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HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: RUSA AND CHALLENGES MISMATCH IN SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE

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ABSTRACT

The problems that deal with higher education in India today are low enrolment rates, problem of access, poor infrastructure and irrelevance with the societal needs. The UGC has taken measures towards structural, systemic as well as academic reforms by setting up Centers for Advanced Studies and Internal Quality Assurance Cells, reforming the Academic Staff College (ASC), establishing New Faculty Development Centers, initiating evaluation of teachers by students and peer assessment, strengthening and expanding e-initiatives and reforming the Self-financed Teaching Programmes, to name a few.In addition, the UGC provides financial assistance to teachers teaching in Universities and Colleges to promote excellence in teaching and research. In the session 2012-13, the UGC has supported as many as 987 Major Research Projects and 7501 Minor Research Projects and incurred an expenditure of 61.86 crores. In this way, capacity building and optimum utilization of land, space, and faculty have been the key concerns of the UGC. To promote the qualitative expansion of Higher education, the project RUSA is being implemented. The present paper debates the challenges of RUSA wih special reference to Himachal Pradesh.

Key words: Higher Education, Quality, Expansion, RUSA

Introduction

Higher education institutions are mandated to render extension service hand in hand with instruction, research and production. This is in recognition of the vital role colleges and universities play in the development of communities, especially the underserved and the depressed.

The debate about whether the present universities have appropriate purposes for the 21st century, and whether universities can indeed fulfil them, is still in full swing. Many universities, as multifaceted stakeholders, may perceive these developments as threats and take a defensive stance. Other questions that arise along with this debate are: will universities be actively responsive, or will they have to be induced or coerced to make the necessary changes? What are the implications of policies that stress the move towards knowledge societies for the university sector? In fact, the terms knowledge societies or knowledge economies and investment in innovation, etc. are used so commonly today that it might be worth re-thinking what knowledge is and what knowledge societies are. There are a number of interpretations of the terms knowledge, knowledge transfer and knowledge societies. The term knowledge transfer is often wrongly used to mean training; knowledge is likewise confused with information. It is, however, not possible to transfer experiential knowledge to other people. Information might be thought of as facts or "understood data"; but knowledge has to do with flexible and adaptable skills – a person's unique ability to process and apply information. This fluency of application differentiates knowledge from information. Knowledge tends to be both tacit and personal; one person's knowledge is difficult to quantify, store, and retrieve for another one to use. The common understanding of knowledge societies underlines the move of advanced societies from a resource-based to a knowledge-based development. Knowledge and innovation are recognised as significant driving forces of economic growth, social development, and job creation.

The higher education system in India today suffers from many shortcomings. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is only 18.8% this means that only a fraction of the population in the age group of 18-23 years is enrolled in higher education institutions. In addition to very low access to higher education in general, there are wide disparities between various social groups. The GERs for SCs, STs and OBCs are far below the average GER. There is also a wide gender

disparity, GER for males is 20.9% while that for females is only 16.5%. There are also differences in quality of institutions and enrollments between rural and urban areas and between developed states and not so developed ones. Given these myriad challenges, a drastic change is required in the approach that has traditionally been adopted for the development of higher education in the country.

We need to keep in mind, however, that there are also different cultural understandings of knowledge and modes of transfer, especially of traditional wisdom and indigenous knowledge, which have largely been marginalized. This can lead to a loss of knowledge that is critical for the survival of traditional communities and practices.

Productive Workforce

For a technologically driven knowledge economy, a growing number of people in the workforce today require higher education qualifications. Despite highfalutin notions that the main of higher education is to ennoble citizens; this has been main reason for mass expansion of higher education. Ironically, as enrolments in higher education grow, so does the problem of unemployment and underemployment of graduates across a wide range of countries, including India. Graduate unemployment is much higher than overall level of unemployment, though there are skill shortages in several sectors. This paper assesses the role of higher education in developing workplace skills and deconstructs skill shortages in India. The chapter begins with explaining the linkages between higher education and economic growth on the one hand and with community linkages on the other. It examines the dynamics of the demand and supply of qualified manpower in Indian economy as it integrates with the world economy and shows signs of structural change. Based on its talent pool, India is perceived to be a frontrunner in the global knowledge economy. However, there are concerns that the country's antiquated higher education and training system might derail the growth process. The paper analyses these concerns and suggests ways to align higher education with the community.

Miss match in supply and demand

India's GER is lingering around 19 percent at the moment, 6 % below the world average and at least 50 % lesser than countries such as Australia and the United States of America. GER stands

for gross enrollment rate, or the percentage of students enrolling into higher education institutes each year post high school. The government apparently has a vision to increase this to 30 percent by the year 2020.

To give that information some context, India has the largest population of teens with close to 100 million in number between 17 to 19. But each year only 19 % students enroll into higher education institutes which translates to 20 million according to a joint survey by aspiring minds and Nasscom in 2013.

That leaves a whopping 81 % or 80 million in number who do not have the opportunity to study even if they wanted to. And to think only 3.5 million graduates join the workforce each year among the 20 million, I wonder how many people drop out eventually.

There is a massive gap that is created due to the difference in the number of schools and higher education institutes that really needs to be bridged. There is either a lack of seats to accommodate the rest or seats are available in colleges nobody has heard of.

Initiatives Towards Quality Enhancement

In an endeavor towards quality and excellence in higher education, the government has set up various national level bodies and agencies that are responsible for the efficient working of higher education institutions all over the country. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the prime agency among them. Ever since its establishment, access, equity and quality in higher education have been the guiding rationale of the UGC. Reiterating its commitment, the UGC recommended enhancement of the triple objectives of access and expansion, equity and inclusion, and quality and excellence in higher education sector under the 12th Five Year Plan. It recognizes that it is necessary to ensure quality enhancing measures and support.

Accordingly, the UGC has taken measures towards structural, systemic as well as academic reforms by setting up Centers for Advanced Studies and Internal Quality Assurance Cells, reforming the Academic Staff College (ASC), establishing New Faculty Development Centers, initiating evaluation of teachers by students and peer assessment, strengthening and expanding e-initiatives and reforming the Self-financed Teaching Programmes, to name a few. In addition, the

UGC provides financial assistance to teachers teaching in Universities and Colleges to promote excellence in teaching and research. In the session 2012-13, the UGC has supported as many as 987 Major Research Projects and 7501 Minor Research Projects and incurred an expenditure of 61.86 crores. In this way, capacity building and optimum utilization of land, space, and faculty have been the key concerns of the UGC.

The UGC has also initiated a program to promote excellence in teaching and research in colleges. This program provides financial support to the colleges to help them improve their academic and physical infrastructure, introduce innovative teaching methodologies and implement modern learning and evaluation methods.

Accreditation of colleges and universities is yet another measure that has been taken by the UGC to ensure and promote quality and excellence in higher education. The most recent endeavor towards this end is the introduction of the Rashtriya Uchch Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA).

Objectives of RUSA (Rashtriya Uchchtar Shiksha Abhiyan) and role of Universities

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has proposed setting up RUSA (Rashtriya Uchch Shiksha Abhiyan*)* in the 12th Five Year Plan document "*to materialize a "quantum jump" in achieving the triple objectives of access and expansion, equity and inclusion, and quality and excellence, with an emphasis on consolidation and optimal use of infrastructure already created during the 11th FYP*". The UGC plan document enumerates several strategies "to bring about changes in the systems, processes, culture, and structure of the university Act/Statutes." However, it is not clear how these systemic, cultural and structural changes will materialize on the ground. In a system where supply of quality institutions and teachers is already far less than demand and the student to teacher ratio is very high in most higher educational institutions, the plan document does not provide any clear direction about teacher recruitment reform and a formal process for quality teacher-training of existing teachers.

The XIIth Plan has kept the above concerns in mind and called for measures that provide higher education to a larger number of students while ensuring equal opportunities for all sections of society and maintaining focus on quality. The XIIth Plan deviates from the previous plans by suggesting some strategic shifts in the approach towards higher education. Given these strategic

shifts and goals talked about in the XIIth Plan, there is a need to develop a policy that presents this much needed holistic plan for the development of higher education in India.

RUSA In Himachal Pradesh

As the Part of the 12 Plan, RUSA is a centrally sponsored scheme that with the aim of enhancing qualitative expansion of Higher Education was made effective from the academic session 2013-14 in Himachal Pradesh. Its aim is to improve education in three dimensions viz. access, equity and quality in state higher education. Its objective is also to correct and bridge regional imbalances in access to higher education through the introduction and building up of high quality institutions in rural and semi urban areas. Not only this, the plan assures financial assistance to all states. According to the financial outlay of the Plan, the centre-state funding ratio for Himachal Pradesh is 90:10. The funding has been offered with a view to set up adequate infrastructure facilities and fulfillment of faculty requirements for the smooth functioning of RUSA.

The objective of RUSA is to provide access, equality and excellence in Higher Education and through this aim is to bring socio-economic transformation of the students. In Himachal Pradesh, 72 Government Degree Colleges (including five Government Sanskrit Colleges), five Government aided colleges and two State Universities i.e. HPU and Himachal Technical University are being covered under this project. The "Cluster Universities" are also proposed at Shimla, Mandi and Dharmshala by clubbing the infrastructure of 4-5 colleges at these places.

The new Model Degree Colleges are also recommended to be established in Sarahan of Sirmour and Chhatrari of Chamba being educationally backward districts. A sum of Rs.26 Crore is released for opening a new Engineering College at Nagrota Bagwan in district Kangra.

RUSA: A Boon for Rural Colleges in Himachal Pradesh

Implementation of RUSA system in Himachal has come as a blessing in disguise for government colleges located in rural areas. Students, who are not getting admission in favourite subjects in big colleges located in towns, are heading towards institutes located in nearby rural areas. As a result, the strength in most of the rural colleges is on the rise as compared to earlier.

Challenges Ahead

With an effort to improve the existing evaluation and examination system, RUSA introduced the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) which is a remarkable shift from the annual system of examination to the semester system of examination. This system offers a wide range of main and elective subjects and papers to the students. It is a student centric approach which was envisaged by the great educationists and philosophers that enables the student to opt for subjects from their respective parent department or any other department. This interdisciplinary approach has been introduced with an intent to promote all round development of students and to widen the horizon of their learning. In addition, the semester system gives students the opportunity to improve and assess their performance in a better manner and get the necessary guidance and feedback from the faculty at regular intervals.

Advantages and Disadvantages and the Future of Interdisciplinary Studies

Today, the interdisciplinary approach is a key concept to the advancement of curriculum at all levels. It has now become debated as to whether an interdisciplinary approach is the best course for a curriculum under RUSA. Though it has many advantages such as, expanding student understanding and achievement between all disciplines or enhancing communication skills, it also has disadvantages, such as integration confusion and time-consuming curriculum preparation.

The interdisciplinary approach has been defined by Executive Director of the Association for Integrated Studies William H. Newell and William Green (1982) as "inquiries which critically draw upon two or more disciplines and which lead to an integration of disciplinary insights" (Haynes, 2002, pg17). The interdisciplinary approach is uniquely different from a multidisciplinary approach, which is the teaching of topics from more than one discipline in parallel to the other, nor is it a cross-disciplinary approach, where one discipline is crossed with the subject matter of another.

Interdisciplinary techniques go beyond these two techniques by allowing students to see different perspectives, work in groups, and make the synthesizing of disciplines the ultimate goal.

Despite being significant and effective measures in attaining qualitative expansion and excellence in higher education, these reforms suffer from many impediments at the executional part. Some of them have been enumerated as under:

1. **Lack of infrastructural facilities**: The CBCS might offer a brilliant opportunity for the students to choose from the varied subject choices available to them, but it has been observed that the lack of infrastructure and qualified faculty inhibits and hinders the students to take up their desired combination of subjects. The lack of class rooms and laboratories to accommodate the increasing number of students and operate various courses at the same time is problem that needs to be addressed urgently to ensure quality. Not only this, the teachers need to be ICT friendly with the computerization of all administrative procedures of RUSA.

2. **Student –Teacher Ratio:** A miserable teacher-student ratio remains a major hindrance in the process of attaining quality and excellence. Despite giving the students the opportunity to choose from a basket of subjects, the lack of adequate number of teachers restricts the students to limit themselves to a few of the subject choices. In Himachal Pradesh, the faculty is being recruited on contractual basis. So is due to the lack of efficient faculty, many colleges have not been able to introduce all the inter-disciplinary courses offered under RUSA.

3. **Irrelevant Subject Choices**: The subject combinations offered in the form of bouquet available to the students prove irrelevant many times. This wide diversity of subjects may, at times, waste the energy of the student in endeavors that might prove unproductive in the long run. Teachers' guidance in choosing subjects that are not relevant in enhancing the student's knowledge regarding his/her specific subject might lead to the students becoming a jack of all trades but masters of none.

Therefore, there is a need to rethink the choice of elective subjects that may not promote excellence in one particular subject.

4. **Lack of vocational utility:** The mindless choices made by the students in order to merely fulfill the credit requirements do not give them any vocational proficiency. The aim of education of producing Productive human beings thus seems to fail.

5. **Revision of the curriculum:** The curriculum needs to be designed bearing in mind the academic level of the students. For example, in Himachal Pradesh, the University revised the syllabus in few streams to achieve the objectives of RUSA which was strongly opposed by the teachers. This attitude on the part of teacher is also debatable.

Conclusion

India is having largest young population in the world. So it must be better equipped in preparing the Human Resource. A culture of Excellence coupled with strong leadership and political will can lead this RUSA project in right direction. Core competencies on the part of teachers should be nourished properly. Academic cooperation between the institutions must be enhanced. Teaching must be top grade and facilitated by attracting and retaining talent, hiring experts from the industry. The industry – academia tie ups are necessary for achieving the ultimate goals of RUSA. The affiliating universities must guide the colleges to main high standards in curricula and evaluation.

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