

## A Welcome Report on Higher Education

*The Yashpal Committee recommendations will help strengthen universities and expand higher education.*

India has one of the world's largest higher education sectors with more than 350 universities and 16,000 colleges where four and a half lakh teachers impart education to almost one crore students. Yet it remains at the bottom of all global rankings with regard to educational outcomes. The gross enrolment rate hovers around 14, while public expenditure per student in higher education is extremely low.

The importance of higher education as a social good and as a contributor to national self-sufficiency has long been highlighted by academics and activists, but it is only in the past few years that government(s) have started to accept the importance of a well developed higher education sector to India's economic success and strategic weight. This acceptance, albeit utilitarian and delayed, has led to a fair increase in funding, perhaps not enough to overcome decades of neglect but surely a step in the right direction. Along with this has been further encouragement to the private sector to "invest" in this sector and an attempt to tailor higher education to the demands of employability and economic utility.

The report of the Yashpal Committee on "Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education", which was submitted to the new United Progressive Alliance government recently, needs to be understood in this context.

This committee has made a total of 19 recommendations. Taken together, these foreground the role of universities as multi-disciplinary incubators of ideas where the academic freedom of the university is protected and skill development is made secondary to the pursuit of knowledge. In this sense, the Yashpal Committee appears to have based itself on radically different pedagogical principles to those which have animated official policy till now. Its main emphasis is on freeing higher education from political and bureaucratic control and the restrictions of the market by providing universities with statutory and financial autonomy to respond to the educational needs of the communities of which they are a part and encouraging these universities to eschew disciplinary constrictions. Thus, it recommends that professional and regulatory bodies be divested of their control over academic decisions of universities. The encouragement given to single discipline institutions (including the Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management) to expand their ambit to all disciplines and the recommendation to upgrade 1,500 colleges into universities over the next few years are surely welcome. Further, the Yashpal Committee marks a break from the general thinking on higher education reforms within official circles by taking a firm stand against privatisation and commercialisation of this sector by asking for public investment in education and a strict control over the

teaching shops, which are proliferating under the guise of deemed universities and vocational colleges. Recommendations like instituting a national admission test for all universities (on the pattern of the United States' GRE), integrating undergraduate courses and vocational courses with the main university, combined with the recommendation that no student should be turned away for want of financial resources are measures which will provide greater mobility to students from social, income and regional peripheries.

The call to merge all the regulatory bodies governing different parts of the higher education system into one all-encompassing National Commission for Higher Education and Research has received the most attention. While some opinions have questioned the ability of such a behemoth to play the role of all the different bodies, it must be noted that the Yashpal Committee calls for Election Commission-like statutory protection for this body from interference and removes control of academic content from its purview. This appears a positive move in the present circumstances but it is always necessary to guard against concentration of power.

There are other recommendations that would require wider debates and greater consensus-building among and between students, teachers, researchers and administrators before they are adopted. The recommendation, inserted as a "premise on institutional autonomy", that "targeted subsidies" should replace "coercion or intrusion in the autonomy" of institutions to achieve social equity seems to be a clever way of asking for a halt to reservations. While it is possible to argue that the present system of reservations is suboptimal in achieving the desired goals of social equity, it would be tragic if such recommendations come in handy to reverse policies of affirmative action.

Higher education is not merely a tool for finding suitable employment, it should, further, be the breeding ground for ideas critical of and critical to the development of the country. The Yashpal Committee, by looking at education as a social good, marks a break from the dominant instrumentalist view of education which sees it only as a market utility. This is an important, and welcome, departure. Given the continued slant in official policy towards privatisation and the incorporation of commercial interests into higher education, it remains to be seen how much, and what, of the Yashpal Committee report is finally implemented. It is incumbent on the academic community, as well as society at large, to join this debate and keep the pressure on the government to retain the spirit of this report which calls for improving higher education through public investments and public control. If higher education loses its public role and gets reduced to being a mere contributor to economic growth, it will impoverish public life and thus weaken democracy.