



Transformation through Higher Education : The Road Ahead

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Abstract

Higher education provides us advanced academic and professional knowledge. It aims at developing higher order thinking and nurturing various skills. It is the gateway to numerous opportunities, such as jobs, entrepreneurship and research works. The higher education suffered adversely during colonial era. In 19th Century, the western education models were introduced by establishing three universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras which offered arts, science and professional courses with focus on English education. The traditional Indian knowledge system was marginalized. After independence, a lot of significant changes came in higher education.

The quality of higher education varies widely across HEIs in India. Many HEIs, no doubt, are offering world-class education. Other HEIs are facing many challenges, like inadequate physical, digital, intellectual, emotional and collaborative infrastructure, outdated curricula and pedagogy, shortage of qualified faculty and staff, etc. Other issues like mushrooming of coaching institutions, rampant cheating, bureaucratization of higher education, etc have adverse impact on higher education. There is urgent need to transform our higher education by undertaking a lot of interventions recommended in this article and implementing fully the National Education Policy (NEP)-2020. As we are marching towards Viksit Bharat@2047, we need political will power to implement the recommendations of NEP to make our nation a global knowledge power and regain our past glory.

Keywords: Transformation, Higher Education, Perspective, Intervention, Knowledge and Skill

Introduction

In the words of Swamy Vivekananda, “Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas.” Education is essential for achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, and promoting national development (NEP-2020). Education brings transformation. Quality education can fulfill our dream of ‘*Viksit Bharat*’ with inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Higher education provides us advanced academic and professional knowledge and skill. It includes undergraduate programmes, postgraduate programmes and research degrees. It aims at developing higher order thinking and nurturing various skills. It is the gateway to numerous opportunities, such as jobs, entrepreneurship and research works.

We feel very proud of our ancient times and our rich traditions of higher education. Our universities like Nalanda, Takshashila and Vikramashila earned reputation and attracted scholars from all over the world in mathematics, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, etc. The focus was on holistic education. But the higher education suffered adversely during colonial era. In 19th Century, the western education models were introduced by establishing three universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. These universities offered arts, science and professional courses with focus on English education. The traditional Indian knowledge system was marginalized. After independence, a lot of significant changes were undertaken in higher education.

Literature review

The following review of literature throws light on the research works undertaken by various research scholars in the area of higher education.

Cortese (2003) examined the critical role of Higher Education in creating a sustainable future of our planet. He inferred that the Higher Education has to play leadership role to literate people on social and biological sustainability. It can change the mindset of people and develop a new human perspective for the well-being of the earth and its inhabitants.

Gopalkrishnan (2024) analysed the higher education in India and highlighted its major problems. To derive the advantages of the demographic dividend, there is need for development of 4.4 crore students of higher education for the economic growth in India. He also concluded that the HEIs should invest in quality infrastructure and research.

Bindu (2024) studied the importance of foreign universities to empower the Indian higher education. The foreign HEIs can help the domestic institutions to achieve global standards in curriculum, pedagogy and research. The paper suggested diverse ways in which the international universities contribute to the upliftment of Indian higher education so that it can compete internationally.

Barucha (2024) analysed the most sweeping transformation in the ecosystem of higher education in the nation's modern history, i.e., the National Education Policy-2020 which aims to bring sweeping changes in education. With half of the world's university-age population residing in India, our students are bursting with aspiration but frustrated by limited access to quality institutions. He inferred that many new HEIs are emerging with quality infrastructure and students support system to achieve excellence in higher education.

Suganya, et.al., (2024) examined the interplay among employee retention, academic performance, and employability in higher education. They found significant and positive relationships, indicating that retention has a substantial impact on both attainment and employability. Attainment also positively influences both retention and employability, and that attainment partially mediates the relationship between retention and employability.

Reddy and Babu (2024) studied the transformative impact of ICT in HEIs. They evaluated the ICT skills of HEIs. They recommended the need for targeted interventions to bridge existing skill gaps. The study proposed for fostering 21st-century teaching strategies, advocating for a nuanced approach to faculty development that considers both attitudes and skills.

Bhesera and Bika (2024) explained how online platform like SWAYAM is serving the three cardinal principles, i.e., access, equity, and quality with special reference to higher education in the present context. The paper focuses on the milestone of Indian higher education with the dynamic role of SWAYAM initiative to develop the knowledge and skill of the students and teachers.

Khanna, et.al., (2024) identified the various problems faced by the higher education institutions and also proposed the strategies to overcome the challenges. They also provided the suggestions for achieving global standards of higher education excellence. They focused on research and development, empowering faculties, investing in online learning, etc. From the review of literature, it is observed that India has the potential to achieve excellence in higher education. But the HEIs of our country face many challenges. We need a long-term strategy to achieve quality and excellence in higher education.

Objective

The main objective of this article is to present a brief overview of our higher education ecosystem and suggest the road ahead for achieving excellence.

Discussion

Research findings tell us that education adds 6 to 12% to a person's income. But the social return of education is very high, i.e., 25 to 30%. After our independence, many higher education institutions (HEIs) were established with the University Grant Commission (UGC) as the apex regulator. Our Government also established many centres of excellence, like IITs and IIMs for technical and managerial expertise. Now our country has one of the largest ecosystem of HEIs in the world with over 1100 universities and 51000 colleges. The State, Odisha has over 37 universities and 1300 colleges. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) has increased significantly. There is now greater access and equity. In some disciplines, the girls outnumber boys. Private HEIs have also increased manifold to meet the demand for higher education.

“India is the future talent factory for the world” Bob Sternfels, CEO, McKinsey & Co, said. But the quality of higher education varies widely across HEIs. Many HEIs, no doubt, are offering world-class education. Other HEIs are facing many challenges, like inadequate physical and digital infrastructure, outdated curricula and pedagogy, shortage of qualified faculty and staff, etc. Other issues like mushrooming of coaching institutions, lack of trust in regulators controlling examinations due to rampant cheating, bureaucratization of higher education, etc have adverse impact on higher education. These issues have direct effect on quality of output of students and their employability. The percentage of unemployed and underemployed youth is increasing every year.

Many research findings focus on the need for huge investment in higher education. There is need for a strong, vibrant public and private education system with industry participation. We need universal access to quality education and outcome-based education. But many HEIs are struggling with various problems like inadequate infrastructure and lack of trained faculty. Another big challenge is the mismatch of skills imparted by HEIs and the skills needed by the job market. The HEIs are required to follow ‘Learning Outcome-based Curriculum Framework’ (LOCF) and ‘Choice-based Credit System’ (CBCS) for achieving quality higher education. We need not only core courses, but also generic electives, skill-enhancement courses,

ability enhancement courses, and many discipline-specific electives. We have to revamp our curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and student support system with the appointment of motivated and capable faculty, principals and vice-chancellors (leaders), and non-teaching staff.

We are fortunate to learn from great teachers who were life-long learners. The great teachers constantly reinvent themselves. They mentor, support, encourage and inspire. Therefore, they need autonomy and independence. There is paradigm shift from teaching to learning by the intervention of good teachers. All HEIs need learner-centric approach to achieve good outcomes and make our students future ready.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a landmark education policy of our country. It aims at making India a global knowledge power. It is a great vision document for establishing an education system rooted in Indian ethos that contributes directly to transforming India. It has recommended one regulator for higher education, the Higher Education Commission of India with four verticals, namely, National Higher Education Regulatory Council, National Accreditation Council, Higher Education Grant Council, and General Education Council. It has a strategy for institutional restructuring and consolidation and moving towards multidisciplinary universities and colleges with autonomy.

NEP aims towards more flexible and interdisciplinary curricula (no hard separation between arts and sciences) and skill-based courses for employability and holistic development of our youth. It is also aiming to bring out the unique capabilities and skills of each student, aligned to the demands of 21st century to enable them to earn their livelihood and also contribute to our society. In the words of Mr. A.K. Tiwary, Secretary, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, “With two way integration between education and skilling through NEP, we are all ready, and it is time for us to take off.”

The importance of research and innovation has increased manifold. But it is found out that less than 1% of HEIs are engaged in quality research activities. The research outcomes have also witnessed significant growth during last one decade. The Prime Minister recently chaired the first Governing Body Meeting of Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), the apex research funding institution of the Government of India, which has been established recently by an Act of Parliament. According to the Education Minister of India, it will fund research projects of Rs. 50,000 crore during coming five years.

We are living in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world. Global collaborations and MOUs will help Indian HEIs in multidisciplinary research projects. There is need for student and faculty exchange for better teaching-learning process and producing good human capital. The international collaborations can also help us to address global challenges like pandemics and climate issues. Our country can become a global educational hub by attracting foreign students and faculty for a more diverse academic environment. We have the potential to become the future talent factory of the world to exploit the global opportunities.

“Higher Education ecosystem is evolving and growing at an unmatched speed. Academic leadership is the key driver an HEI to deliver on its mandate and ensure the achievement of successful outcomes for the students preparing them for the modern work place.” (Prof. M. Jagdaesh Kumar, Chairman, UGC) The HEIs have embarked on the journey of fostering leadership excellence within academics which will serve as a catalyst for transformative leadership. The target is to increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) from 26.3% to 50%. We demand dedicated interventions from academic leaders of HEIs and also from the regulating agencies. The academic leaders need to be recognized at an early stage and nurtured through the institutional leadership development programmes for HEIs.

The road ahead

The digital erahas brought digital revolution in higher education. The technological integration in higher education is the need of the hour. Our country has developed numerous digital platforms for learning, research and academic administration. This would help our motherland in making higher education more flexible, accessible and effective. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) offer a wide range of courses for promotion of lifelong learning. In higher education, the platforms like SWAYAM, NPTEL etc. offer a variety of courses for the students of HEIs. The artificial intelligence, machine learning and other new technologies are expected to bring transformation in the teaching-learning process. The big data analytics and other software can bring revolution in the efficient management of resources of HEIs. The ‘Institutional Development Plan’ of each HEIs, which is a long-term action plan, would help them to realise their goals. We have to balance quality and quantity, and address the skill gaps. We have to meet the needs of 44 million Indian youth who are now admitted every year in the HEIs.

The favourable demographic dividends can be realized by having five types of infrastructure in HEIs, viz., physical, digital, intellectual, emotional and collaborative infrastructure. Learning from Bhagavad Gita and from our ancient scriptures can add value in the holistic development of students. The chalk and board should be given priority to digital learning. Building excellent institutions of learning and research should be given priority to establish India as a knowledge super power and to realise the benefits of a knowledge economy. Our country has to establish many MERUs (Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities) like JNU. We have to observe World/National Book Day to promote the reading of books and journals.

Quality assessment and accreditation of HEIs is a big challenge for any regulating agency in a vast country like India. The help of technology for evaluation and monitoring of HEIs is very essential. We should not replicate the western model. Our country has to design and strengthen its accreditation process and bridge the loopholes. The HEIs should be made accountable for their actions and inactions, and their overall performance. The grants to HEIs can be outcome-linked and performance-based. Yes, quality matters a lot in a knowledge factory, i.e., HEI.

Our HEIs need good teachers, who are lifelong learners. They revitalize themselves every day so that they remain vibrant, relevant and effective. Our HEIs also need a strong culture of research and innovation. The universities are known for their innovative research, patent and research publications. The collaboration among HEIs will help in creating a research environment. The incubation of innovative ideas leads to many startups. There is need for 'Entrepreneurship and Incubation Cell' in all HEIs which would justify the need for outcome-based higher education as we desire to become a nation of job creators rather than job seekers. The position of India in research as compared to other countries is only satisfactory. We have to build a strong collaboration for research among our Colleges/Universities by the help of technology. There should not be many duplications and malpractices in research projects. The HEIs and its faculty members should avail benefits from Government research funding agencies, Partnership for Accelerated Innovation and Research Programmes (PAIR), and Programmes on "Solution-focused Research in Selected Priority Areas" under ANRF, such as Electric Vehicles Mobility, Advanced Materials, Solar Cells, Smart Infrastructure, Health and Medical Technology, Sustainable Agriculture and Photonics, Lab Grown Diamonds, etc.

We need innovative funding models and efficient financial management for sustainability of HEIs. There is need for increased investment by the Government and also the private sector.

The CSR funds of large companies can be tapped for the development of higher education. The HEIs should follow prudent financial management policies to achieve long-term financial goals. All our States need a programme like ‘Odisha Higher Education Programme for Excellence and Equity’ funded by World Bank for the development of higher education in Odisha.

We need leaders in HEIs. The UGC has issued guidelines for Institutional Leadership Development Programme for HEIs, which aims to be a guiding compass for empowering faculty members to adeptly assume leadership responsibilities. These guidelines provide a strategic pathway to nurture a fresh group of future leaders of HEIs. It will guide the leaders “to navigate administrative complexities, fostering inclusivity, driving innovative ventures, or cultivating collaborative cultures.” (Prof. M. Jagdaesh Kumar, Chairman, UGC) We hope that these guidelines will be effectively implemented.

We need many academic leaders who can act as change agents to bring transformation and good governance in HEIs. This would help us in achieving our goal of ‘Vasudheiva Kutumbakam’ and delight the stakeholders of higher education. Mental and emotional wellbeing of our students, teachers and staff can be achieved by establishing ‘Wellness Centres’ in HEIs. Happiness of our students, teachers and staff is the new wealth of HEIs.

Policy implications

The major policy implications found from this paper can be summarized as the following:

Focus on Holistic and Inclusive Education: Policies must emphasize life-building and character-making education, aligning with NEP-2020 to foster full human potential and equitable national development through inclusive and transformative quality education.

Investment in Higher Education Infrastructure: A robust framework is needed to attract private investment and corporate participation, ensuring sustainable funding for physical, digital, and intellectual development of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), while addressing regulatory and implementation challenges.

Adaptation to Global Trends and Digital Revolution: Policy measures should integrate evolving technologies like Artificial Intelligence and promote continuous learning systems to prepare students for the dynamic knowledge economy, supporting the vision of *Viksit Bharat@2047*.

Conclusion

The educated citizens of India know their duties and responsibilities. They also know their rights. We have our expectations from Government and regulators. Our motherland needs a lot of interventions for quality higher education which is more inclusive. There is need for huge investment to develop the physical, digital and intellectual infrastructure of HEIs. NEP-2020 has the potential to bring transformation. But its implementation is a big challenge. India is yet to get its apex regulator and four councils in higher education. For the success of HEIs, we need effective implementation of NEP-2020, sustainable funding and strong regulatory system. We need reforms in higher education to attract private investors and corporate sector to provide the huge investments required in this sector. All the citizens of India should participate in this process to make our motherland great again.

Change is the only constant in today's world. The world is undergoing rapid changes in the knowledge landscape and ecosystem. The Sustainable Development Goal – 4 of UN on education to be achieved in 2030 also focuses on quality education for transforming our society. We are living in a knowledge economy and a rapidly evolving world. Digital revolution has taken place. Artificial intelligence has already entered the classroom of a teacher. Learning how to learn, unlearn and relearn in this dynamic and evolving world will help our students. “Sa Vidya Yaa Vimuktaye”, i.e., Education liberates you. We believe in the words of our Father of Nation, Gandhiji, who said, “By education, I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in the child and man; body, mind, and spirit.” This is the need of the hour for our country. Our children and grandchildren will get quality education by the help of continuous reforms and innovations. We have no choice, but to transform our higher education by undertaking a lot of interventions. As we are marching towards Viksit Bharat@2047, we need political will power to make our nation a global knowledge power and regain our past glory.

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