

Short Communication

Higher education in India: Challenges and opportunities

S. Thanuskodi

Department of Library and Information Science Wing, Directorate of Distance Education, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar-608002, Tamil-nadu, India. E-mail: thanuskodi_s@yahoo.com

Accepted 6 June, 2011

India has survived with an increasingly mediocre higher education system for decades. Now as India strives to compete in a globalized economy in areas that require highly trained professionals, the quality of higher education becomes increasingly important. So far, India's large educated population base and its reservoir of at least moderately well-trained university graduates have permitted the country to move ahead. But the competition is fierce. China in particular is heavily investing in improving its best universities with the aim of making a small group of them world class in the coming decade; and making a larger number internationally competitive research universities. The largest international student population is from China. The number from China is about 4 lakhs. China allows this large number to go out for higher education, inspite of the massive facilities created within China only because they realize that in the larger interests of the country, the young men and women have to seek educational opportunities outside the borders of China. Surprisingly Tamil Nadu has not taken a comprehensive view of higher education through an appropriate committee since independence. The neighbouring states have done the exercise. It is necessary for Tamil Nadu to examine comprehensively the opportunities available for higher education and research; the opportunities needed to be created and policy decisions to be taken for the future. It is not the responsibility of the party power alone. Every political party that worth the name must accept responsibility in this direction.

Key words: Higher education, research, national knowledge commission, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), foreign exchange, economic policy.

INTRODUCTION

India has significant advantages in the 21st century knowledge race. It has a large higher education sector, the third largest in the world (in student numbers) after China and the United States. It uses English as a primary language of higher education and research. It has a long academic tradition. Academic freedom is respected. There are a small number of high quality institutions, departments, and centres that can form the basis of quality sector in higher education (Bundy, 2004). The fact that the States, rather than the Central Government, exercise major responsibility for higher education creates a rather cumbersome structure, but the system allows for a variety of policies and approaches.

GROWTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Humanity has gone through 3 ages of civilization namely agricultural era, industrial era and knowledge era. We

are assumed to be in the knowledge era. We refer to the present society as knowledge society. Knowledge is for human virtue from the beginning and nothing is new. It is an inherent characteristics and possession of human beings. If that is so, then why is it that we refer to the present age as knowledge era? Agriculturally civilized economy depends not on literacy and education but on crafts that require only training. The agents of production were the agriculturist, the mason, the carpenter, the blacksmith and so on. Knowledge is not used as a means of production. It was in the industrial age that knowledge was used to produce tools, and the objective is to increase productivity (Kothari, 1985). Production moved from craft to technology. During the following 2 centuries, enormous category of tools was produced. Productivity was consistently increased. Today the difference between a rich and a poor country is the difference in their productivity.

It is the productivities of land, water and of an

individual. The procedure has been one of, using knowledge to produce tools. A tool does not necessarily mean a concrete object. It may be a device; even an idea is a tool. The process has been a continuous development of new tools using knowledge and the consequent increase in productivity (Lenox and Walker, 2003). In the knowledge era, knowledge is even directly used to increase productivity. Industrial age knowledge was used to develop tools. Now, without developing new tools, the use of existing tools is so organized that even with the existing tools, you increase productivity. We refer to it as industrial engineering. The World Bank conducted a survey in 34 advanced countries from 1850 to 1960 and it was found that in all these countries, economic development picked up only when they reached a high level of literacy. Nearer example was quoted. The revolution of China launched its new development programme thereafter from 1978.

In 1979, the literacy in China was 70% while in India it was 43.6% even until 1981. We launched the new economic policy in 1991. Even at that time the literacy in India was 52.2% that is, half of the population was still illiterate. In other words the people in India in 1991 were not as well prepared for development as the people in China were even a decade earlier. We have to realize that we have failed to reach the threshold level of literacy needed for development in the knowledge era. Even until the end of the 20th century, our failure has been that of educating our people. In higher education, the opportunities mentioned earlier were the opportunities of education for the highest level of knowledge in every subject and capacity, for creating new knowledge important for development. Developing countries do not have the facilities for producing adequate number of people with necessary university education. Students are moving, in increasing numbers, from developing countries to the advanced countries for higher education.

This number has considerably increased and we have today what we refer to as a category of international students. Their numbers was according to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 1.9 million in 2003. According to a study made by IDP Education Australia, the estimated demand for international higher education may reach 7.2 million globally by 2025. United States of America (USA) had in 2003, 5.7 lakhs of international students and the income from them was \$13.5 billion. Even a country like Australia with a small population, had 1.6 lakhs of students in 2004, contributing US \$ 4.5 billion. The number of Indian students studying abroad as per the statement of the Honorable Minister Vayalar Ravi, is 2.6 lakhs as a whole and 1.04 lakhs in USA. Even in a country like Australia the Indian student population is over 97000. One may estimate foreign exchange paid to the students who are studying abroad and it may amount to about Rs.25000 crores. We have to realize that higher education has long become one of the commercial goods. If we do not

provide opportunities for adequate education facilities within India, we may have to pay for education abroad. It is not as though students from India alone go abroad to study (Prem et al., 2007).

The largest international student population is from China. The number from China is about 4 lakhs. China allows this large number to go out for higher education, inspite of the massive facilities created within China because they realize that in the interests of the country, the young men and women have to seek educational opportunities outside the borders of China.

HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

In India, one problem is numbers and the other is quality. We want to be a developed country by 2020. If we really want to achieve that target, we should have at least 20% of the age group in higher education by 2020. The present number is uncertain but is reported to be around 10% .In other words within a decade (that is, from 2010 to 2020), we will have to double the opportunities for higher education. It is just impossible for the Government alone to create the facilities needed. Private providers have to play a role. Coming to another important component of higher education, that is research. In the Science Summit held in Bangalore, in 2000, the former secretary of the Department of Science and Technology gave the following information based on estimates that emerged in a discussion meeting. In technology that is used in India, the foreign components were as follows:

- 1) Foreign technology used without alteration 50%
- 2) Foreign technology modified and adopted to suit our need 45%
- 3) Indigenous technology 5%.

The Defense Minister of India stated in Parliament recently that, our weapons are outdated and we are depending upon imports from abroad for nearly 70% of our equipment. In an age of globalization, no country will sell advanced technology or lend advanced technology. We have to substantially develop our own. This requires augmenting our research capability. We may take a look at the state of research in India. It may be meaningful to compare our position with China. In 1980, India published 10,606 papers with citations. The number from China was 682. In 1990, India published 11563 research papers and the number from China was 6991. In 2005, the number from India was 25227 while the number from China was 72,362.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The higher education sector in India spends 4.1% of the

country's research fund. It is 17.0% in Germany; 22.6% in U.K. and 10.1% China. The research manpower in China is 8.6 lakhs; in India 1.3 lakhs and even in Korea it is 1.5 lakhs. Prof. C.N.R. Rao who is now the Principle Science Adviser to the Prime Minister has stated that our universities have largely stopped doing research. It can be pointed out here that the higher education system in India is not conducive to research and if the present state of affairs continues we will never be competitive in research. Higher education scene in India should kindly be looked into. Every institution has Lecturers, Assistant professor and Professor; and all are expected to do research. In India, higher education is in the affiliated colleges which are 22000 in number. They have no Professor; not even Assistant professors necessarily. Ninety percent (90%) of our undergraduate students and 66% of our postgraduate students; and 84% of our faculty in higher education are in the affiliated colleges. There is no research in the affiliated colleges; this means that, in the field of higher education 84% of faculty members do not do research. They are not expected to do research and only 16% of the faculty in higher education is expected to do research in the country. How can university research prosper with such grossly inadequate numbers not engaging in research, in comparison with the entire higher education faculty being expected to do research in advanced countries?

On the 29th of November 2006, the Chairman National Knowledge Commission wrote to the Prime Minister, recommending 1500 universities from India. Again, 2 years later, in 2008, Yasphal Committee recommended 1500 universities from India. These numbers are by no means large. The Chairman, Today's Meeting has stated that USA has 3500 universities; UK with a population less than that of Tamil Nadu has 125 universities; Germany with a population of 82 million has 350 universities; Japan with a population of 127 million has 726 universities. It is said that a nation must periodically introduce minor revolutions. Otherwise it will have to face a major revolution. India today, requires really a major revolution in higher education.

CONCLUSION

The needs of higher education cannot be met by the Government alone. It needs the participation of the Government, the private providers and perhaps selectively participation of foreign universities. We have to free ourselves from the mindset and take a realistic

attitude, taking into consideration the fact that a major revolution is taking place in higher education in the world. Considering the conditions of India, the writer is of the view that the true patriots are those who create opportunities for education. As regards Tamil Nadu, suggestion was made. If you take India, the Government at the Centre has constituted a number of committees and commissions for higher education. Dr. Radhakrishnan Commission from 1947 to 1948; Gothari Commission from 1964 to 1966; National Education Policy in 1986; and recently, National Knowledge Commission and Prof. Yashpal Committee. Surprisingly Tamil Nadu has not taken a comprehensive view of higher education through an appropriate committee since independence. The neighbouring states have done the exercise. It is necessary for Tamil Nadu to examine comprehensively the opportunities available for higher education and research; the opportunities needed to be created and policy decisions to be taken for the future. It is not the responsibility of the party in power alone. Every political party worth the name must accept responsibility in this direction.

REFERENCES

- Bundy A (2004). Information Literacy framework: Principles, Standards, and Practices. New Zealand J. Inf. Literacy, P. 240.
- Kothari CR (1985). Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques. 2nd ed; Wishwa Prakashan; New Delhi, pp. 300-330.
- Lenox MF, Walker MI (2003). Information Literacy in the Educational Process. Educ. Forum, 57(2): 312-324.
- Prem C, Prakash K, Satyrbati T, Chuhan SK (2007). "Access to scholarly literature in higher education institutions under INFLIBNET consortium". Proceedings from International CALIBER '07: Convention on automation of libraries in education and research institutions. Ahmedabad: INFLIBNET, pp. 570-588.