CHALLENGES FACED HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA-AN OVERVIEW

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Introduction

The Indian system of higher education is both enormous and complex. Established in the image of British universities in the mid nineteenth century, it has now acquired a more hybrid form, influenced after independence by both the Soviet and American traditions. India now boasts over 375 public and 40 private universities, with almost 20,000 affiliated colleges that teach programs developed and examined by key state universities (Agarwal 2009). India also has around 250 specialist teaching and research institutions, established to provide training in such areas as medicine, engineering, agriculture, and computer science, and to conduct high-level research (Jayaram 2004: 91). The system as a whole employs more than 400,000 teachers and caters for almost 10 million students. Increase in demand for higher education in India has averaged more than 4 per cent over the past four decades, and shows no sign of decline. The growth of the financially independent, for-profit sector in higher education has perhaps been one of the most noteworthy recent developments in India. Also significant has been the increase in open and distance institutions, which now enroll over two million students. Indian higher education has evolved in distinct and divergent streams, all monitored by an apex body, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). The Planning Commission of India sets the broad parameters for the funding of Indian higher education, while the University Grants Commission (UGC) is responsible for distributing resources and promoting reforms. The UGC also has a role in the processes of coordination, accreditation and quality control.

Policy Anxieties

The complexity of Indian higher education has made it difficult for both central and state governments to implement programs of reform in any systematic and coordinated manner. In 1985, for example, the Indian Ministry of Education proposed an extensive reform package that included such measures as a moratorium on the expansion of conventional colleges and universities; a fair and robust admissions regime based on scholarly merit; a new accreditation and accountability scheme; decentralization of educational planning; and a campaign to ensure 'academic de-politicization'. As sensible as these reforms were, they were widely resisted by most state bureaucracies and universities, and produced little improvement, leading one writer to

conclude that 'higher education in India stands as an immobile colossus – insensitive to the changing contexts of contemporary life, unresponsive to the challenges of today and tomorrow, and absorbed so completely in trying to preserve its structural form that it does not have the time to consider its own larger purpose' (Dube 1988: 46). Subsequent reform attempts have met a similar fate, while the system has become ever more complex and unwieldy, and the challenges ever more urgent (Neelakantan 2009).

Most commentators, both within India and abroad, now realize that, apart from a very small group of elite public sector institutions and a few emerging, privately-funded ones, Indian higher education is in deep trouble. Despite its many distinct advantages, such as having the third largest student numbers in the world (after China and the United States), the use of English as a primary language of higher education and research, a long tradition of academic freedom and a highly talented pool of students, India is burdened by a system of mass higher education that is bureaucratically inflexible, hampered by poor governance structures and characterised by uneven and modest quality at best (Venkatesh & Dutta 2007). Lack of resources has clearly been a major issue. Despite the Kothari Commission's target of 1.5 percent of the GDP in 1966, government support for higher education remained until recently at less than 0.8 percent (Tilak 2004). Indian universities face a number of other difficult issues as well. While many more Indian students now have access to higher education, the system as a whole is characterized by gross inequalities. The Indian government now freely acknowledges Reforms Unleashed Against these criticisms, internal policy dynamics in India appear to be shifting at last. India has begun to interpret its higher education system as inextricably located within a global framework, contributing to universities around the world and also benefiting from their intellectual input. It has recognized the need to respond to the complex requirements of the globalizing context and to the opportunities created by the increasing levels of global interconnectedness. It is attempting to align this logic of globalization with responses to local pressures: growth in demand and greater access to higher education; diversification and privatization of institutions; and the need to reform not only institutional governance but also curriculum and pedagogy. A new policy discourse is emerging, more open to external input, which seeks to reconcile exogenous pressures of globalization and the knowledge economy with India's distinctive endogenous policy traditions. that it risks losing its advantage in the fiercely competitive global knowledge economy unless its universities are re-engineered (Singh 2004). It has begun to draw on overseas expertise in higher education policy, both from its academic diaspora and from international organizations such as UNESCO. Over the past decade, the UGC has, for example, established a number of task forces, many of which draw upon these overseas resources in establishing new policy processes designed to accommodate both external and domestic policy inputs. It appears then that the Indian government has at last recognized the need to utilize global policy

resources with which to develop new strategies for institutional re-positioning, new processes and structures for governance, and new imaginings of desirable futures.

Tensions

What this new investment regime does not adequately address is the quality of educational provision in the colleges. Nor does it adequately deal with the issue of the organizational cultures of Indian universities and colleges which, after years of neglect, are widely known for their outmoded approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, their ineffective modes of assessment, and corrupt practices of staff recruitment and promotion. Pouring good money into a largely dysfunctional system cannot be expected to produce the desired changes, for the sources of dysfunction lie not only in the lack of resources but also in a range of reform dilemmas that have become an inherent feature of Indian higher education. These dilemmas have their origins in both the historical constitution and the contemporary organizational practices in Indian higher education. As we have already noted, previous attempts at reform have not enjoyed great success in India, and this has not been solely due to the lack of resources but also to a deep-seated organizational culture resistant to reform.

This being so, unless issues of organizational culture are addressed, it is likely that the current attempts at reform, too, will similarly become embroiled in a politics shaped by a range of complex dilemmas that have proved intractable in the past. The notion of dilemma implies difficult choices within a context in which a particular course of action designed to alleviate or solve certain problems may also bring about consequences that are undesirable. These dilemmas, it should be noted, have historical origins, and are located within policy configurations linked to various political and organizational structures. This raises the question of the extent to which these configurations should in fact be disturbed; there is a risk that the consequences might undermine the very intents of the reform during the processes of implementation. It is for this reason that traditions are invariably defended, sometimes in vigorous ways but more often through organizational inertia. So, for example, in the case of Indian higher education, a policy choice in relation to greater autonomy for institutions runs the risk of creating a system characterized by even greater organizational incoherence. Similarly, the decision to pursue a vigorous regime of affirmative action creates conditions in which academic excellence is potentially compromised.

Policy and Practice

Many of the dilemmas of reform in Indian higher education are centered on issues of governance. As noted already, the Indian system of higher education has experienced a massive expansion over the past two decades, but this has happened in a rather chaotic and unplanned manner. As Agarwal (2009: 29) has pointed out, 'in an effort to meet rising aspirations and to make higher education socially inclusive, there has been a sudden and

dramatic increase in the number of institutions without a proportionate increase in material and intellectual resources'. As a result most students experience curriculum and pedagogy that is outmoded, and which is taught by faculty who are poorly prepared, lack motivation, are mostly disinterested in research and do not possess the kind of professional attitudes necessary for implementing any program of reform.

Attempts by the central government to coordinate reform initiatives have also met a great deal of resistance from the state educational bureaucracies, as well as from the universities and colleges themselves. Indian federalism has a complex structure, which worked reasonably well during the first two decades after independence, but is now increasingly characterised by highly contentious politics. State governments have become increasingly protective of their regional identity and political power. Within the structure of this competitive federalism, the authority of the UGC has declined, with no other agency emerging that can develop, coordinate and steer the processes of reform down to the local level.

However, even if it is possible to negotiate programs of reform across central and state governments, an understanding of the reforms seldom reaches the local institutional level. The structures of policy communication in India are largely ineffective, with policy ideas remaining confined to administrative leadership, often far removed from the level of professional practice. This suggests that the capacity of the state to promote reform practice is limited. At the colleges in particular, the curriculum arrives in a packaged form, and the students are prepared for examinations that are set elsewhere. At the same time, Indian institutions, while they are proud of their autonomy, rarely exercise this autonomy to debate policy ideas at the level of practice. There is furthermore no marked tradition in Indian higher education of policy ideas emerging 'from the bottom', despite its distinctive democratic political traditions. In India, university teacher unions enjoy a proud tradition, but remain concerned largely with industrial conditions, and pay little attention to academic issues.

Autonomy and Control

The system of affiliated colleges, around which the Indian system of higher education is built, has often been described as a curse. The distinguished scholar and educational leader, Professor Kulandai Swami (2006), argues, for example, that the affiliating system is 'outmoded, anachronistic, and acts as a real curse on the Indian higher education system'. It holds back any genuine attempt at reform and renewal. It ensures that reforms are inevitably symbolic and piecemeal, leaving most of the system unaffected.

The system of affiliated colleges emerged in the second half of the 19th century, in the image of the colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, which prepared students to sit for examinations set by the University. In an era when very few students attended higher education, this enabled a networked system to be established quickly around a small

number of universities, such as Madras, Bombay and Calcutta (Swami 2006). The universities had very few students of their own, but had the tasks of developing the curriculum for affiliated colleges, overseeing teaching quality, and assessing student performance.

According to Swami (2006), this system has disastrous consequences for college teachers and students alike. For teachers, little professional autonomy exists for developing their own curriculum, setting their own examination questions and grading the answers submitted. They teach subjects allotted to them for the syllabus prescribed by an authority elsewhere. They seldom get a sense of participation in the academic and administrative affairs of the system. With a few notable exceptions, the system turns the colleges into narrowly focused tutorial institutions, and teachers into tutors with no clear career path and no sense of professionalism. It also turns the faculty at the universities into mere examiners, with little opportunity to conduct research, preoccupied as they often become with oversight tasks.

Most students, especially those enrolled in tiny affiliated colleges, do not have access to adequate library and other educational facilities. Their teachers are often poorly trained and unmotivated, with little enthusiasm either for their disciplines or for teaching. Most colleges, even those that are subsidised by the central or state governments, largely exist for profit, and are often run by ex-politicians and entrepreneurs who have little knowledge or interest in higher education. With a system in which a small number of universities are given the responsibility of quality oversight, considerable potential exists for corruption, as is indeed is reported regularly in the media. Of course these concerns are not new. In 1966, the Education Commission of India introduced a system of autonomous colleges, and in 1986, the National Education Policy supported a freer and more creative association of universities and colleges. Neither of these policy initiatives can be said to have succeeded, with very few colleges taking up the option of becoming autonomous. Indeed, if anything, the situation seems to have worsened, with a number of universities in technical and professional areas being given the authority to affiliate new colleges which have little autonomy to experiment with relevant and innovative curriculum or pedagogy.

Public and Private

Over the past two decades, as earlier noted, the level of demand for higher education in India has increased well above the Government's capacity to finance. As a result, private higher education has flourished, with a boom in commercially oriented for-profit colleges. There has always been a private sector in Indian higher education, but the institutions which enjoyed government support were largely run by various religious groups and were not motivated primarily by the pursuit of profit. More recently however, identifying lucrative opportunities, various entrepreneurs, businessmen and politicians have established institutions through family trusts, or by taking advantage of other favorable

taxation conditions. The state authorities have encouraged this growth not only to meet the growing demand but also to introduce what is assumed to be a greater degree of institutional diversity in the system.

Yet a level of complexity that is seldom noted by the observers of Indian private colleges is that they are invariably linked to public universities as affiliated colleges, which means that many of them are often little more than small tutorial colleges, requiring a very low level of investment to get started. A very complex symbiotic relationship thus exists between the public and privates sectors of Indian higher education, raising a number of issues for the regulatory framework under which private colleges operate. Given their dependent relationship to public institutions they cannot be allowed to work totally under free market mechanisms - a degree of state control appears necessary. The dilemma that the state has is the extent to which, and how, it should steer the market, without turning private colleges into quasi-public institutions. Furthermore, a perennial dilemma facing Indian authorities is how to reconcile the policy imperative of institutional diversity on the one hand and quality assurance on the other.

Equity and Excellence

In India, the push towards privatization, as expressed in the Indian government's support for the development of private institutions, both for-profit and non-profit, and for the entry of foreign players into the market, appears to have two main motivations: to diversify the system and to provide greater access to higher education. Private institutions enroll students who would not otherwise be in higher education. From the point of view of the government, they bring additional revenue into the system, and often operate at much lower costs per student, even after allowing for the fact that their tuition is supplemented by government subsidies. It is assumed that private institutions bring in greater institutional diversity into the system through innovation and experimentation not only through reform in finance and management but also in instructional approaches. It is also believed that the private sector is much more responsive to the changing needs of the labor market, and that it is better able to address skills shortages and offer courses in fast growing areas of employment such as information technology, business administration, financial services, tourism and hospitality.

However it is hard to find evidence for such claims in India. On the contrary, there is greater evidence that most private institutions are rather reluctant to experiment with new areas of study and instructional approaches. Indeed most offer courses of low quality. They have fewer staff and most of their teachers are employed on a casual, part-time basis. Costly fields of study are eschewed, as indeed is any attempt at faculty professional development. Most owners of for-profit colleges shy away from investing in even essential infrastructure and facilities. It is however true that they do provide educational access to many students who are academically unable to gain entry into the public institutions,

especially in the high demand professional disciplines. As Levy (2008) has pointed out, private institutions in India provide second choice access for those who perform poorly in the highly competitive entry tests. These students are often ill-prepared to undertake a rigorous program of studies.

Research and Teaching

Debates about instructional approach, student support structures and employment outcomes are largely absent in most institutions of higher education in India. By and large, a tradition of critical reflection on their teaching, and how their instruction is differently experienced by students of varied backgrounds, has not yet been established among higher education faculty in India. Teachers are given little opportunity or support to consider the academic difficulties students might encounter, and how pedagogic approaches might be better aligned to their diverse needs. This is not an individual matter but a structural one, for the functions of teaching and research are sharply contrasted within the structure of Indian higher education. Faculty who are employed as teachers do not view research as important to them personally or professionally, even if educational research might have a great deal to say about their approaches to teaching. Most institutions too view themselves as being concerned with teaching alone. This sharp dichotomy has not served the cause of equity well, for it has not introduced a tradition of debate informed by evidence and research into Indian higher education.

Nor has it created an organizational culture of research that applies to all institutions of higher learning, not just to those specifically mandated to conduct research. Indeed, for a country that is now reliant for its continuing economic success on knowledge-based industries, and therefore on research and development, its research performance in globally comparative terms is remarkably poor. Investment in research and development in India is barely 1 percent of the gross domestic product, compared to 1.75 percent in China (Bettelle 2007). The number of active researchers for each million people in India is a very low 119, compared to over 4,605 in the United States and 708 in China. In the areas of publication and citations, India's performance is poor, with barely 1 per cent of the global output. Indian universities also perform very poorly in research training, with just 9,000 PhDs in Science and technology graduating in 2008. And the quality of most PhD theses, especially in the social sciences, is widely regarded as unacceptable.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that, faced with a growing policy anxiety in India about the risks it confronts of losing its advantage in the fiercely competitive global knowledge economy unless its universities are re-engineered, the Indian Government has at last unleashed a series of reforms to its system of higher education. It has begun to view these reforms as inextricably linked to the requirements of the global economy and the shifting architecture of global higher education. The Government has therefore greatly

increased its level of investment in higher education, and has also begun to loosen some of the bureaucratic rigidities in the system, giving universities greater organizational autonomy. As overdue and welcome as these initiatives are, we have argued that while additional resources are clearly necessary to reform Indian higher education, they are not sufficient. This is so because the problems of the Indian system of higher education are deep, and relate to a range of dilemmas arising out of the historical constitution of Indian higher education, and to the organizational traditions and cultural attitudes about its nature and functions in society. We have suggested that unless these dilemmas are squarely addressed, the Indian system of higher education will continue to struggle, producing isolated pockets of academic excellence but leaving the nation as a whole poorly served.

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