

In a Flux

The expansion of primary and high school education in India over the last few years has been indeed noteworthy notwithstanding its uneven quality. This has meant a rise in enrolment and the retention of progressively a larger proportion of students over longer periods in school. But soon enough this will also mean larger numbers aspiring for better qualifications of some sort. Inevitably the proportion of those seeking professional qualifications in established disciplines such as engineering and medical/health sciences as well as newly emerging areas will rise. If the yearly circus around the time of admissions to professional courses is any indication, there has been little attempt to evolve a comprehensive perspective on the development of professional education. This year too all the usual actors, the courts, the Medical Council of India (MCI), the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), private college associations, state governments as well as non-government bodies have been brought into play resulting in the usual confusion about admission rules, seat quotas, fee structures, etc. While hundreds of seats in technical institutions in some states remain unfilled, in others court cases and conflicting directives have stalled the admission processes.

Over 21,000 engineering seats in Tamil Nadu will remain unfilled this academic year and over 30 colleges in the private sector are in danger of being forced to close down. Interestingly, in April 2003 the Supreme Court had directed the state government to create additional seats in medicine and engineering to accommodate "those meritorious students in the 'open category' affected by the 69 per cent reservations policy". In sum there are 'meritorious students' but no accessible seats. This was the 10th time that the Supreme Court was moved to pass an interim order as the petitions challenging the 69 per cent reservation policy had still to be decided upon. In West Bengal over 3,000 seats will remain vacant, again as a result of a mismatch between student access and seat availability. The Kerala government has this year sanctioned the setting up of seven new self-financing professional colleges, two offering business administration, two in computer applications and three engineering colleges adding to the 119 already existing. Not only are private trusts and other bodies setting up professional colleges, but also universities and institutions seeking 'deemed' university status and receiving it. Meanwhile the ruling in the T M A Pai case last December on the issue of seat reservations in minority institutions threw up more issues than it resolved. While several state governments have issued notifications that at least 50 per cent of the seats in these institutions must be filled through the competitive examinations they conduct, minority institutions quoting the Pai case have argued that they have autonomy over admissions as well as over fee structures. In March, unmoved by the Pai case ruling, the AICTE appointed a commission to decide the fee structure for all private educational institutions and conduct an all-India engineering entrance examination arguing that the Supreme Court judgment was clear on the issue of merit being the prime consideration for admissions.

Admission policy has been understandably a point of much conflict. Essentially, governments have been trying to ensure that a share of the seats in 'self-financing'/high fee colleges is available to students who apply on merit, either via competitive exams or otherwise, as distinct from those who can 'buy' seats. This 'extraction' of seats for government-fixed quotas has been justified on various grounds, viz, that in the case of medical colleges they use public hospital facilities; that the inclusion of merit students will lead to upgradation of quality; that private entrepreneurs running these colleges are under ill-defined social obligation to share these facilities with those who cannot afford them, and so on. State governments have not been keen, however, on contributing a proportion of their seats to a national pool to be filled through competitive examinations so that access to quality education is not denied to students from states with poorly developed education infrastructure.

Part of the problem is also the extraordinarily large subsidies provided to students in state institutions resulting from archaic fee structures that make no distinction between those who can afford to pay more adequate fees and those who cannot. For instance, West Bengal has recently hiked tuition fees for medical and dental courses 80 and 75 times respectively from an incredibly low Rs 12 per month in both courses to Rs 1,000 and Rs 900. This is not being received favourably and few state governments have been bold enough to take such steps. In fact, many states have been insisting that private colleges as well stick to unrealistic fee structures that bear no relation to the actual cost of producing, say, a medical graduate.

Professional education has typically grown without order or direction. In medical education, monitoring of quality and licensing of medical colleges come under the purview of the state medical councils. But the universities and state governments need not abide by MCI rulings and have often defied them. The situation is worse in technical education with the AICTE having even less authority. There has been no well-defined policy or perspective on developing educational institutions to suit needs. Policy-makers for decades refused to acknowledge the existence of private initiatives in professional education. The fact that these private institutions have come up to fulfil a keenly felt need has failed to be recognised. The state focus has been narrowly on training young people to provide a service, quite forgetting that in an expanding economy such issues as career opportunities, employment prospects, etc, needed to be addressed in the education sector. While the provision of equal opportunity for higher education is a commitment on the part of the state, the direction of its efforts at least on the surface has been to suppress private initiatives. This has not succeeded in either ensuring quality education or in expanding students' access to it. In medical education, the state opposed private medical colleges contending that there was no need for more doctors than could be absorbed in the public health system being put in place. This did not prevent a proliferation of colleges, private- and state-run. The newly-trained doctors with little prospect of interesting or lucrative careers in the government system either set up private practice and nursing homes and hospitals or migrated outside the country in large numbers over the 1960s and 1970s. This outmigration was even more evident among engineering professionals. Of course, despite that huge numbers were still left here, enough for India to claim the third

largest stock of scientific and technical professionals in the world.

To be sure, the present confusion may well be evidence of a flux where several diverse initiatives are being pursued and the complicated tasks of organisation and standardisation of professional education are coming to the fore and assuming a pressing urgency. For the moment, however, there is an all too evident absence of coherent and comprehensive policy direction. **EPW**