

A Fail-Safe Approach for Reforming Higher Education

The Government of India (GOI) formally started *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* in November, 2001, with a view to provide universal basic education to all the children between 6 and 14 years of age, so that every child receives formal education up to class VIII by the year 2010. Now, the GOI is planning to universalize formal education up to Class X, by targeting 75% enrolment of children of 14-16 years age for secondary education by the year 2012 and 100% enrolment by the year 2017. Its natural outcome would culminate in a huge demand for institutions of higher education in our country in coming years. To gear up to the challenge of additional students seeking higher education as well as to make our nation a developed knowledge society, by the year 2020, the GOI on the advice of National Knowledge Commission, is planning to make massive investments for the development of higher education in the country.

In this endeavour, the GOI has planned to establish 8 new Indian Institutes of Technology, 7 new Indian Institutes of Management, 15 Central Universities, 5 new Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research, and 14 World-class Universities. However, it is unlikely that the dream of setting up of acknowledgeable world-class universities in India can be realized in near foreseeable future, because as on today, only two institutions of India, viz., Indian Institute of Sciences, Bangalore (ranked 317) and Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur (ranked 318), find their place in top 500 world-class

universities, as per the Academic Ranking of World Universities for the year 2007, prepared and released by Shanghai Jiao Tong University of China.

The plan outlay on education in India has increased from about Rs.1.51 billion in 1st Five Year Plan to Rs.438.25 billion in 10th Five Year Plan. In 2003-04, expenditure on education was about 3.74% of GDP and many are demanding that it should be raised to 6% of GDP. But those who feel that just by increasing allocation of money for education, quality of education in India, particularly, higher education, can be raised to world-class, they are grossly mistaken. No amount of money or wishful thinking can make a significant impact on quality of education, till accountability of concerned people is clearly demarcated.

Thus, just by starting a few more educational institutions and investing huge sums of money in their establishment or by allocating more money for existing educational institutions, and wishing that some of these will rise to world-class, nothing significant can be achieved, as is clearly evident from the past record of Indian Universities. Had money been the most significant factor, many universities of oil-rich West-Asian countries would have been pushed in the top echelon of world-class universities by now. Moreover, the money and other resources are also not in abundance in India, thus these should be judiciously employed with a strategic view to ensure their optimal utilization, so that we reap most productive outcome otherwise our resources will be spent up and we will end up merely with a few more institutions, which will add to the list of other such money guzzling educational institutions.

Beyond the money and the resources, there are two more significant factors, viz., (i) Frame-work of an Institution and

(ii) Performance of Individuals, which play important role in raising the quality of an educational institution.

In India, frame-work of a government-aided educational institution is bound by rigid regulations which cannot be set aside in the near future, like, reservation quota for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Castes, as well as quota for minorities, for admission of students as well as for appointment of faculty members and other administrative staff. Reservation policies will stay in India, till people of the reserved categories achieve parity with those of the general category, which is difficult to achieve in the present scenario but is surely attainable in a couple of decades, if efforts are made in this direction as illustrated in the following section, viz., “*Solution for Reservation-Related Problems*”. Till, we do not improve upon the existing frame-work of our government-aided educational institutions and thus do not start valuing merit of individuals over other considerations, for any reason whatsoever, there is no scope for raising the level of our universities to the world-class.

So presently, “Performance of Individuals” is the only remaining factor on which we can work upon and try to raise the level of education in our country as much as possible. Faculty-Members, Administrators, and Students are the three sets of people, whose performance can significantly influence the achievement level of an educational institution. It comes to one’s mind that to extract optimal performance from various individuals as well as various groups of people, their responsibilities should be made known to them and thereafter they should be held accountable for their actions. People talk about the responsibility and fixing up accountability of individuals but they seldom talk about standardized parameters on whose scale accountability of various

individuals, connected with educational institutions, could be measured unambiguously.

In the absence of any measurable parameter, in unambiguous terms, all the talk of accountability just reduces to a matter of debate and further debate. Rastogi Committee (UGC appointed Pay Review Committee), while examining Fifth Pay Commission guidelines for reviewing pay-scales for teachers, w.e.f. 1st January, 1996, observed among other things that appraisal of performance of teachers through students should be introduced. There was a wide spread hue and cry among teachers fraternity against this proposed appraisal of teachers. Eventually, pay-hike was granted to teachers without stipulating their appraisal by the students. However, self-appraisal of performance of teachers is continuing which is considered for their promotions. One can easily comprehend that the instrument of self-appraisal can be rarely objective, more so because it impinges upon one's own personal gains.

Now, Chadha Committee (UGC appointed Pay Review Committee), while reviewing pay-scales of teachers, in accordance with guidelines of Sixth Pay Commission, to be implemented w.e.f. 1st January, 2006, has also recommended in its report dated 3rd October, 2008, that the evaluation of performance of teachers by the students, with regard to their teaching capabilities, should be carried out. Chadha Committee observed that such evaluation of teachers should be done once a year and should be communicated to the teacher concerned and should also be made available to the selection committee at the time of promotion of the teacher. Normally, end result of evaluation of teachers by the students, should culminate in instilling greater sense of responsibility among them besides simultaneously providing necessary feedback to the concerned teachers which should enable them to discharge their primary duty of teaching in more conducive manner. But again raging

debate is on, whether assessment of teachers' teaching should be carried out or not. Even if assessment of teachers by the students is made a reality, various kinds of issues will be raised which will give rise to so many controversies and allow so many conditional waivers that the very purpose, for which appraisal of teachers' teaching by the students is being introduced, will itself get defeated. Presently, many a time, teachers do not care seriously whether their pupils learn or not because it does not have any detrimental effect on their personal well-being.

Now, I briefly touch upon the attitude of administrators of government-aided educational institutions. Many a time, heads of educational institutions, viz., Vice-chancellors/ Principals are themselves appointed with undue interventions. Members of the selection boards which are entrusted with the responsibility of appointment or promotion of college teachers and university teachers, seldom perform their jobs with full sincerity. Quite often, they have their personal agenda to meet through the process of appointment of teachers and other staff. Sometimes they favour their acquaintances in appointments, sometimes they do it to gain outright material benefits, sometimes they just do it to foster a mutually beneficial relationship with their counter-parts at other places in the spirit of give and take, and sometimes they do it to keep their places secured in the selection boards or else they themselves might be shunted out from those selection committees, as now corruption is deeply entrenched in public life in India. And in the process, losers are the educational institutions which are denied services of the meritorious faculty-members.

Now, I discuss the role of the students who comprise the last but the most important block of an educational institution. People seldom discuss as to how students can be made more receptive towards the education which is delivered to them

in an educational institution. Many would argue that owing to career prospects, students are always eager to learn for advancement of their knowledge. But I feel that more often than not, it is otherwise. Most of the students put in as much effort as is required for fulfilment of their immediate goals, viz., passing an examination and some how securing a job during campus placement or afterwards. One of the most glaring examples of it can be cited from the general attitude of class XII students, who will put up their hardest efforts while preparing for Joint Entrance Examination for Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and once they secure admission there, their effort level would come down. Earlier, they want to ensure admission in a government-aided IIT, where they are imparted high quality education, which is highly subsidized, but once they secure admission there, their motivation level drops. The very same students when they go to U.S.A. for higher studies, they again start working harder. Many would contend that they perform better abroad because they find better working environment there. I feel that they work harder abroad because they pay dearly for the cost of their education and thus easily understand that the opportunity granted to them for learning is not to be wasted. In India, usually, less than one tenth of the cost of higher education (undergraduate/postgraduate) is realized from the students, in a government-aided educational institution.

Generally, it costs Rs.50,000/- to Rs.200,000/- per student per year to the Government, depending upon the academic discipline, for providing higher education in a medium level government-aided educational institution, whereas such students are charged, each, around Rs.5,000/- to Rs.20,000/- per year. Even, some state governments of our country spend between Rs.12,000/- to Rs.20,000/- per child per year in a government primary school, besides the cost of land and

building of the school. **One can provide free education up to secondary level for public good but for the higher education, fruits of which are mostly enjoyed by the concerned students privately, its cost must be charged from the students, not for the sake of any monetary profit but at least to promote further the cause of higher education in the country. So, it is argued that actual cost of higher education should be charged from the students. One should not fear that it would take away higher education from the reach of the students as, now, they should be charged for the cost of their education only after they have finished their studies, and while they pursue for their studies, they should be provided free education, of course, without any fees.**

Now, a question arises as to how the cost of education can be realized from the students after they have completed their studies. It is not difficult any more, because owing to advancement of I.T. enabled services, now, a person can be easily traced in India. Thus, cost of his education can be directly debited from his salary in the same way as Income Tax is deducted from the salary through monthly instalments. Those who remain self employed, they can deposit instalment for their cost of education along with their Income Tax return or through some similar mechanism. Those who want to proceed abroad for further studies; they should pay back for the cost of their education in advance or pledge collateral security for the same. Those who do not find any employment with good earnings or do not earn at all, they, too, should not be exempted from paying for the cost of their higher education. For them monthly or annual deductions should be made from their basic comprehensive social security package which is proposed for every citizen of the country in PART I of this book, and this process of deduction should continue till they clear their dues.

No one should think that the pay-back for the cost of higher education delivered to a person is any kind of hardship to him. Because the person concerned would be paying only for a thing which he has already availed of and, now, reaping its rich dividend which should continue throughout his life. Moreover, this pay-back will help in spreading and strengthening higher education in India for the benefit of his remaining brethren, which will make this country more prosperous in due course of time and its rich reward will be enjoyed by one and all.

I understand that this pay-back for the cost of higher education can play a very dominant role as well as create an enabling environment which can facilitate purposeful and much needed reforms in the higher education sector of India, in one comprehensive sweep, as is illustrated below:

1. **Students will not waste away their time during their studies because they will be aware about the true cost of their education in the beginning itself. They will also know in advance that they will have to pay-back for it after their studies. Therefore, they will not fritter away the golden period of their lives, when they can naturally acquire skills/knowledge in the most efficient manner. Students will take admission for higher studies only when they need it and intend to pursue their studies seriously. They will not join a college or a university just for fun and joy-making or continue it as a stop-gap arrangement while pursuing for their other interests.**
2. When the GOI will be spared from the burden of meeting ever-increasing recurring cost for maintaining already established educational institutions, it will have enough spare money to open up new educational

institutions. Since, now, it can spend more money on establishment of new institutions and thereafter it can pass over its control to selected educational bodies (public or private or co-operative or corporate) for smooth functioning and professional management under regulated guidelines. It will increase availability of more educational institutions which will charge only up to the cost of education and not fleece students as many private un-aided institutions of higher education are resorting to presently. Since, now-a-days, when the students do not get admission in a good government-aided institution, they are forced to seek admission in private un-aided colleges where they are charged exorbitantly high fees; however, their richer brethren also have an option to go abroad for pursuing higher education.

It is just to point out that for the fear of mounting financial burden, due to high recurring cost of running educational institutions, the Government is not establishing fresh colleges/universities regularly, which could meet the demand of ever growing population of our country besides fulfilling the increased desire of higher studies among masses, thereby, denying opportunities for higher education even for many meritorious students. Such a situation causes undue stress amongst most of the aspiring students and their families. Thus, setting up of more educational institutions for higher studies by the GOI, can alleviate problems of our young people and unburden a lot of their anxiety in this respect.

- 3. When students are not required to pay for higher education, no meritorious student, howsoever poor will ever face difficulty in receiving higher education.**

Instead, all the meritorious students will be preferred for granting admission, since after their studies, chances of their early and decent employment will be more which will ensure earlier pay-back for the cost of their education, which in turn will directly benefit the institutions from where they received their higher education. So meritorious students will not be denied admission and fairness in the selection process during admissions will get a boost.

4. Another benefit of opening up of more and more educational institutions by the GOI would be that private un-aided educational institutions, which are mostly set up to mint money by fleecing students, will have some kind of check in charging fees from the students, as now students will have more options to pursue higher studies. Thus the fee burden of those students, who do not get admission in government-aided educational institutions, will also reduce.
5. **As the money realized from the students is to be transferred to their *alma mater* for paying salaries to their teachers, staff, and other recurring expenses, this factor will act as a big catalyst in increasing interest of the teachers towards their students because the better they teach, the more their students will learn, which will help these students in getting decent employment earlier, after completion of their studies. And decent employment of these students will ensure quick pay-back of the cost of their education, which will improve financial health and growth of the concerned educational institution and its teachers. So teachers will try their level best to make sure that their students are knowledgeable enough to get good employment after their studies.**

Similarly, now, educational administrators would like to recruit best teachers as well as to admit most meritorious students. At the same time, students will also like to study in those institutions where best teaching is being imparted, so that chances of their employability with decent pay-package increase, because, now, education is not free and thus they would not like to pay for a thing which does not yield value to them. In this cycle of (i) appointment of teachers and staff, (ii) admission of students, (iii) teaching, (iv) learning, (v) placement for jobs, (vi) pay-back of the cost of education, everyone's interest will get inseparably inter-twined, which will infuse transparency in the entire process and usher in a new era where everyone would feel responsible for his actions as well as can be held accountable for the lapses on his part. Because now the teaching-learning process would be performance-oriented and will be judged by the third party, i.e., the employer, who will measure the quality and suitability of the students for his organization. The employer will not be interested for the welfare of the student or the teacher or the educational administrator, he will be interested in the welfare of his own organization. Thus, it will inculcate team spirit among the teachers, the educational administrators and the students, for achieving pinnacle of success, together. Such a scenario can certainly galvanize rapid growth of higher education by leaps and bounds and in turn the dream of establishing world-class universities in India could also be realized sooner than later.

6. Issues, like, assessment of performance of the teachers by the students, which have generated a lot of heat

Some Other Needed Reforms

these days, will become irrelevant, leaving no scope for any kind of debate thereon. In the new scenario, teachers would themselves like to receive feed-back from their students for inducing improvement in their teaching methodology, so that it could help them in increasing learning level of their pupils, which alone can push up chances of employment of these students in a competitive market. This way, our universities would be able to churn out graduates and post graduates who would be knowledgeable in the real sense and fairly equipped to add value as well as enhance competitiveness of the organization where they are employed.

Time and again, University Grants Commission and other bodies have stressed the need for accreditation of Universities/Colleges by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and establishment of Internal Quality Assurance Cell within Universities/Colleges for enhancing quality of higher education in the country. There has also been a demand from several quarters that the role of NAAC should be expanded to bring teaching and research departments of the universities in its ambit, too. But, I feel that these measures can at best bring only cosmetic changes in the existing system of higher education and it would be too much to expect that these steps can result in drastic improvement in the quality of higher education in the country. First, because assessment and accreditation by NAAC can neither coax teachers to improve their teaching skills and commitment towards students nor it can shake off the veil of complacency among the students towards their studies and make them realize the true value of the costly education which is being imparted to them by our country, while it has scarce resources but many pressing problems to be addressed for alleviating sufferings of masses.

Secondly, with the gradual expansion of accreditation activities, the process of accreditation will itself get diluted. Educational institutions will short-change themselves to brace up before their assessment and accreditation is due. Moreover, networking instincts of human beings will come to the fore thus casting aspersions on the entire process of accreditation of Universities/ Colleges, itself. Thus, excessive dependence on the rating agencies for improving quality of higher education in our country will not meet with success in the long run. Last, but not the least, most of our students do not have much choice as far as getting admission in a government-aided educational institution is concerned, as the intake capacity of these institutions falls short by a wide margin vis-à-vis the number of students who queue up to seek admission there, thus, the rating process of accreditation bodies, like, NAAC, has little significance, since whatever is available, is grabbed by the waiting students.

However, a far more effective strategy would be to make it mandatory for educational institutions to disclose data with regard to the status of placement/employment or upward mobility of their alumni, because this is the actual indicator of the true quality of that institution as it cannot be tinkered with by a few individuals, whereas there is fairly high possibility that rating by an accreditation body can be influenced as it is dependent on a smaller number of individuals. Such disclosures can help students' community in making up its mind regarding the true standing of these educational institutions.

The first and foremost question which arises in one's mind is with regard to feasibility and sustainability of the scheme, which envisages that, first, higher education should be provided free, and later, its cost should be charged from the concerned students. People would say that it will not be feasible in view of the past track record of the Government

where it has been found too soft on the loan defaulters and indifferent towards those who pay-back regularly. People will question what will happen if pay-back for the cost of higher education is received only from a minuscule percentage of students and others are unable to pay-back of their own or simply express their inability to pay-back by concealing their actual income. My answer is as under: As per the conservative estimates, at least 20 percent students, who receive higher education, are able to garner a good job in public/private sector or successful in establishing a profitable venture, and thus they would be earning more than Rs.20,000/- per month. Accordingly, on an average a sum of Rs.10,000/- per month or Rs.0.12 million per annum, can be charged from such persons. An income of Rs.20,000/- per month is estimated conservatively, as about Rs.20,000/- per month is payable, even to a person who has been appointed on a post which is equivalent to the rank of an Assistant Teacher in a government secondary school, in accordance with Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Supposing, Rs.0.1 million per annum is spent on a student, for duration of 4 to 5 years, for his higher-education, then he can easily be charged about Rs.0.12 million per annum, thus his pay-back for cost of higher education will be over in about 4 years. In this fashion, at least 20 percent cost of higher education can be collected by the Government in 4 years. Now, considering that another 30 percent passed-out students will earn around Rs.10,000/- per month, then at least a sum of Rs.5,000/- per month or Rs.60,000/- per annum can be charged from such persons. Thus, additional 15 percent cost of higher education can be realized by the Government in first 4 years and another 15 percent cost can be collected in the next 4 years.

Now, considering that remaining 50 percent do not earn enough or their earnings cannot be traced in black and white

then for these remaining 50 percent, a sum of Rs.1,000/- per annum (to be enhanced year after year as per the inflation index) can be deducted out of their admissible basic CSS package, which should be provided to all the citizens of the country as a universal welfare measure for them as discussed in PART I of the book. In this fashion, supposing that the Government realizes Rs.40,000/- to Rs.50,000/- from their basic CSS package over a period of 40 years or so even then it can realize up to 10 percent of the total cost of their higher education. However, there should be a stipulation that if such people transact any financial deal later in their lives, like, sale or purchase or inheritance of any property, motor-driven vehicle, etc., then first charge from their income should be adjusted towards their outstanding cost of higher education. In this way, the Government will be able to recover much more than the above estimated conservative figure of 10 percent towards cost of higher-education even from those 50 percent people who would express their inability to pay-back for the cost of their higher-education. However, a normal person, who receives formal higher education for five years, is expected to earn at least Rs.10,000/- per month, in due course, after completion of his studies.

So the next question would be as to how an educational institution will function without recovering the total cost incurred by it in delivering education to students. For this, my submission is that presently, also, the Government is able to realize less than 10 percent of the total expenditure incurred by it towards the higher education and still maintaining its educational institutions, therefore, the scenario suggested above is much better which enables the Government to realize more than 50 percent cost of higher education from the beneficiaries in four to eight years as well as reap a bigger reward by inducing a culture of academic accountability

among the teachers as well as the students. So, now, the Government can maintain its educational institutions for the initial four to five years, and thereafter these institutions should be paid, only in proportion to the remittances collected from the students who received education from these institutions.

Moreover, once the concept of pay-back for the cost of higher education comes into operation, remittances would start pouring in the government kitty from the established educational institutions, too. It will enable the Government to enhance financial allocation for the higher education sector, which in turn can help in augmenting deficit in the infrastructure of the new as well as existing educational institutions of the country.

Undoubtedly, the help and the support of the Government as well as some regulations are very much required for the long term growth of education in the country, from which no Government must shirk its obligation lest it should risk the well-being of the entire nation. **The only thing which requires change on the part of the Government is that its help and support should be applied in equal measure towards all the people of the country, instead of the present day approach, whereby it doles out subsidies for a few privileged individuals only. Presently, the system of higher education is skewed in favour of those who are more empowered in their respective categories (General/SCs/STs/OBCs). First of all, those few who hail from empowered families are likely to receive better education in their childhood which in turn helps them in securing admission in better educational institutions, with low fee-structure. Later, it helps them in securing a better job which naturally improves their standing in the society even more. Thus, presently, the**

empowered ones receive higher subsidy and opportunity for higher growth vis-à-vis those who were under privileged since birth, which is not fair by any count. The feeling of due pay-back to the nation will also arouse the passion of patriotism and fervour of social responsibility among concerned people, which I understand will foster trust among people of all the sections of the country, as no one will be seen as an oppressor as everyone will have equal opportunity for growth and empowerment.

If we charge for the cost of higher education, it will help in creating a conducive environment, whereby the following twin objectives can be achieved: (i) academic accountability of the teachers as well as students will increase thus raising the quality of higher education in a sequential manner and (ii) money collected from those who have benefitted from the higher education, can supplement government efforts in spreading higher education in the full length and breadth of this country, which is the ultimate panacea to remove all the ills of this country in a shortest possible time.

If the ideas discussed above are acted upon, it can automatically initiate self sustainable reforms in higher education. The problem of management of education will get solved of its own. Now, educational institutions will be more inclined to manage themselves well or else students will desert them. Re-orientation of education will take place, thereby churning out graduates who will be equipped with meaningful education which will increase their adaptability and suitability towards job-market. It is not that the education meant for job-market is always devoid of ethics and human values, because those who will lack in ethics and human values, chances of their sustaining employment will also erode thereby denting remittances to their *alma mater*, too. Thus

educational institutions will make every effort to impart value-based education to their students. So it will not induce mere commercialization of education, instead, it will bring the cult of cost-effective, purposeful, and value-based education in our universities. Of course, some disciplines, where employability is less, will lose out. But where is the need to have compromises and to practise socialism in matters like education which itself is concerned with the empowerment of the whole society. Those disciplines which have lesser use in the present day scenario should be left to grow at their own pace. Of course, the Government can pay special attention for growth of such disciplines, albeit at limited places, so that these disciplines are not sidelined completely. There may be many more such issues which will need fine tuning but all of these issues can be handled, provided the GOI displays courage and adopt above mentioned pragmatic policies and thereby initiate real change towards improving quality of higher education in the country.

In the end, it is reiterated that charging for the cost of higher education should not be looked down upon as a kind of business of the Government to spin money, but for investing more and more resources for providing quality education to whosoever desires it, the Government needs enormous amount of money. And the money received from those who have already been provided higher education, earlier, and now reaping its reward, will only help to a great extent in this endeavour and will ensure a healthy and sustainable education system in India, where everyone will discharge his responsibility in the best possible manner and as per his best capacity.

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