Three Solutions for Reforming Indian Higher Education

Rahul Choudaha[a,*]

[a]*World Education Services, USA*

Introduction

Is Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) a university? What is the difference between a deemed-to-be-university and a state private university? How does University of Pune "affiliate" more than 600 colleges? How does the authority and control of multiple regulatory bodies differ?

These are some of confusing and frustrating questions that researchers, policy-makers, and foreign institutions who are interested in India have to confront (Choudaha 2013). It exposes the complexity of the current condition of higher education in India. The bigger implication of this complexity is how it threatens human talent potential and economic growth. A recent report from the World Economic Forum (2010, 23) states:

> More than 100mn people from India—the equivalent of the combined labor forces of the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Spain—are projected to join the workforce by 2020. With the youngest age profile among large economies and the largest national workforce, India holds great potential to become one of the most attractive talent providers.

In order to accomplish this, it is necessary that India put its postsecondary education system in order.

Context and Complexity of Indian Higher Education

Indian higher education has expanded at a breakneck speed. Between 2007-2008 and 2010-2011, postsecondary student enrollment grew by nearly five mil-

lion students (see Table 1). In the same five-year period, the number of institutions increased by nearly 10,000. However, this much needed expansion came at the expense of quality, primarily due to an inadequate and incoherent policy and legal framework.

TABLE 1

GROWTH IN ENROLLMENT BY TYPE OF INSTITUTIONS

Category	2007-2008	2011-2012	Increase	Growth Rate (%)
Central Institutions				
Degree Awarding Institutions	75	138	63	13.0
Colleges	58	69	11	3.5
Diploma Institutions	14	24	10	11.4
Sub Total	147	231	84	9.5
State Institutions				
Degree Awarding Institutions	253	316	63	4.5
Colleges	9,500	13,024	3,524	6.5
Diploma Institutions	2,151	3,207	1,056	8.3
Sub Total	11,904	16,547	4,643	6.8
Private Unaided Institutions				
Degree Awarding Institutions	80	191	111	19.0
Colleges	13,706	19,930	6,224	7.8
Diploma Institutions	7,220	9,541	2,321	5.7
Sub Total	21,006	29,662	8,656	7.2
Total	**33,057**	**46,446**	**13,383**	**7.0**

Source: XIIth Five-Year Plan of the Government of India.

The most challenging problem of higher education institutions in India is funding. According to the policy framework, higher education institutions in India are required to have a non-profit structure, irrespective of how they are funded—by public or private sources. At the same time, degree-awarding power rests only with universities as specified by the University Grants Commission (UGC) under Section 22(3) of the *University Grants Commission Act, 1956*.

The Act has resulted in a unique and complex system of hundreds of "teaching" colleges—private or

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public—"affiliated" with public universities. Public universities themselves can be funded by state or central sources. In order to achieve the goals of expanding access to higher education within the constraints of public funding, privately-funded universities were allowed. These private universities in turn can be approved by state acts or central authority (UGC). This complex framework resulted in four types of universities in India as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Typology of Universities in India

Types of universities	Number of universities	College affiliation?	Funding	Regulatory authority
Central Universities	44	Y	Public	Central
State Universities	299	Y	Public	State
Private Universities	140	N	Private	State
Deemed to be Universities	130	N	Mostly Private	Central
Total Universities	*613*			

Source: University Grants Commission (2012).

The complexity of the Indian higher education system gets further compounded due to large number of regulatory bodies who sometimes have overlapping scope of work resulting in power struggle and additional confusion for stakeholders. Consider the recent example of conflict between UGC and All India Council for Technical Education or AICTE on the regulatory jurisdiction for management programs in India (Pathak and Balchandran 2013).

Another outcome of this complexity is the nexus of politics and business of higher education, which has given birth to pseudo-not-for-profit institutions. As the regulations require colleges and universities to be registered as a non-profit legal entity, many private colleges, which offer high-demand engineering and management programs, are found to be engaged with financial engineering to siphon off the "profit."

The previous Minister of Human Resources Development, who is also responsible for higher education, has attempted to address these challenges by proposing a dozen legislative bills, including the *Foreign Educa-*

tion Institutions Bill 2010, the *Higher Education and Research Bill* 2011, and the *Prohibition of Unfair Practices in Educational Institutions* 2010. Unfortunately, most of the bills were still far from seeing the light of the day and had remained unapproved due to political divisiveness and general elections in 2014.

With the proposal of the Foreign Education Institutions Bill, foreign universities bills, which had been in conversation in its various forms for nearly a decade, became a topic of discussion again in 2010. However, no progression was made as the bills had been languishing in a political stalemate. Regulatory bodies themselves are seeking ways to work around politics of Indian higher education. In May 2013, UGC announced that the existing and future partnerships would require their approval to offer any joint degrees and twinning (Kumar 2013). The vacuum of policy framework resulted many twinning partnerships and a few branch campuses have started without any regulatory oversight. Unsurprisingly, quality is at risk and the students are often deceived for the high cost and the lack of recognition of the degree they earn.

Overall, the regulatory environment for Indian higher education is complex and fails to improve its quality and addresses the deficiencies. Regarding this matter, I am proposing three recommendations that go beyond the rigmarole of politics and power struggle in higher education.

Recommendations for Improving the State of Indian Higher Education

The three recommendations to navigate the complexity of Indian higher education system are: First, enforce higher standards of transparency and disclosures for private higher education institutions; second, strengthen the vocational and doctoral education pipeline; third, professionalize the sector through stronger institutional responsibility.

Improve Transparency of Information for Students

One of the biggest and often overlooked challenges of Indian higher education is the lack of transparency in

accessing credible and current information about institutional performance. The policy reform directions are seriously limited by its political approach of using control and bureaucracy as the way of assuring quality rather than using transparency for empowering students and fostering competition.

One specific recommendation to achieve goals of transparency is to mandate high standards of institutional performance data disclosures by institutions. These data are uploaded to a user-friendly and easy-to-use national database. Hence, students are able to make informed choices based on the data they obtained.

Let me elaborate on the case of regulation in the financial system. How is transparency ensured in publicly traded companies? It is through mandatory and easily-available-audited financial reports coupled with the strict oversight by the financial regulator. In contrast, the parallel information of institutional performance for higher education institutions is unavailable. This results in all sorts of academic, financial, regulatory, and marketing malpractices.

As applied in the US educational system, transparency through data reporting and information sharing is an important policy-tool enforced by the U.S. Department of Education where the National Center for Education Statistics collects, collates, analyzes, and reports on American education. Data reported by the institutions are uploaded to a free website (CollegeNavigator), which enables students to search and compare colleges based on various parameters.

As the students have easy access to comparable information on each college institutional performance, they can decide the programs they are pursuing and in the process creating a state of enhanced competition among institutions. In addition, policy-makers and researchers will also have access to rich data in order to improve the educational system.

Strengthen the Doctoral and Vocational Education Pipeline

The two extremes of postsecondary education, vocational and doctoral, are facing acute quantitative and qualitative challenges. At the qualitative front, there are serious concerns about the learning experiences and hence the outcomes are sub-par. Likewise, at the quantitative front it is difficult to attract the students to pursue programs at the two extreme—vocational or doctoral. While improving these two challenges, officials often neglect two important aspects. First, providing a policy framework that facilitates better fit of students with their career path and second, attracting and preparing faculty who can offer quality educational experience.

Vocational education is impaled on the quantitative front by the large gap between demand and supply. According to the Ministry of Labor and Employment, Government of India, while 12.8 million people are added to the labor force annually, vocational training is available to only a miniscule 4.3 million.

On the qualitative scale lies the dismal skill development and training scenario. A report by the World Bank released in 2008 notes that over 60 percent of graduates from the vocational stream in India remain unemployed even three years after graduation.

This quality gap in vocational education has resulted in a disproportionally large number of students opting for college degrees and resulting in graduates oversupply. At the same time, the quality of college education is also challenged; hence, many college graduates remain unemployed. In addition, industry is clamoring for skilled labor force. This unfortunate mismatch would have been better resolved with an improved vocational education system.

If vocational training is in shambles, the doctoral educational system also struggles with the issues of quality and accessibility. According to the University Grants Commission, nearly 16,000 doctoral degrees were awarded in 2010-11—a disproportionately small number for one of the largest education systems in the world enrolling 20 million students.

Despite such small number of PhD enrollments, concerns for quality and rigor of training have been growing (Rajput 2013). There have been cases of poor quality assurance and large number of doctoral degrees awarded through the distance learning model. India is in a precarious situation of balancing quality and quantity for doctoral degrees.

Professionalize the Higher Education Sector

Higher education services are considered public goods with a strong sociopolitical connection. In addition, they are highly experiential in nature with information asymmetry between consumers (students) and service providers (institutions). This makes higher education to be one of the highly regulated sectors. Teixeir (2006, 14) notes that

> the adoption of market forces as a steering mechanism for higher education is unlikely to engender the expected efficiency benefits for society unless a more effective regulatory framework can be developed to address the problem of imperfect information on the quality of teaching and student learning.

While regulation is required to developing the system in India, there are bigger opportunities for self-regulation through professionalization of the sector. Jongbloed (2004, 94) argues that "self-regulation is preferable to government regulation when specific knowledge or information is primarily held by the sector itself." He adds that "in higher education, the norms of academic professionalism act as systems of self-regulation" (94). This could be achieved through professional associations, which in the process mutually define and monitor the agreed quality standards. It will also provide systematic opportunities of continuous learning and professional development for faculty and administrators.

Many people consider a career in higher education as their last resort. This makes it difficult to attract, retain, and reward more people with the best talent. It has also been constrained by the "non-for-profit" requirement, which has kept salary levels low, especially for private institutions.

Currently, the administrative positions in higher education are not recognized as a "profession" and hence there is a lack of formal training and corresponding deficiency in the quality and impact of the services. There is an urgent need to systematically develop leaders and managers who understand the context, con-

straints, and challenges of education. Professional associations are the key as they will encourage quality improvement and prepare higher education specialists for a changing environment.

Conclusion

Indian higher education has expanded at a clipping rate and policy framework has failed to adapt and change its complex system. The system has remained embroiled in politics of policymaking and suffered in terms of quality. Given the pace of growth and unmet demand, the success of Indian higher education lies in adaptable and innovative solutions. A focus on enforcing higher standards of transparency, strengthening of the vocational and doctoral education pipeline, and professionalization of the sector through stronger institutional responsibility would help in reprioritizing efforts and working around the complexities.

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