

# Emerging Challenges and Thrust Areas of Indian Higher Education System

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## *Abstract*

*The path of liberalization and globalization has had enormous ramifications and reflections on several facets of the economy. The education sector has been no exception. Indian higher education system has grown significantly since independence. There were 16 universities with over 2.3 lakh enrolment of students and 591 university and affiliated colleges. Today there are more than 600 universities with over 20 million enrolments of students and around 30 thousand plus colleges in India. The inclusion of higher education as a tradable commodity under GATS (general agreement on trade in services) and the rapid advancements ICT (information and communication technology) has been largely responsible for the spurt in this sector. The present paper tries to track the odyssey of higher education from its genesis to the present day. It also tries to explore the emerging trends, thrust areas and challenges emanating there to.*

**Keywords:** *Globalization, Gross Enrollment Ratio (GRE), Higher Education (HE), Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)*

**Introduction:** Today the pace of economic prosperity and the quality of life of people are directly proportional to the use of knowledge by a country. Knowledge based economies are successful in generating technological innovations and commercializing them, thereby creating thousands of knowledge related jobs in an array of disciplines. As the economist Clark Kerr observed, "On a global scale, wealth and prosperity have become more dependent on the access to knowledge than the access to natural resources."

There have been significant developments in Higher education in the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The traditional role and ethos has largely remained intact but there have been several new paradigms arising from the arena. The experiences of the developing and developed nations come in handy in tackling this challenge of paradigm shift.

India has the third largest higher education system in the world in terms of enrolments, after China and the US. The number of students enrolled in the universities and colleges (formal system) has been reported to be 16 million in academic year 2010-11. This does not include enrolment in higher education offered through ODL. India is also acknowledged to have the largest higher education systems in the world in terms of number of institutes. India has a total of 610 universities. 43 central universities, 299 state universities, 140 private Universities, 128 deemed universities and 5 institutions established through state legislation, 30 Institutions of National Importance and more than 33,000 colleges under affiliated and autonomous states. This enormous space of Indian education is evolving several off-shoots in the form of new niche sectors like vocational training, finishing schools, child-skill enhancement and e-learning platforms and software among others. Growth is driven by the increasing propensity of the middle class to spend on education and more aggressive initiatives by private entrepreneurs. The

12th Five Year Plan focuses on Expansion, inclusion and quality to achieve the national goals in education.

**History and Heritage of Education in India:** The ancient and medieval Sanskrit and Buddhist tradition have records of centers of learning and enquiry at Taxila (now in Pakistan), Kanchipuram, Odantapuri, Srivastava, Kashmir and Vikramashila. Hiuen-tsang and I-tsing, all Chinese travelers have mentioned of these learning centers in their work when they visited India between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. These travelers have written that the centres of learning had men of great character, ability and talent in them, further they were respected by the fellow countrymen. They were sincere and helpful to one another.

Institutionalized formal Higher education system in India started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the British universities. The first 3 modern Universities of India were established in 1857, as “affiliating universities” on the erstwhile model of the London University. Thus the system of affiliation and the power of conferring degrees at university level started since then. This is still prevalent in India though it has been largely discontinued in UK. After independence Indian education system faced an unprecedented challenge of providing leadership, guidance and qualified personnel in various fields of national reconstruction. It thus became imperative for the Universities to play a full-fledged role in literary, scientific, technical and professional areas. This demand and urgency of the situation led to a spurt in the growth of University education in the country.

**Birth of an Indigenous Regulatory Framework:** The post-independence scenario not only required the bridging of demand and supply gap but it also required a framework to regulate the sector in order to bring a flair of discipline and growth. Such a step was also needed to allocate and disburse grants to the universities for maintenance and improvement of standards in education. Thus the Education Commission (1949) and the UGC (1953) were formed by a resolution of the Ministry of Education. The post-independent era also witnessed the establishment of AICTE and MCI to work as facilitators and to have a transparent working system. The expansion of the sector started raising issues of quality control and hence NBA, NAAC, FICCI and ISO were formed to ensure quality aspects in terms of teaching, ensuring relevance of programs updating and forming interdisciplinary curriculums. The next realization for the system was to concentrate on research. Hence CSIR, DRDO, FICCI, NASSCOM etc. were incepted and groomed for quality research. India also had several commissions set up from time to time in order to manage and control the sector. The prominent commissions were: Dr. S Radha Krishnan (1949-66), Prof. D.S. Kothari (1949-1966) National Education Policies (1966, 86, 92).

**Current Developments and Initiatives:** The UN has declared the period from 2005-14 as “the decade of education for sustainable development” (ESD). According to UNESCO, the lead agency within the UN system for coordinating worldwide efforts in this direction, education needs to reorient its own programs to include the changes with required to promote sustainable development. (UNESCO online). The other initiatives in this regard are Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Education for All (EFA) and UN Literacy Decade (UNLD) all aiming to improve education.

Currently, the Indian Government spends around 3.8% of its GDP on education. The UGC has allocated a general budget of Rs.5,244 crores for the year 2011-2012 to be distributed under

eight broad categories. The Indian Education sector is witnessing rapid increase in the enrolments. It also has a promising potential to grow at 16% for the next five years. According to the 2011 census, the total literacy rate in India is 74.04% compared to the world average of 83.4% (2008). The female literacy rate is 65.46 % and male literacy rate is 82.14 %. With a good economy and a growing middle class, a target GER of 30% by 2020 is envisaged by the authorities, which means 24 million new enrollments. FDI inflows in the education sector during May 2012 stood at \$31.22 million

Several reforms by the government including the Education Bill are on the anvil to give a push to the education sector. More Foreign investment is likely to come in with the passing of the Education Reforms Bill. Significant activity in terms of new foreign entrants and participation is expected to be witnessed in the years ahead.

**Challenges for Higher Education in India:** The higher education sector is evolving over the years. The following are the major challenges to be confronted in quest of sustainable development:

- **Access, Equity and Excellence:** Ensuring equitable access to higher education is a huge challenge. There are wide disparities seen across gender, regions and socio-economic groups. According to the UNESCO data base of 2009, India has a GER of 15% in higher education, which is much lesser than the developed as well as, other developing countries of the world. The GER is 89% in US, 76% in Russia, 59% in UK, 55% in France, 40% in Malaysia, 24% in China. According to a data for 2009-10, while the GER in higher education in India was 17.1 for males, it was only 12.7 for females. Additionally, while the overall GER for the population was 15%, the corresponding figures for SCs and STs were 11.1% and 10.3%, respectively. Hence, there are regional variations too with Uttar Pradesh having a GER of 10.9% while Delhi has a GER of 47.9%. These figures reflect some of the significant imbalances within the higher education system. Ensuring quality in higher education is amongst the foremost challenges being faced in India today. Though a few institutes have achieved global recognition for excellence, a large chunk of the institutes still remain in the shadow of doubt in terms of various dimensions of quality in education like content, mode of delivery, infrastructure and facilities, employability, etc. Accreditation is still not mandatory; however, reforms are in the pipeline to address this issue

- **Demand and Supply Equilibrium:** The 12th Five Year Plan focuses on Expansion, inclusion and quality to achieve the national goals in education. It also aspires to achieve a target GER of 30% by 2020. This would mean an additional 24 million new enrollments in the times ahead. But the current pace of growth in terms of institutions, infrastructure etc. may not support such huge enrollments. It may thus be inevitable to attract private players and foreign direct Investment in this sector under different models of growth and sustainability. The Ambani- Birla report (2001) deserves a mention on this juncture where the report has categorically stated that the government spending in this sector must be minimal and private players may be allowed to augment resources and thus tide with the financial crunch.

- **Fostering research and Innovation:** There is inadequate focus on research in higher education institutes. The causes include insufficient resources and facilities, as well as, limited numbers of quality faculty to guide students. According to a data from UNESCO (2009), enrolment for Ph.D. / M.Phil is only 0.48% of the total enrolment in higher education in India.

- **Correction of pseudo notions:** We need to create a skilled and employable workforce. Merely churning out degree holder without any creativity and skill set will only land the

economy in trouble. We therefore need to create quality institutions which excel in dissemination of knowledge. Actually our innovations must begin in our class rooms and then get transferred to the corporate world. Unfortunately we find that our institutions of higher learning are reduced to workshops of the corporate world where tailoring and customizing of products on industry dictate takes place. Students flock to institutions which offer campus placements and companies are attracted to institutions that cater and oblige them by tailoring their students according to the desires of the company. Creation of new knowledge and research has taken a back seat. There is a need to reverse this trend and it seems this is going to be a mammoth challenge for the country.

▪ **Leveraging and Regulating Foreign players:** Having embraced globalization and then subsequently signing the WTO and GATT agreements, it may not be wise to back track on the issue of inviting foreign players and FDI in this sector. In fact we need FDI and the foreign players in this sector to cope up with the rising demand of higher education in our country. Unfortunately there is lack of clarity under Foreign Education Bill, 2010: Although the bill is presently pending in the parliament, even in its present form, it does not address certain key issues such as nature of entity permitted, applicability of FCRA provisions, “not for profit” character etc. We may not succeed in inviting the foreign players entirely according to our own whims and fancies. A win – win situation has to be created to facilitate their arrival and smooth functioning of the sector.

**Conclusion:** The education sector has definitely come along way and has to go a long way. Sustainable development in this sector is possible with conjugate efforts by all the players concerned. We certainly cannot afford to import a solution from the outside world in to-to, but there are a good amount of lessons to be learnt from the developed and developing countries of the world. The Bologna process of Europe, experiences of the Asia Pacific and lessons from North America in context with higher education may have something important in them to help the Indian Higher Education. The process of problem solving and addressing issues shall be a continuous affair. We only need to put in place an ever vigilant system which can keep a close tab on all the developments within and outside India and keep highlighting them and addressing them in the right perspective.

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