

Developing Globally Competitive and Inclusive Higher Education in India

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Abstract

The massification of higher education is a global phenomenon in this century. The market-led massification of higher education in India is accompanied by widening regional and economic inequalities and persisting social and gender inequalities. An inclusive approach and friendly strategies to provide quality higher education, enhance employability, and improve the global competitiveness of graduates are nonnegotiable elements on the agenda of higher education development.

The global expansion of higher education is a phenomenon of this century, with an addition of nearly 7.5 million students every year. Developing countries account for a major share of this net addition. Flexible pathways and technology-mediated learning systems have expanded opportunities to pursue higher education globally. This fast expansion is very often led by market forces and accompanied by inequalities in access and wide variations in the quality of the educational offer.

India is no exception to these global trends. Indian higher education has developed from a slow growing, low enrollment sector to a fast growing, massified system in this century. Between 2000 and 2018, growth rates accelerated to reach two digits, gross enrollment ratios (GER) tripled to reach 26.2 percent, the number of universities more than tripled and reached 960, the number of colleges more than quadrupled (to 42,000), and student enrollments increased by more than 4.5 times to 36.8 million. The

Indian higher education sector has surpassed that of the United States to become second largest in the world.

Market-friendly reforms have helped private higher education institutions to proliferate, have shifted the financial burden of expansion to households, and have thus resulted in perpetuating inequalities in access and quality. There is no doubt that affirmative action policies have contributed to promoting inclusiveness. However, exclusionary tendencies persisting in the system have contributed to social and language inequalities in access to higher education and a widening of inequalities within disadvantaged groups.

There is evidence that regional and economic inequalities in access to higher education have widened and social inequalities have persisted, while gender inequalities, though rampant, have narrowed. The unplanned expansion of the private sector has led to a regional concentration of institutions. Between 2007 and 2014, the inequality in GER between the lowest and the highest income groups increased from 43.6 to 63.7 percentage points.

While English is the language of professions and business globally, in India it is the language of elite institutions. Students from high fee levying, private, English-medium schools account for a disproportionately high share of enrollments in elite higher education institutions. English has become an obstacle for disadvantaged groups to pursue higher education. To evolve into a more inclusive higher education system, India needs to address challenges related to equality of opportunity and diversity of the student body.

Quality of Higher Education and Employability of Graduates

Higher education quality is central for institutional reputation, a basic criterion determining student choices, and an asset for employers competing in the global market. In India, higher education suffers from poor quality in general, and wide variations in quality among institutions. India has set up external quality assurance (EQA) mechanisms to accredit institutions and internal quality assurance cells (IQAC) to monitor quality at the institutional level. However, a large share of the higher education institutions in India remains unaccredited.

Ranking exercises and national initiatives to establish world-class institutions are evidence of an increased interest in quality issues. Indian institutions rank low globally. According to the latest QS rankings, nine Indian institutions are listed among the top 500 and only three institutions rank among the top 200. In 2015, India established its National Institutional Ranking Framework and has now embarked on developing world-class “institutions of eminence.”

The poor quality of higher education results in declining employer confidence in the competencies of graduates. To improve quality and employability skills, universities are expected to revise their curricula based on the National Higher Education Qualification Framework. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2019 envisages setting up a General Education Council to specify learning outcomes and graduate attributes.

Internationalization of Indian Higher Education

Internationalization takes place at home through curriculum changes, and abroad through cross-border mobility of programs, students, institutions, and teachers. The curriculum revisions envisaged in NEP 2019 will promote internationalization at home. India ranks second in terms of sending students abroad for studies (300,000 yearly) and MOOCs enrollments. Initiatives are also taken to allow foreign universities to establish independent branch campuses in India.

The Indian approach to internationalization aims to extend soft power and diplomatic relationships rather than financial interests. The country envisages transforming itself into an education hub and a preferred study destination for foreign students. India has launched several programs to increase the number of international students from 46,000 currently to 500,000 by 2024. The Study in India program and a massive plan to fund 50,000 scholarships by 2023–2024 are good examples of this promotion of internationalization.

The Global Initiative of Academic Networks, the Scheme for the Promotion of Academic Research and Collaboration, and programs encouraging scholars to return to India are expected to stimulate global engagement. India plans to invest the equivalent

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of around US\$130 million on internationalization initiatives, which may help the country to emerge as an important global player in education.

Looking to the Future

Developing countries have a higher potential than industrialized countries to expand their higher education systems. However, the market-led massification of higher education in developing countries is accompanied by several forms of inequality and increasing commercialization, resulting in the exclusion of the poor and disadvantaged. The challenge is to address issues of equity and diversity and provide inclusive quality higher education at an affordable cost.

While its youth bulge and low GER give scope for Indian higher education to expand to become the largest system in the world, the most recent trends indicate a decelerating rate of growth in the sector. Given the high share of secondary school graduates entering higher education in India (more than 90 percent), a fast growth of the sector seems difficult, unless there is an accelerated growth of secondary education in educationally backward states of India. The other possibility to overcome the shortage of graduates from secondary schools is increasing the enrollment of mature students. In any case, a further expansion of the sector may increasingly rely on private/household funding, open universities, and technology-assisted learning facilities. ▲