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Higher Education in India - a Review of the Current Scenario

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Abstract:

This review paper is a cumulative overview of the numerous reports and studies done on the prospects of Higher Education in India. The intertwining of Indian politics, economics, demographics and its impact on the field of higher education cannot be underrated. Vision 2030 envisioned by the FICCI Higher Education Summit 2013 and its implications for the future of Higher Education in India as well as its impact on the global scenario is contextualized. An insight on the challenges and problems that hamper the progress of higher education in India is included. The reviewer moots the idea that practices proposed by ESP (English for Specific Purposes) practitioners would be well suited to counter the challenges that dog Higher Education in India.

Keywords: Higher Education in India, Knowledge economy, English for Specific Purposes, Vision 2030

1. Introduction

The Higher Education System in India is undergoing a phenomenal transformation that is unprecedented. It has acquired a sheen of internationalization which has come about as an offshoot of the Indian government's proposal to project the country as a "knowledge economy". In India, presently the main categories of universities and university – level institutions are Central Universities, State Universities, deemed to be universities and University – level universities. Higher Education refers to the tertiary level of education which falls under the ambit of these universities.

2. The Scenario of Higher Education in the Past

In the past the Higher Education Scenario in India has been noteworthy and we have ample proof that India has had a rich heritage of internationalization of higher education. History is replete with information that it flourished in ancient universities like Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, Vallabhi, Kanchi and Ujjain which were globally known and used to attract international scholars. (Siddique2014). Many of these universities along with other ancient universities like Pushpagiri, Odantapuri and Somapuri came to an end by the 12th Century. It should be remembered that noteworthy scholars like Chanakya and Panini are from Takshashila university. The foundation for modern education was laid by the British who set up a network of schools to impart western education in English. The first Indian Education Commission of 1882 recommended the initiative of private agencies in the expansion of education.

3. The Scenario of Higher Education in the Present

A report from the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) shows that the number of universities in India has increased from a mere 20 in 1950 to an overwhelming 677 in 2014. The number of colleges has also increased from just 500 in 1950 to 37,204 in 2013. But this development has not found a parallel development in the skills and knowledge of the graduates so one finds that there is an abysmal mismatch between the skills acquired by tertiary level students in their course of study and the skills actually required from them in the job market. Empirical studies by Nasscom (National Association of Software and Services Companies) and other agencies have revealed that a majority of the graduates are unemployable. This is despite the fact that the transformation in Higher Education pedagogy in the last decade has been dramatic to say the least. The concept of the students' minds being a tabula rasa with the teacher being omniscient has given way to the student being an active participant in their discovery of knowledge. The classroom set up is no longer teacher centric but rather it is learner centered.

4. The Scenario of Higher Education in the Future

A report by the British Council (2014) speaks about the transformation that has onset India which is being driven by the economic and demographic changes that are prevalent here. India's demographic trend suggests that it will soon overtake China as the world's largest population and its middle classes that demand higher education will swell to over 500 million in the next ten years. It should be perceived that India's higher education system was originally designed to serve only the elite but will now have to serve more people as higher education has come within the grasp of the common man as well. By 2030, India will be amongst the youngest nations in the

world. With nearly 140 million people in the college-going age group, one in every four graduates in the world will be a product of the Indian education system according to Jaipuria. (2014)

5. The Political Scenario and its Impact on Higher Education

The Government of India has proposed many initiatives like the “Foreign Education Provider (Regulation) Bill which was introduced in 2010 and was put forth to facilitate and regulate the entry of trans-national Higher Education institutes in India along with the “Obama-Singh Initiative of 2009 and the Higher Education and Research Bill of 2012. Altbach (2011) speaks about the implications of the global revolution on Higher Education in India. Internationalization has become a mantra in higher education these days. The knowledge economy is a global network and interconnectedness appears to be the buzzword. Dahlman and Utz (2005) highlight the point that “the time is very opportune for India to make its transition to the knowledge economy”. Kapil Sibal, former Minister of Human Resources and Development stated that the country will need 800 new universities and 40,000 new colleges to meet the requirement of 30% GER (gross enrolment ratio) by 2020 and that the government alone cannot meet this demand. (Gupta & Gupta 2012). Jaipuria (2014) has also focused on this when he stated that with state universities being unable to cater this demand the lacunae are being filled by several private universities. In fact this very need has led to the proliferation of these private institutions.

6. The Challenges that Hamper the Progress of Higher Education in India

There are many problems that hamper the progress of Higher Education in India which includes the curriculum, faculty and infrastructure. Jaipuria (2014) stress that there is an urgent need to transform the whole system of higher education in India. Altbach (2005) refers to this situation in India as India’s 21st century dilemma and also rues the point that according to him India is a world class country without world class higher education. The challenges that hamper the progress of higher education include a lack of adequate level of staff internationalization. Thus there is very little evidence of faculty exchange with foreign universities. Faculty exchange would foster better dissemination of knowledge and scope for exchange of novel and innovative methods being incorporated into the teaching and learning process. The curriculum that is being used is obsolete and does not pertain to relevance. (Siddique 2014). Jaipuria (2014) also reiterates the point that that universities should have adequate faculty, research facilities, relevant curriculum and adequate infrastructure among others. The dearth of research and the quality of research is also a point of concern. Dahlman & Utz (2005) as well as Kumar & Oesterheld (2007) project the view point that skill development and research are very important.

7. Migration of Students from India

The FICCI (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry) report on Higher Education 2009 brings to light the disquieting issue of the growing number of Indian students seeking Education abroad, faced as they are, by an all too stark absence of world class universities within the country. Knight (2011) has identified three generations of cross border higher education wherein academic mobility has moved from people (students/ faculty scholars) to programme (twinning, franchise, virtual) and provider (branch campus mobility and then to the development of education hubs. Yeravdekar (2012) has diverged from this and has identified 4 levels with level one being student mobility, second level being programme mobility, third level being the incidence of branch campuses and the fourth level being the formation of education hubs. Knight (2011) also has commented on the trend that India still continues to be more of a source of international students rather than a destination for international students.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion the reviewer would like to reiterate that the stage is set for the upward swing of Higher Education in India. With the political scenario being very encouraging towards Higher Education and the inclination of demographics, internationalization of education is definitely on the cards. To cite Jaipuria (2014) “Indian higher education currently the third largest in the world, is likely to surpass the US in the next five years and China in the next 15 years to be the largest system of higher education in the world.” J.D. Singh also reiterates this fact but asserts that there is also another positive influence with English being the medium of instruction is a major strength for our country. This in large measure will help in the prediction that by 2020 India will outpace China as the country with the largest tertiary age population to come true. Pankaj Chandra (2013) asserts that the change we will see in the next ten years in Education in India will be at a scale that is unprecedented in human history. But if Vision 2030 envisaged by the government of India is to become a reality and not merely wishful thinking concerted efforts have to be made. Application of the theories of ESP practitioners would augur well to counter this state of affairs. Research is done on the students’ language needs, their wants, and their academic and professional goals (*needs analysis*) as well as into the discourses and cultures where the students will be working or studying (*target situation analysis*). (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 122). In contrast we have TENAR, “Teaching English for No Apparent Reason” or “General English”—which is intended to cover the presumed basics or fundamentals of the language.

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