

## Revamping Higher Education

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The recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) on higher education, which were recently discussed (*EPW*, February 17 and March 10), were sent to the prime minister in spite of my repeatedly writing to the chairman – as a member (vice-chairman) of the NKC – that they needed to be further discussed. It was only on December 19, 2006 that I learnt through a press report in a Delhi newspaper, that these recommendations had been sent to the prime minister on November 29, 2006.

As the prime minister rightly stated when the recommendations on higher education were presented to him in person, along with some other recommendations, by the chairman of NKC on January 12, 2007, these recommendations should be debated in the country before finalisation. As a part of this debate, I am presenting here a list of possible action points with regard to higher education that may be able to address some of the problems we have today in this important area. As these problems, relating (for example) to the purpose of higher education, access to it (who gets in and how), the nature and number of universities we need (the problem of “quantity”), and quality (of teachers, infrastructure, management and governance), are well known, they are not stated in any detail; only some steps that could be taken to at least partly take care of the problems, are indicated. The list presented is by no means exhaustive; it is only indicative and is presented here for debate. The suggestions given here have only a small overlap with the recommendations of the NKC mentioned above; they differ from the latter in many vital respects.

I have assumed that we should plan for 20 per cent of eligible students to go for higher education. It is further assumed that a university with only a few 100 students is not a viable proposition. The average

optimal size of a university is taken to be 10,000 students including those going for a professional degree, say in medicine, agriculture, engineering or law.

### Prerequisites

No matter what we do, we cannot take care of higher education appropriately and adequately, unless we take care of school education, unless we ensure that every child in the country in the age group of six to 18 has equal access to high-quality education from class one to class 12 (to begin with perhaps to class 10), which can happen only by decommercialising school education and adopting a common (neighbourhood) school system, with private (de facto and de jure not-for-profit) schools being a part of it. We need 4,00,000 higher secondary schools of the quality of our central schools, funded by the central/state government but run by the local self-government and civil society. When all the above happens in respect of school education, we would not need any reservation in higher education, and would be optimally utilising our gene pool – of which, today we are not using more than 5 per cent!

We must also recognise that, concurrently with taking care of our school education, we must take care of quality vocational education and training at various levels with multiple entry and exit points, with some of the exit points routing one towards university education. We need to expand the number of vocational training institutes from today's 5,000 to 50,000 to begin with and later, 2,00,000. We need to provide vocational training in not just 80 or so vocations as we are doing today, but in at least several hundred, including traditional vocations such as weaving and metal work.

It is only when we have put appropriate systems for school and vocational education in place that we can hope to solve our problems of higher education on a

long-term basis. However, a beginning can be made with the suggestions that follow that may provide a viable framework for a change.

### Objective of Higher Education

If higher education is in a professional course, then the objective should clearly be to prepare a person for a profession. This would be true also of vocational education at all levels. However, the objective of university education in basic disciplines, such as physics, chemistry, sociology, economics, biology, history or languages, should be to produce experts in the area who are knowledgeable and excited about the field, and who are capable of engaging in research to push the frontiers of knowledge, or in creative or productive activities that would be related to their field, or where the culture of such university education will provide them with an excellent starting point for their chosen pursuit. Such people, if they turn out to be true experts in the field, would rarely be without a job; history shows that for such people jobs are created and that is how knowledge advances.

There should be a substantial investment in higher education (ideally, 1.5 per cent of GDP which should be possible when the government fulfils its commitment to provide 6 per cent of GDP for education). While private institutions granting degrees should be encouraged, it should be ensured by a suitable legislation (an act of the Parliament) that they are de facto and de jure not commercial institutions (that is, like companies). All profits made by such institutions should be ploughed back to meet the objectives of the institutions within the country. They should be set up following the same procedure as a publicly-funded institution, and they should submit themselves to the same regulatory mechanism as the publicly-funded institutions.

No foreign educational providers (FEPs) should be allowed to set up educational facilities in India for profit which would not be entirely ploughed back into the institution in India, but used to support the parent institution abroad, or accrue to an individual or individuals as to shareholders in profit-making companies. Only

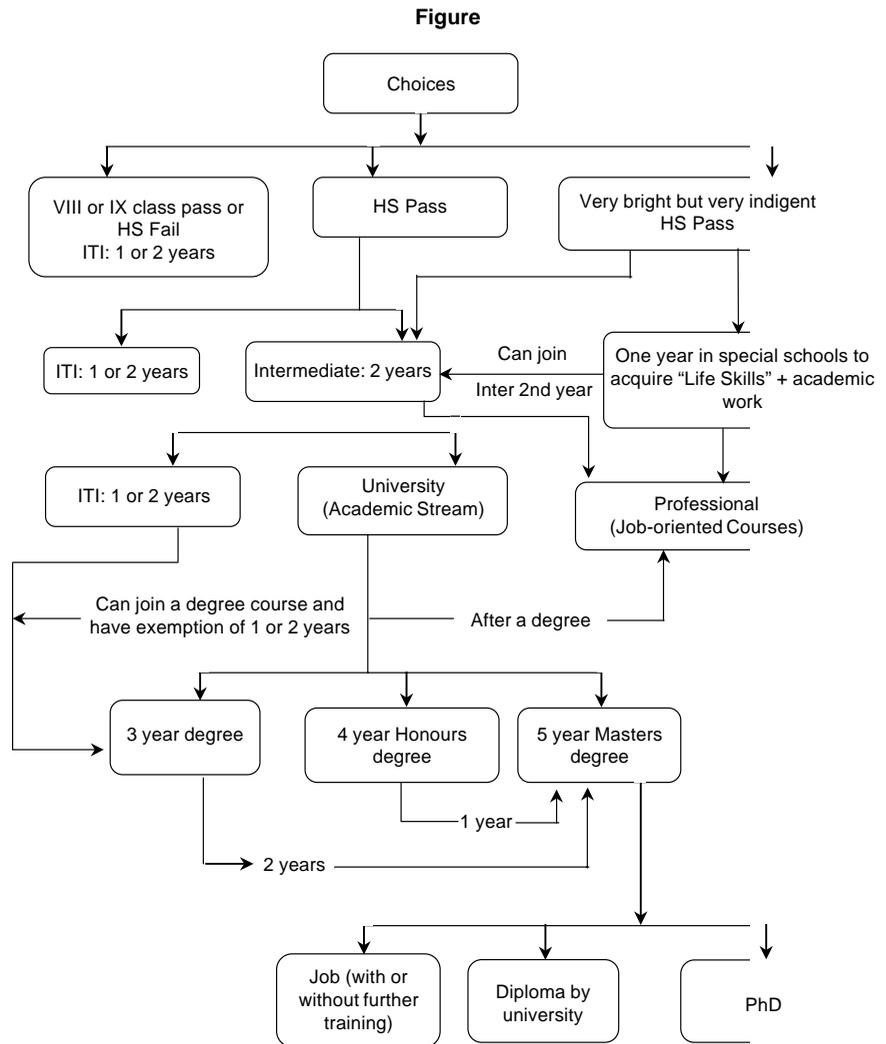
a well known foreign institution (say, amongst the top 200 universities in the world) may be allowed to set up campuses here, solely following an altruistic motive. Such institutions must give an Indian degree and be subject to all rules and regulations that would apply to a wholly Indian university.

There should be no bar on private for-profit organisations in the technical sector, that provide specific training in an area of interest to the country and its people; they should not be authorised to provide a degree (but can provide a diploma or a certificate), and must operate ethically. They should be regulated by a separate authority that will ensure, through appropriate mechanisms (such as a security deposit with the government) that the students are not taken for a ride and get an appropriate return on their investment.

**Choices:** The choices that a student passing (or not passing!) high school may have are best stated diagrammatically (the figure).

**Access:** (i) Admission must be means blind and made on the basis of merit and not on the basis of a student's ability to pay – be it in private or in state-run universities. (ii) Poor students must be supported financially and schemes must be worked out for this, including bank loans, following an arrangement between a bank and the university. (iii) In principle, every student's fee should be paid, be it by the student (through one's own resource or through a university-arranged bank loan), by the state or by the university (through scholarships).

**How may students get in?** (i) There should be a national test like that conducted by educational testing services (ETS) of Princeton, but testing both scholastic ability as well as social experience and sensitivity, for admission to a university, which the student should take during the last year of his college (that is, the +2 course). (ii) The test should be conducted, say, six times a year (if not every month), and a student should be able to take the test as many times she/he wishes, and ask for any test score to be sent or not to be sent to the universities of his choice. (iii) There should be a nominal fee for the test. While registering for the test, the student should give preferences of universities all over the country. The universities can then decide whom to take on the basis of the test score. (iv) If a person has succeeded in obtaining admission to more than one university, he or she must indicate by, say, January, the



Note: ITI: Industrial training institute or a similar vocational training centre.

university of his or her preference – so that all universities finalise their admissions, by say, May. All this can be done easily using information and communication technology (ICT). (v) The above test should cover all private universities too. (vi) It is recognised that once every child in the country is in a position to go up to +XII (that is the intermediate college of today), and have her/his education in an excellent school (like the central schools of today), there would be no need for reservations based on any criterion of social backwardness or deprivation for higher education. Till that time, we would clearly need to have reservation for intrinsically meritorious, but socially deprived or backward children whose environment has not provided them adequate opportunities for expression of merit to the extent that the system of selection

for admission to higher educational institutions may demand. For this purpose a social deprivation index that takes into account various factors should be worked out by an expert group. This index could, for example, have a rating of 1-20 marks out of a total of a 100 that a student may get in any assessment system for admission to a university. The marks obtained following using this index should be added to the other marks obtained by the student. For such a system to work, an extreme penalty will need to be imposed for any deliberate misinformation provided by the student for determination of the social deprivation index. This index should be determined by organisations that may conduct the national tests mentioned earlier for admission into universities and added to the marks obtained by the student in the regular test. As mentioned above,

the social deprivation index should account for 20 per cent of the total marks. *Quantity:* We need 3,000 good universities (that is, universities that satisfy all the criteria laid down by the Higher Education Regulatory Authority (HERA) mentioned earlier), each with not more than 10,000 students. This can be achieved in the following way: (a) Upgrade existing (nearly 300) universities by, for example, providing a certain percentage of their budget as extra grant every year, after ensuring that they follow the new norms of the HERA mentioned later. (b) Set up new universities, to begin with, perhaps 20, in the next five years. (c) Convert good colleges (out of the over 17,500 we have) that satisfy criteria laid down by the HERA mentioned later, into universities – private or state-run – ensuring that they are not (de facto or de jure) commercial institutions set up to make profit for individuals. They must be provided an additional grant to make up deficiencies if any, specially in the area of research. (d) Small colleges in a city, that are good and are not de facto or de jure commercial institutions, could together, similarly, form a university in which, for example, the faculty would be transferable from one constituent college to another; one college could have one department and another college another department.

The remaining affiliated colleges may be given three options: (i) to convert into trade-related institutions training people for specified vocations/trade; (ii) to upgrade within five years to a level that would enable them to be given an autonomous university status (to wind up within the subsequent two years, if this does not happen in the first five years); or (iii) to wind up within a reasonable time (not more than five years), with no new admissions from the following year.

It should be noted that no country in the world has the extensive system of affiliated colleges we have. A few of the over 17,500 of our affiliated colleges we have, are capable of doing any worthwhile research or even employ outstanding academicians. The students are, therefore, as a rule, denied the latest in terms of knowledge imparted by the best of minds, besides the advantages of a university culture. A large proportion of them produce unemployable graduates. It is, therefore, not surprising that, as Kiran Karnik, the chairman of the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) says, over 70 per cent of our

engineering graduates are unemployed. Further, the existence of affiliated colleges has had many of our universities stop having undergraduate classes! Thus none of the 13 universities in Andhra Pradesh have undergraduate classes. Compare this situation with that obtained in, say, the US and the UK (or elsewhere) where it may be difficult to find a university that does not have undergraduate classes in its own campus. *Employment:* Employers may conduct their own tests to ascertain suitability of the output of the university.

*Quality:* Teachers, infrastructure, management and governance: Set up a HERA which will perform the following functions: (a) Grant licence to give degrees; (b) Set up quality bench marks and lay down standards; (c) Licence assessment agencies both in the public and the private sectors; (d) Licence agency for assessment of students wishing to enter the portals of a university; (e) Be responsible for disbursement of government funds, and set up transparent and objective criteria and mechanism for that purpose; (f) Grant licence to practice various professions after obtaining a professional degree.

The function of organisations such as the National Accreditation and Assessment Council, University Grants Commission (UGC), All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the Medical Council of India, the Pharmacy Council of India, and the Bar Council, will then need to be redefined. They – one or more of them – could act as agencies that would assess universities, or provide grants to universities, on behalf of the HERA. Functions such as giving of grants or running of refresher courses could be performed autonomously by these agencies after they have been appropriately restructured.

HERA should consist of a chairman, a vice-chairman and eight to 10 other members, some of which could be part-time. All the members of the HERA should be top class academicians with high public credibility and integrity, and known commitment to fairness and objectivity. They should have a demonstrated interest in education and a wide vision, and be articulate and receptive to others' ideas, besides having established managerial qualities. The HERA must be autonomous (both de facto and de jure) and free of political interference. It must establish channels of quick communication with the academic community of the country. Its composition, detailed structure and mode of functioning must be designed through

a national debate and consensus to ensure that it does not go the same way as its predecessors.

HERA should be complemented by similar state higher education regulatory authorities to whom HERA could delegate a part of its responsibilities under a specified set of conditions. A major responsibility of HERA would be to ensure implementation of the other provisions of this article or additions to (and subtraction from) it from time to time. It should be ensured by setting up a suitable system of accountability and transparency, that HERA does not come to suffer from the same problems that existing organisations such as the ones mentioned above are widely known to suffer.

- Institute a new stringent, objective and fair system of appointment of university teachers. All university appointments should be open to all citizens of the country, and some (a designated) proportion, even to people from other countries. Introduce transparency and accountability in regard to above.

- Increase proportion of non-tenure, contract appointments.

- Prevent inbreeding by suitable conventions. (Today, inbreeding is the rule in a vast majority of our universities.)

- Remove barriers to involving appropriate people from outside India in teaching and assessment at various levels.

- Make retirement age flexible for outstanding academicians that satisfy specifically laid-down stringent criteria.

- Make provision of compulsory retirement with full benefits for non-performers of today – till the new system takes root.

- Bring back undergraduate courses to all universities that do not have them.

- Set up a code (through HERA) for university teachers, say in regard to attendance, number of teaching hours, and the teacher-student ratio. The most famous and the best-known members of the faculty should teach undergraduates, as is customary around the world.

- Dissociate salary from position and function, in the academic world (examples are available).

- Provide liberal (not time-bound) incentives (such as an increase in salary) for proven and recognised accomplishments of university teachers. (Some suggestions follow later.)

- Abrogate existing system of time-bound promotions. Link career prospects for the staff of academic institutions with performance evaluated stringently.

- Set up a stringent (but a transparent, fair and objective) system of continuous evaluation of institutions based on specific but dynamic criteria. (This system should be set up by HERA.)
- Introduce salary differentials (within a specified range) within a department, within a university, and between universities, to attract talent in areas of high demand.
- Make provision for regular part-time employment (e.g., one could have two half-time secretaries instead of one full-time, or a university teacher could draw part of her/his salary from the university and part from an industry). Thus, encourage multi-institutional affiliation of academics (including public-private mix).
- Encourage multiple appointments for outstanding academicians (e.g., in a university and a research lab, or an Indian university and a foreign university, or a university and an industry) of university teachers. Frame appropriate rules that would encourage consultancy.
- A system of evaluation of teachers by students should be evolved.
- The university (and the national accreditation system) must make sure that appropriate infrastructure facilities that are adequately professionalised are installed (examples, workshop, instrument repair, dispensary, bank, cleaning, security). A list of some 60 such “tested” facilities is available with us.
- Abolish over a period of 10 years, all affiliated colleges in all areas (including professional ones).
- Revise procedure for selection of vice-chancellors so that the decision is made by the academic community/chancellor without any political interference of any kind.
- Restructure management of universities to decentralise power and decision-making, and encourage collegiate management. Minimise the roles of VC, registrar, and head of the department (HoD). Change the system of rotation of HoDs. Make compartmentation into “department” or “faculty” or “schools”, dynamic instead of being rigid, and create “virtual departments” to represent emerging areas of knowledge.
- Adopt fully (not partially) course and credit system (on the lines of what is obtained in the US) in universities, thus changing the examination system entirely to internal assessment as is, for example, obtained in the US. Provide flexibility so that a student can complete the requirements for a degree in any period he wishes. Thus an indigent student can work part-time

and complete his degree in, say, five years instead of the minimum of three years. Contents of the course should be determined by the teacher but the outline should be included in the information booklet of the university to be published every year, an year in advance, and put on the university’s website which every university must set up.

- Ensure that research publications (articles, journals) from the country adopt the open access system to the maximum possible extent.

- Encourage the use of open source software.

- Revise procedure for PhD examination. For example, have at least one examiner from one of the, say, 500 best universities and research institutions abroad; the viva could be conducted through a conference call.

- It should be recognised that in a university some people are excellent teachers but not outstanding research workers while there are others who are outstanding research workers but not good teachers. This should be kept in mind when distributing teaching load in a university. A teacher should teach a course over a semester during which he may not be normally permitted to absent himself from his teaching duties for any reason whatsoever and irrespective of his status, as is the practice in reputed institutions all over the world. A system should be set up for international assessment of every university once in, say, every 10 years. This should be done by people of undisputed academic and/or professional ability, interest in India, lack of any bias, and commitment to a high level of excellence.

- Change the accounting systems of academic and research organisations to increase accountability (professional, social and financial), with no interference in academic matters. (The comptroller and auditor general (CAG) has, for example, a separate cell for auditing certain science departments.)

- Set up an ICT-based system for maximising national benefit from the visit of foreign visitors that are often invited by one organisation.

- Remove fragmentation of education (e.g., as of today, medical and agricultural colleges are often under ministries of health and agriculture with no coordination with education ministries and are subject to unwarranted transfers).

- Set up a system of interaction with civil

society, to elicit their involvement. This could be done, for example, by offering extra-mural courses to members of the public – say, in the evening – and having public lectures.

*Finances:* As mentioned above, the government should work towards having 1.5 per cent of the GDP allocated for higher education. All universities should be encouraged to create a corpus fund and assets through investment. They should be permitted to engage the services of investment managers as is the case with many universities outside the country. The professional management of assets over a period can generate substantial wealth. Under no circumstances, should the permanent immovable assets of the university such as land, should be sold or alienated on a de facto permanent basis.

The universities should also employ professional fund raisers who should be able to identify the unique selling points of the university and persuade, for example, private donors, to donate money to the university. One impediment today in this endeavour is the lack of any trust on the part of a potential donor that the money given to the university would be appropriately utilised. The university must, therefore, create an environment of transparency and of commitment to excellence which would persuade donors to support the university. In addition, it must have overhead charges built in research proposals. Provision of various services and licensing of patents could be other sources of revenue. No deduction must be made from the governmental grant to a university following its success in raising funds from elsewhere. In fact, for say, 10 years, the government should provide financial rewards to universities that raise their own funds which would be in addition to the normal grant by the government to the university: something like the weighted tax deduction for research and development in industries. [27]

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