirmative is probably not there.

## II MAJOR ISSUES OF CONCERN

It is not that everything is bad with our higher education system. At least in quantity front we have made significant progress. We can boast of being second largest higher education system after China in the world with around 25 million students studying in about 40 thousand colleges operating under close to 700 universities and figures are rising every day. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) which is the ratio of population in higher education to population in 18-23 age group and which is a statistical measure used by United Nation to measure education index of a nation has also improved rapidly and stands at 19%, though much below the target of 30%. World average for GER is around 40% for developing nations. Contribution of private participation (private colleges and private universities), which accounts for over 60% enrolments has made this feat possible. It has been said by the Planning Commission that for sustained economic

growth of the country in double digits, GER of 30% is an essential requirement. The knowledge commission projects a requirement of 1500 universities to achieve quality and quantity. Still there are many issues which have serious concerns and grave consequences. When we look for remedies, correction and restructuring in light of remarks by Planning Commission and Knowledge Commission, these issues cannot be overlooked. Rather the focus needs to be made on these issues. Quality of education, research and extension, Attitude of distrust towards private participation, Faculty crunch, Over security for faculty in govt. institutes and lack of formal effective organisational structure in private institutes, Industries apathy to participate in institutes, Funding of education sector, Overregulation and policing attitude of regulating and monitoring agencies etc are some of the major issues which may be main cause of our ailing system of education.

## III QUALITY OF RESEARCH, EDUCATION & EXTENSION

Non other than President and Prime Minister of India have recently shown serious concern for poor quality of higher education, research and extension. It is a sad commentary on second largest higher education system of the world that non of the our universities/institutes rank in the top 200 universities of the world. Quality as such is a multidimensional concept. Also, quality cost's dearly. It requires heavy investments with no short term gains. For enhancing the quality of education we have to enhance quality and quantity of material, human, technological, research and environmental resources. To improve accessibility to education – Govt does not want to financially burden students and puts a clamp on what fees can be charged from them. In government funded/supported institutes burden of subsidy is borne by the government, though there are moves to make govt institutes also self sustainable in years to come. The biggest sufferers are private institutes and universities. They are not at liberty to charge students for the quality, nor is the government ready to share the cost. Research is still biggest grey area. Here infrastructure and resources need much larger investments. Most of exchequers fund through the government goes to govt institutes/universities, central research labs; and private institutes/universities have to depend only on self investments. This system does not appear rational. The logical question is why govt institutes/universities which account for only 40% of enrolments, corner 96% of exchequers support and private institute/universities which have more that 60% of students on their roll receive almost no support? Also due to lack of accountability and assurance of job security, which faculty in govt set ups enjoy, quality of research remains a weak area. There is therefore serious dearth of quality research, though in quantity they may

have made a mark. The result is that after Dr. CV Raman there is no Noble lauret from Indian institutes/universities, though there are many Indians who have won awards but they did it from foreign soil. So the popular phrase is, Indians are good in research but India is poor. Another serious problem for poor research culture and low research output in HE sector is research being conducted in isolated pockets, in some universities, institutes, govt labs and industries. This results in highly under utilisation of scare resources as there is no sharing or even proper communication between each other, leave alone any collaboration. Universities are supposed to be hub of research activities but most of the govt funds for research go to central research labs who are working in isolation with no notable contact with universities. This not only reduces research strength but in the process the biggest sufferer is education sector. Industry is highly reluctant to jointly do the research work with institutes. Same is the case with central research labs. **The best way for improving research in higher education sector and reducing employability gap is to introduce one or two semester's internship in industries or central research labs compulsorily for all UG/PG Professional degree courses. During the internship industry should be asked to pay a stipend and facilitate students to work on research projects of industries/labs. A legislative compulsion can only ensure such arrangement effectively.**

The present system of funding from govt resources for research also requires serious restructuring and policy correction. If we look at UGC alone, in financial year 2011, it funded only 133 of 383 state universities and only 18% of the govt colleges. Same is story with other govt funding agencies Private universities and colleges do not receive any significant fund. There is strong need to expanded the net of funding and include private universities and institutes as well to the extent of their participation. Irrespective whether the institutes are private or government all are serving the same cause and deserve equal treatment in research funding.

#### **IV GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP**

Regulatory framework for higher education is most complex and multifacet. The present system is unfortunately based on distrust, numerous checks & balances and suspicion. This defeats the very concept of autonomy in higher education institutes, which is the basic requirement of good governance. Regulatory bodies normally adopt policing attitude and inspection team start their checks with measuring tapes and weighing balances. The spirit of quality education takes back seat. Verification and monitoring system are based on the premises that other side may be hiding facts, cooking up figures and providing fake information. Inspecting & monitoring agencies behaviour during inspection visits at times gives an impression that the team is on criminal investigation. It appears at times that rampant corruption in education sector may be due to this complex high handed and cumbersome

regulatory and verification process. **There is strong need to simplify the regulatory/inspection system and remove the prevailing atmosphere of distrust.**

At institution and university level there is need to strengthen pillars of good governance and leadership. Administration, work culture, examination system and teaching –learning pedagogy are the four pillars of governance. These can be strengthened by an honest and transparent system, good faculty appraisal, feedback and correction methodology. In state universities and institutions job over security, poor appraisal system and lack of effective motivation for performing people, dilute the system of governance. Private universities and institutions suffer from multiple command, undue intervention of management in academics, administrative authorities having extra constitutional powers belittling authority of head of the institution, support of management to such groups who undermine the command structure and authority of head of the institution; give rise to indiscipline and culture of sycophancy. In most of private set ups, command and communication hierarchy is highly diluted due to above factors and indirect or direct encouragement of management. Effective governance in any institution demands respect and authority for hierarchical structure not only in words but in spirit also. **Head of the institute in private setups should not be made only an ornamental leader but should be empowered to command both administratively and academically** then only vision and mission can be translated in to real outputs. With a good and empowered leader only a good work culture can be expected to build in an organisation. Unfortunately most of private institutes/universities suffer from non implementation of proper hierarchy of organisational structure, diluting authority of the head of the institution resulting in power groups and interpersonal conflicts. Most of the time it is with the consent of top management.

Another weak area is quality assurance. Effective and mandatory accreditation system and multiple QA bodies including self quality check could effectively improve quality and reduce burden on governance. For the large size of our higher education system there is need for larger number of accreditation agencies and privatisation of accreditation could be obvious solution. Role and domain clarity with authenticity will be biggest challenge for private participation in accreditation task. Significant improvement in teaching learning methodology and evaluation systems could be expected with not only one time but periodic QA intervention and self assessment.

Span of control for a university is very important issue of concern. There are state universities with affiliation of 400 to 700 colleges. This is totally against the span of control norms. **For effective governance there is need to put a limit to number of colleges under a university and limit of maximum 50 could be a good figure to ensure good governance.**

## V FACULTY RECRUITMENT & DEVELOPMENT

There are disturbing reports that even in IIT's IIM's and central universities vacant faculty position is as high as 40%. RUSA proposes relaxation of up to 15% of faculty position for the first year. But this is not a complete answer to a grave problem. The root cause of faculty crunch is that teaching is still last choice for talented people. Many people join it as stop gap and switch to financially better jobs on first opportunity and others continue reluctantly. So there is lack of commitment in most of the faculty and only few teachers have aptitude, dedication and enjoy their teaching jobs. Though there has been improvement in pay structure still it's not very attractive as a sought after career. Empowerment of teachers as a cader is a strong need of the hour. **An All India Service similar to IRS, IFS, IAS etc for Education services will not only attract right kind of talent it will provide excellent frame work for inside people to shoulder the responsibility of academic administration right from principal/director secretary to chief secretary and build an effective framework. Non academic outsiders at helm of education affairs are the biggest cause for present poor state of HE.** Faculty on continuous basis to be abreast with the current development in the field is another area which needs attention. Faculty recruitment through a standard all India level examination (UPSC) can also initiate a quality bench marking. At policy level faculty exchange programme with top end institutions will promote environment of development. Collaboration and resource sharing by top end institution with lower tire institutions can also help in improving development environment. These have to be forced through legislation and regulation.

Student feedback, student attendance pattern, result analysis and development effort by faculty in terms of course undergone, papers/books published, patent registered and project initiated should be given very high credits in annual report of faculty for consideration of pay like, incentive reward, retention and penalty. The head of the institution/university need to be empowered for effective control over faculty which is easily said than done. Unfortunately in most of the private set ups faculty recruitment, retention, promotion/pay like etc are done, on extraneous considerations without even knowledge of head of institution, by non academic drivers. In many govt set ups this area suffers from lot of group politics, red tapism, lobbying and corruption. All these adversely affect higher educations quality and working culture of faculty both in govt and private institutions/universities. This area could improve effectively if monitoring/inspecting, regulating bodies during inspection visits, pay adequate attention to this area instead of only counting rooms, books and equipment.

## VI OTHER CONSTRAINTS & LIMITATIONS

(a) **Level field for private operators-** There are different sets of rules and regulations for a private university/institute as against govt. Institute/university, though both are discharging same functions. For example there is a moratorium of five years for a private university to operate outside campus and 3 years to become member of association. There are many such rules which give an impression of strong bias against private operators who are now responsible for over 60% of enrolments. Right from funding to various other facilities this bias is evident. There is need to treat everyone, who is giving same services, on equal footing.

(b) **Infrastructure-** In this age of knowledge economy the biggest contributors to a good infrastructure are lab eqpt, hardware/software facilities, connectivity and research resources and not the buildings alone. One has to move the focus from number of rooms and halls to this area of infrastructure. There is need to ensure that knowledge infrastructure is so designed that it provides a student hands on experience, sharpen his skills, motivates him to innovate and carry out research to develop attitude of working with own hands, inculcate feeling of pride of labour and generate social concern. **Regulating bodies also need to change their mind set to see the spirit of regulations rather than just words of regulations as facilitators rather than inspectors**

(c) **Industry – Institute Interface-** This is a very weak area. Today's wide gap of employability is result of poor industry institute interface. Industries should never forget that they have a social responsibility to participate in curricula build up, training and shaping of students to make them employable. Industries have become extremely profit oriented and almost every industry is reluctant to discharge the social function of helping preparing & grooming students. This has given rise to mushrooming growth of coaching centres who impart training in specific area required by the industry. So a student has to spend money for the basic degree in a college/university then go for coaching/training in an industry specific job area and then go for a finishing school for soft skill. Still industry may find him non-employable. **Unless there is a legislative compulsion on industries to participate with institutes in curricula build up, training and exchange programme the situation will never improve. The feeling with industries that their responsibility ends by paying education cess and surcharge needs to be removed and they have to be brought to the campus to participate in industry – institute interface not only in tire one institutes and cities but also in tire two and three institutes from where bulk of student pass out, preferably through legislative compulsion and government intervention. Govt. Needs to seriously consider this.**

(d) **Funding-** For the desired target of GER in the 12th plan estimated additional investment requirement may cross Rs. 350,000/- crore and needs certainly private participation. In private participation biggest road block is Not – for - profit clause i.e. the private operator has to plough back all surpluses and cannot take away the profit. For operating a HEI a private operator has to therefore raise funds at high rate of interest and has to invest huge capital while establishing a HEI without expecting for any returns. Thus funding is the most demotivating factor for a private participant to venture in to education sector. **For faster, sustainable and inclusive growth of HE, the Not – for – profit clause needs to be re-examined and govt needs to provide soft and easier loans to private operators. Also some portion of govt funds needs to be allocated to private HEI for infrastructure as grant.**

## VII CONCLUSION

With every fourth graduate in the world being product of Indian education system we are now an important regional hub for education in this part of continent and single largest producer of global talent. In order to gain and retain the leadership, there is need to remove anomalies in weak areas from our education system as discussed and make it world class. **Spending in HE at govt level should take same priority as spending in defence and HE sector certainly needs much bigger budget out lay than being given now. Also Let the HE system be left in the hands of Academicians and let it be run by academic specialists rather than bureaucrats. Let there be thinking out of box.** Let us not talk only of building new IIT's IIM's and central universities or increase their capacity. Let us also talk of 2 and 3 tire institutes which account for 60% of roll outs and who remain in India to serve the economy. Let us do something to improve things there and upgrade these institutes to IIT & IIM level instead of building new ones. Let there be more Robin hoods than Sherlock Holmes in regulating bodies. Late Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru, PM of India had once said that if all is well with the universities, all is well with the nation. So if we have to correct the nation we have to correct our universities, colleges and higher education system.

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