

# Downsizing Higher Education

## An Emergent Crisis

*The issues involved in the turmoil in higher education – sustained autonomy, maintenance of academic standards, greater availability and accessibility to deprived and weak sections of society – are fundamental to the continued health of the higher education system of the country. The declining importance being assigned to this sector, in stark contrast to developed countries, has created disparities that are increasing over time. The ongoing process of dismantling the higher education system in the country has to be reversed if the gap between India and the developed countries is to be bridged.*

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Recent months have witnessed turmoil in the education sector, with the all-India education bandh – called by the Federation of Central Universities Teachers' Associations, the All India Federation of Universities and college teachers' organisations and school teachers' organisations – being observed on August 13, 2002 which was followed by a week-long strike from September 10, 2000 by 7,000 teachers of Delhi University, with more intensive actions likely in the offing. These agitations by the teaching community are a response to a series of measures initiated by the ministry of human resource development (MHRD) and the University Grants Commission (UGC), which have adverse implications for the standards of teaching and accessibility to higher education for large sections of the population. While these measures will directly or indirectly affect all institutions of higher education, the immediate brunt of the offensive is being borne by the University of Delhi that, both in terms of its size and high standards of academic excellence, is a premier institution of the country. The university also has the strongest teachers' association in the country, which has been at the forefront of many struggles in the past. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the attacks have been directed first towards those sections of the teaching community who have a tradition of resisting measures aimed

at downgrading the structure of higher education

### Orchestrated Attack

Three distinct yet related developments may be said to have precipitated the current crisis. The first of these was the forwarding by the UGC of certain recommendations made by the MHRD which included; (a) complete freeze on recruitment in all autonomous organisations, (b) ban on creation of posts at all levels, (c) an ad-hoc cut of 10 per cent in total staff strengths and (d) abolition of all vacant posts which are older than one year. These recommendations were supposedly based on the Expenditure Reforms Commission's (ERC) fifth report that was submitted on March 7, 2001, and covered the departments of posts and supplies as well as autonomous institutions. The recommendations of the ERC in respect of the latter were that pending a review "there should be a freeze on recruitment of staff in all the autonomous organisations at all levels. In addition, an ad hoc cut of 10 per cent in the total staff strength should be imposed, in all those institutions in which there have been substantial increase in staff strength in the recent years and/or in which the proportion of group C and D officials is quite high" (pages 7 and 26, Part III).

Three caveats should be noted in respect of the MHRD decisions based on the fifth report of the ERC. The first relates to the fact that the MHRD fiat, as conveyed to the universities and colleges, makes no

mention of its restrictive applicability as noted earlier. A different qualification relates to the fact that, as the ERC report records, "in spite of repeated reminders no information was received from the ministry of HRD in respect of 109 out of 114 autonomous Institutions under it" (page 15, Part III). With 96 per cent of MHRD institutions excluded from the purview, the very relevance of the fifth report of the ERC to educational institutions under the MHRD may be disputed. The third caveat relates to the fact that the ninth report of the ERC, submitted on September 18, 2001, and which is more relevant than the fifth as it deals directly with issues relating to the MHRD and the educational sector, makes no mention whatsoever of any general downsizing of this sector. In fact the report states that "...higher education and technical education are also important. This is because educated and skilled manpower for national system becomes available from the products of higher education and technical education. Therefore for efficiency and productivity in the national system, the higher and technical education sectors need to be strengthened in the coming years. These sectors will also need to be continuously expanded...." (page 2, Part III). The report goes on to say "the central government and the state governments will need to continue to *strengthen* the secondary and higher education sectors for many years while of course according to that high priority to the elementary education sector" (Part III, pages 15-16, emphasis authors'). There is indeed a section in the report that recommends a reduction in posts but this is exclusively in relation to the high ratio of non-academic to academic posts. Given these, the MHRD construal of all of the above to recommend a freeze on recruitment, ad hoc cut in posts and abolition of vacant posts necessitates questioning of its underlying motives.

The second development underlying the crisis is the UGC's directives in respect of workload in universities and colleges in the University of Delhi, which seeks, within the overall workload norm of 40 hours a week, a rather untenable reallocation between 'teaching' and 'non-teaching' components, despite the overall ceiling of three hours of teaching per day. To pressurise the university, the UGC has stipulated that till these issues are resolved only 80 per cent of the teaching vacancies will be filled and that too on a temporary basis. The motive behind this mandate

seems to be clear – the UGC’s position is that as per the new workload norms the colleges have 35 per cent excess staff. This may be termed as the second component in the ongoing offensive.

The third element in this well-orchestrated attack on higher education is also directed, at this juncture, on the colleges of Delhi University. The UGC has reportedly taken a decision, based on an ERC recommendation, to transfer from itself to ‘an appropriate agency designated by the state government of Delhi’ the responsibility for determination and disbursement of funds – along with the funds – to Delhi colleges. The ninth report of the ERC has, in fact, the following: “Now that Delhi has a full-fledged state government it is recommended that the responsibility for determination and disbursement of maintenance grant to Delhi colleges should be transferred along with the funds to an appropriate agency designated by the state government of Delhi” (para 2.29, Part III).

The Delhi colleges are a constituent part of Delhi University, which also happens to be a central university and the UGC has the task of determining maintenance grants and disbursing it to central universities. Transferring this duty to another institution therefore implies duplication of agencies for the same responsibility. An implicit corollary might, therefore, be the transference of the colleges to a state university. How will they be funded? If they are to be financed from the central budget then status quo makes for greater sense – colleges of a central university being funded by the centre, with the UGC being the disbursing agency. However, if funding is to be from the state budget then there emerges the critical issue of whether the state government has the resources to ensure adequate funds for the optimal functioning of the colleges which, incidentally, cater to students from all over the country.

The current state of centre-state relations is such that regional finances are already severely constrained and likely to become more so. The third report of the 11th Finance Commission has recommended a monitorable fiscal reforms programmes for all states and the creation of an incentive fund from which fiscal performance-based grants should be made available to all states. The fiscal correction measures in the Tenth Plan approach paper suggest that the states’ fiscal deficit be reduced from the base-line figure of 2.4 per cent of GDP to 1.5 per cent and their revenue deficit

from 1.1 to 0.3 per cent. Under these circumstances it is only too likely that there would be an automatic process of gradual downsizing, consequent to the colleges being denied adequate funds.

## Report of the Task Force

The issue of whether there exists any ‘optimal’ size of the higher education sector and, consequently, whether downsizing is required is difficult to resolve without examining the contribution of this sector to the process of overall socio-economic development of the country. The report of the task force on higher education and society (2000), which was convened by the World Bank and UNESCO had this to say about various aspects of higher education;

*Contribution to socio-economic development:* Higher education simultaneously improves individual lives and enriches wider society; raises wages and productivity, making both individuals and countries richer; encourages independence and initiative, both valuable commodities in the knowledge society; creates educated people and environment in which economic development is possible... good governance, strong institutions, and a developed infrastructure are not possible without highly educated people... promotes an open and

meritocratic civil society and values ... embodies norms of social interaction such as open debate and argumentative reason... promotes rejection of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religious belief, or social class..... a society that wishes to build or maintain a pluralistic, accountable democracy will benefit from a strong higher education sector.

*Priority to be given to higher education:* ...the quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions, and its accessibility to the wider economy, is becoming increasingly critical to national competitiveness... urgent action to expand the quantity and improve the quality of higher education in developing countries should be a top development priority... while the benefits of higher education are continuing to rise, the costs of being left behind are also growing... higher education is no longer a luxury; it is essential to future national social and economic development... Without improved human capital, countries will inevitably fall behind and experience intellectual and economic marginalisation and isolation... in the developed world education is a major political priority... human capital in the US is now estimated to be at least three times more important than physical capital. *Need for public institutions of higher learning:* ...developing countries are currently

**Table 1: Higher Education Development Indicators – Comparison across Countries**

Country	Overall Education (Education Index (2000))		Higher Education							
	Value Ranks as of		Gross Enrolment as Percentage of Relevant Age Group				Number of Students Per 100,000 Inhabitants			
	Per Index	Per Index	1980		1997		1980		1996	
			Per cent	Index <sup>1</sup>	Per cent	Index <sup>1</sup>	Number	Index <sup>1</sup>	Number	Index <sup>1</sup>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Developed Countries										
Sweden	0.99	1	31	6.2	50	7.1	2423	4.7	3116	4.9
Australia	0.99	3	25	5.0	80	11.4	2222	4.3	5682	8.9
Netherlands	0.99	4	29	5.8	47	6.7	2546	4.9	3018	4.7
UK	0.99	6	19	3.8	52	7.4	1468	2.9	3237	5.1
Norway	0.98	8	26	5.2	62	8.9	2546	4.9	4239	6.6
US	0.98	10	56	11.2	81	11.6	5311	10.3	5341	8.4
France	0.97	12	25	5.0	51	7.3	1998	3.9	3541	5.6
Germany	0.97	13	27	5.4	47	6.7	2110	4.1	2603	4.1
Asian/African Countries										
South Korea	0.95	18	15	3.0	68	9.7	1698	3.3	6106	9.6
Japan	0.93	25	31	6.2	43	6.1	2065	4.0	3131	4.9
Philippines	0.91	40	24	4.8	35	5.0	2641	5.1	2958	4.6
Singapore	0.87	63	8	1.6	39	5.6	963	1.9	2730	4.3
Thailand	0.84	80	15	3.0	21	3.0	1284	2.5	2252	3.5
Malaysia	0.80	93	4	0.8	11	1.6	419	0.8	1048	1.6
China	0.80	96	2	0.4	6	0.9	116	0.2	473	0.7
Indonesia	0.79	101	4	0.8	11	1.6	367	0.7	1157	1.8
Namibia	0.81	91	-	-	9	1.3	300 <sup>2</sup>	0.6	735	1.2
Zimbabwe	0.81	92	1	0.2	7	1.0	197	0.4	661	1.0
India	0.57	141 <sup>3</sup>	5	1.0	7	1.0	515	1.0	638	1.0

Notes: (1) The indices in columns 5, 7, 9 and 11 are derived with the values for India as the base. (2) Relates to 1990. (3) Out of a total of 173 countries.

Source: For columns 2 and 3, *The Human Development Report 2002* (UNDP), for columns 4 and 6, *World Development Indicators 2000* (World Bank) and for columns 8 and 10, *World Education Report 1995 and 2000* (UNESCO).

under great pressure to meet increased demand for higher education, and many are finding it hard to keep up... they are becoming increasingly reliant on fee-based education and private, for-profit providers... in this environment education becomes more narrowly focused on providing a skilled labour pool for the immediate needs of the economy... Market forces predominate and the public benefits of – and responsibilities for – higher education recede from view... the private (for-profit) sector has problems establishing quality programmes that address anything other than short-term, market-driven needs.

## India Lags Behind

It is evident that a strong and well-established higher education sector confers immense benefits to the nation. If the state of development of this sector is critical to 'national competitiveness', with low levels leading to 'intellectual and economic marginalisation and isolation', what is the level of its development in India relative to other countries? The overall education index, one of the three indices on which the human development index is built, and which is based on the adult literacy rate and the combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio, has a value of 0.57 for India for the year 2000 which gives it the extremely low rank of 141 out of a total of 173 countries (cols 2 and 3, Table 1).

Development indicators specific to higher education reveal a comparable dismal story that is worsening over time. The enrolment ratio in higher education was 6.0 per cent in India for the year 1985 as compared to figures of 61.7, 28.8 and 32.3 per cent respectively for the developed regions of North America, Asia/Oceania and Europe respectively (cols 2, 3 and 4, Table 2)<sup>1</sup>. The world average at 12.5 per cent was double that of India. By 1997, while North America and Europe had increased their already high enrolment figures to 80.7 per cent and 50.7 per cent respectively, India managed a meagre increase from 6 to 7.2 per cent, the latter being well below half of the world enrolment ratio of 17.4 per cent. In fact, higher education expanded much faster in all regions as compared to India.

Countrywise comparisons of the enrolment ratio indicate a similar situation. In 1997, the US and Australia had enrolment levels ten times higher than India, while Sweden, Norway, UK, France and Germany all had ratios more than six times

the figure for India (cols 4, 5, 6 and 7, Table 1). In Asia, all the developed and fast-developing countries had ratios higher than India's for the same year, with South Korea, Japan, Philippines and Singapore having enrolment levels higher by five times. While China had enrolment rates less than India's in 1997, the ratio for the former experienced a three-fold expansion between 1980 and 1997, while the expansion for India was less than one-seventh of this magnitude.

India also lags well behind different regions and countries in terms of a different but related indicator – the provision of higher education, measured in terms of the number of students per 100,000 inhabitants (cols 8, 9, 10 and 11, Table 1).

While the enrolment ratio indicates the level of provision of higher education in

relation to the potential number of beneficiaries in the relevant age group, the number of teachers in higher education per million inhabitants may be looked on a measure of the intensity of provision of the service. In 1985, North America had nearly seven times, Europe and Asia/Oceania nearly five times and Latin America more than three times the number of teachers in India. The average figure for the world was double that of India. In 1997, this already appalling situation had deteriorated further, with the numbers increasing to more than eight times for North America, seven times for Asia/Oceania and two and a half times for the world (cols 5 and 6, Table 2). This deterioration was due to the fact that while the number of teachers relative to population expanded in all the regions and the world over the period 1985 to 1997

**Table 2: Higher Education Development Indicators – Comparison across Regions**

Regions	Gross Enrolment Ratios			Teachers Per Million Inhabitants		
	Per Cent		Growth Index	Numbers		Growth Index
	1985	1997	1985=100	1985	1997	1985=100
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
North America	61.7	80.7	131	2980	3611	121.2
Asia/Oceania	28.8	42.1	146	2162	3205	148.2
Europe	32.3	50.7	157	2042	2393	117.1
Arab States	11.5	14.9	130	653	730	111.8
Latin America/Caribbean	15.7	19.4	124	1422	1608	113.1
India	6.0	7.2	120	436	434	99.6
World Total	12.5	17.4	139	964	1084	112.5

Source: Derived from *The World Education Report 1995 and 2000* (UNESCO).

**Table 3: State Commitment to Higher Education**

Countries	Public Expenditure on Education								Public Expenditure on Higher Education			
	As Percentage of GNP				As Percentage of Total Government Expenditure				As Percentage of Expenditure on All Levels			
	1980		1997		1985-87		1995-97		1985-86		1995-97	
	Per Cent	Index*	Per Cent	Index*	Per Cent	Index*	Per Cent	Index*	Per Cent	Index*	Per Cent	Index*
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
	Developed Countries											
Sweden	9.0	3.0	8.3	2.6	12.8	1.5	12.2	1.1	13.1	0.9	27.2	2.0
Australia	5.5	1.8	5.4	1.7	12.5	1.5	13.5	1.2	30.5	2.0	30.5	2.2
Netherlands	7.7	2.6	5.1	1.6	-	-	9.8	0.8	26.4	1.7	29.3	2.1
UK	5.6	1.9	5.3	1.7	11.3	1.3	11.6	1.0	19.8	1.3	23.7	1.7
Norway	6.5	2.2	7.4	2.3	14.7	1.7	16.8	1.4	13.5	0.9	27.9	2.0
US	6.7	2.2	5.4	1.7	11.9	1.4	14.4	1.2	25.1	1.6	25.2	1.8
France	5.0	1.7	6.0	1.9	18.0	2.1	10.9	0.9	12.9	0.8	17.9	1.3
Germany	-	-	4.8	1.5	-	-	9.6	0.8	-	-	22.5	1.6
	Asian/African Countries											
S Korea	3.7	1.2	3.7	1.2	-	-	17.5	1.5	10.9	0.7	8.0	0.6
Japan	5.8	1.9	3.6	1.1	-	-	9.9	0.9	-	-	12.1	0.9
Philippines	1.7	0.6	3.4	1.1	11.2	1.3	15.7	1.4	22.5	1.5	18.0	1.3
Singapore	2.8	0.9	3.0	0.9	11.5	1.4	23.3	2.0	27.9	1.8	34.8	2.5
Thailand	3.4	1.1	4.8	1.5	17.9	2.1	20.1	1.7	13.2	0.9	16.4	1.2
Malaysia	6.0	2.0	4.9	1.5	18.8	2.2	15.4	1.3	14.6	1.0	25.5	1.9
China	2.5	0.8	2.3	0.7	11.1	1.3	12.2	1.1	21.8	1.4	15.6	1.1
Indonesia	1.7	0.6	1.4	0.4	4.3	0.5	7.9	0.7	-	-	24.4	1.8
Namibia	1.5	0.5	9.1	2.8	-	-	25.6	2.2	-	-	13.1	1.0
Zimbabwe	5.3	1.8	-	-	15.0	1.8	-	-	-	-	17.3	1.3
India	3.0	1.0	3.2	1.0	8.5	1.0	11.6	1.0	15.3	1.0	13.7	1.0

Note: \* The indices in columns 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 and 13 are derived with the values for India as the base.  
Source: For columns 2 and 4, *World Development Indicators 2000* (World Bank), for 6, 8, 10 and 12, *The Human Development Report 2002* (UNDP).

– by nearly half in case of Asia/Oceania, about one-fifth in case of North America and Europe and 12 per cent over the entire world – in India the number of teachers actually declined (col 7, Table 2).

### State Commitment

In the context of the ongoing attempt at downsizing the state education sector, the observations of the task force in respect of the inability of the private institutions to successfully assume the wide range of responsibilities undertaken by public educational institutions are extremely relevant. What is the level of state commitment to education? State spending by India on overall education was three per cent of its GNP in 1980, while the proportion was much higher in case of developed countries in Europe and America and some Asian countries as well – Sweden (9.0), Netherlands (7.7), US (6.7), Norway (6.5), UK (5.6), France (5.0), Australia (5.5), Malaysia (6.0), Japan (5.8) and South Korea (3.7). While these countries maintained these high levels to a large extent in 1997, India managed to increase its

spending only marginally to 3.2 per cent (cols 2, 3, 4 and 5, Table 3).

The proportion of public outlays that goes to finance the education sector is also indicative of the relative importance assigned to that sector. India committed 8.5 per cent of the total government expenditure to education in 1985-87,<sup>2</sup> while all the major developed countries spent a much larger proportion. A similar situation prevailed in Asia, with percentage for Thailand and Malaysia being more than twice that of India. Though India increased its spending on education to 11.6 per cent in 1995-97, the position relative to other countries changed only marginally (cols 6, 7, 8 and 9, Table 3).

While these figures are indicative of the relative lack of public commitment to developing the education system vis-a-vis other countries, the situation in respect of higher education is even more sombre. In 1985-86, India directed 15.3 per cent of the total expenditure on all educational levels on higher education – a figure that was even higher than in some of the developed countries such as Sweden, Norway and France, though countries such as the US

(25.1), Australia (30.5), Netherlands (26.4) and UK (19.8) were spending a much larger proportion. By 1995-97, while other countries had substantially increased their allocation, India actually reduced its allocation to 13.7 per cent. The developed European countries and the US enlarged their allocations on this head and spent a quarter or more on higher education, as did the countries of Asia which experienced rapid economic growth in the 1990s – Singapore (34.8), Malaysia (25.5) and Indonesia (24.4). Philippines, Thailand and China with allocations of 18.0, 16.4 and 15.6 per cent respectively also spent more on higher education (cols 10, 11, 12 and 13, Table 3).

### Why Downsizing?

The policy of downsizing, directed at this juncture primarily on Delhi University colleges, must be seen as a component of overall government policy of privatisation and commercialisation. As the mechanism followed in case of disinvesting of the public sector cannot be directly applied in case of publicly funded higher education,

an alternate route has been adopted – banning the starting of new courses and opening of new educational institutions, mandating ceilings on the student strength in the existing institutions, freeze on recruitment as well as ad hoc reductions in staff strength and so on. Related measures adversely impacting on accessibility and educational standards include attempts to raise fees, autonomy to institutions with practically no controls but wide ranging powers to managements, funding linked mandatory assessment and accreditation, and conditionality-laden students loan schemes that will primarily benefit students who already have an asset base.

A driving factor underlying this policy of downsizing is the overall need to liberalise even publicly provided non-traded services such as education and health under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). The formal state education sector in India is seen as a major obstacle to the entry of the informal systems of education sponsored by foreign educational institutions and, potentially, a formidable adversary to their expansion. Substantial downsizing of the higher education sector will not only create space for projected alternative forms of education such as transnational cyber universities, institutions franchised by foreign universities, etc, all of which will operate within purely commercial parameters, but will also generate the necessity of ‘importing’ knowledge – technical knowledge that is being increasingly protected and restricted under the Intellectual Property Rights regime. Further, the technology that will be permitted to be accessed (after due payment) is likely to be dated, enabling the developed countries to continuously profit from their high levels of investment in higher and technical education. A related aspect of ‘opening-up’ of the education sector under the auspices of the WTO and GATS regime is that it might “result in draining of resources of receiving country as well as strong cultural and political influence by one set of countries on other set of countries” [NIEPA:2000:9].

The higher growth in enrolment rates of the developed regions of the world and the widening gap in relation to India have been noted in an earlier section. In light of this, the attempts made to restrict accessibility to higher education for the weaker and less privileged sections of the population – by reducing the subsidy and financial support which would result in a substantial increase in fees and other charges – is indeed

difficult to understand, unless it is recognised that there is a change in the fundamental approach to education. Education is being increasingly looked on as a ‘market’ for major national and multi-national corporations where immense profits are to be made, instead of a public service vital for the overall development of the country. Notably, the Ambani-Birla Report (2000) had made a case for full cost recovery from students of public higher education institutions and immediate privatisation of entire higher education except those areas of education involving ‘disciplines that have no market orientation’ (pp 85,90). In this regard, the national level meeting on trade in education services expressed concern that “the socio-economic implications of opening the education system globally and making education service for profit needs to be carefully examined” and “global competition, fullor profit cost pricing of education has several socio-cultural implications and may adversely affect the constitutional obligations of equity” [NIEPA: 2001:4-5]. It further observed that making open to world competition with high cost of education might cause social-cultural problems that may be unmanageable in India.

Another argument being offered to justify attempts to downsize higher education relates to the growing number of unemployed graduates, which is interpreted as an indicator of ‘over investment’ in this sector. In effect, therefore, the level and content of education is considered a mere function of skilled labour force planning and industrial manpower requirements. For example, the Ambani-Birla Report suggested that industry requires that education must ‘shape adaptable, competitive workers who can readily acquire new skills and innovate’ and that the ‘objective of higher education at the most basic level is to prepare its students for employment’ (pp 30,72). In its quest for skilled but depoliticised robotic labour inputs the report further went on to suggest that legislation should be enacted ‘banning any form of political activity on campuses of universities and educational institutions’ (para 6.22). The proponents of this argument seem to ignore the fact that education is the process by which people not only acquire knowledge and information skills, but also values and the ability to live and interact in social groups as well as to participate in cultural life and productive activities, which may not be necessarily economic or tangible. Education with all

its wide-ranging attributes cannot be permitted to be dictated to by the needs of market originating demand or application of some mechanistic norms of ‘productivity’, ‘efficiency’ or ‘returns’.

The declining priority being assigned to the higher education sector in India is alarming in the light of the contribution of this sector to the overall development of the country. The issues involved in the teachers’ agitation – sustained autonomy, maintenance of academic standards, greater availability and accessibility to deprived students – are fundamental to the continued health of the higher education system of the country. The declining importance being assigned to higher education in India, in stark contrast to developed countries, has created disparities that are increasing over time. The ongoing process of dismantling the higher education system in the country has to be reversed if this gap is to be bridged. ■■■

## Notes

- 1 While the data in the *Human Development Report*, the *World Education Report* and the *World Development Indicators* have a number of limitations, and comparisons across time and regions/countries have to be made with caution, even a broad interpretation is indicative of the situation outlined in the paper.
- 2 Data refer to the most recent year available during the period specified.

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