

Emerging Trends in Higher Education in India

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0. Introduction

The latest report to the Government of India on Higher Education was the report of the 'Committee to Advise on the Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education'. The committee was headed by Prof. Yash Pal.

I believe the starting point for our consideration will have to be the recommendations of that report. There are 19 recommendations in all vide para 3.4 of the report.

1. Creation of a National Commission and Autonomy of the Universities

The first three recommendations deal with the creation of a single National Commission for Higher Education and Research in place of the existing multiple regulatory bodies including UGC, AICTE etc. and the Universities are to be autonomous. The first recommendation states that the existing regulatory bodies will be replaced by the National Commission. The second recommendation talks about divesting of the academic functions of AICTE etc. I see there is certain amount of inconsistency in these two recommendations. I would suggest that all the existing regulatory bodies may continue and the new commission will coordinate the activities of these bodies. It will not control and it may not even regulate.

Presently the universities are autonomous as per the laws which established them. But in practice, the Governments think these universities are under their control. They in the Government i.e., the bureaucrats and political bosses are refusing to recognize the legal autonomous status of the university which is answerable only to the legislature or parliament which established it. It is time, the political bosses realize that the autonomy of the universities is to be safe guarded by them in the interests of the country as well their own interest.

In view of the foregoing the bodies established by the Governments including the commission recommended by the Yash Pal committee, may not stipulate regulations but only issue guidelines or minimum standards. To my knowledge the Constitution

stipulates (1) reservation for certain categories and (2) that the educational institutions funded by the Government are to be open to all. That is all. If the National Commission considers that any more stipulations are to be made, it should make such recommendations to the Government for consideration and propose an amendment to the Constitution

Engineering, Medicine, Law etc. are professions and in order that someone to practice that profession he should be qualified, as stipulated by the respective professional body. Therefore there is a need to have these councils. But the problem with the present councils is that they stipulate not the minimum requirement but only one requirement and expect uniformity throughout the country. The main reason, I believe is that these councils are nominated bodies and not consisting of representative professionals.

University autonomy ends where constitutional provision begins. In other words a truly autonomous university will not be controlled by any other order or regulation. However, if the university violates the provisions of the Constitution, then the Government may step in and take appropriate action as stipulated in the relevant act establishing the university.

From the foregoing it may be clear that those who aspire to become officers or hold positions in the authorities must have undergone a course on university laws. Similar stipulations may have to be made for those among the bureaucrats and politicians who are to take up posts in the department or ministry of higher education.

The third recommendation states that the National Commission would create curricular framework. As this is a framework, it is to be presumed as recommendatory in nature.

2. Undermining Undergraduate Education

The committee recommends that it should be mandatory for all universities to have a rich undergraduate programme. Each of the university faculty should be attached to a college for teaching UG courses and thereby give the undergraduate students to have the opportunity to interact with best faculty. In a way, this recommendation contradicts the previous recommendation that the university must function autonomously.

As this is purely an academic matter, personally I would not think of a mandatory requirement; if this is a good practice then the universities may automatically follow the same. As is well known, the UGC did not issue many regulations from its establishment in 1956 till about the end of the century; yet the recommendations and guidelines have been accepted by almost all universities and implemented by them in general.

I would like to add that personally I am of the opinion that teaching the undergraduate classes is beneficial to the teacher. Hence if senior faculty makes it a point to teach at least one undergraduate level course in a year, it will benefit both the students as well as the faculty.

3. Learning across Disciplines

The fifth recommendation is that the undergraduate students must have opportunities to access all curricular areas like humanities, social sciences, aesthetics etc. in an integrated manner. The committee suggests that the walls of disciplines are made porous and subject areas are not to be designed in isolation. The present distances between disciplines is to be eliminated. (Vide para 2.1.1 of the report).

I am of the opinion that the disciplines like Physics, Chemistry etc. were carved out by the western philosophers during the last two or three centuries. These disciplines were made water tight in due course. But during the last century, it was found that interdisciplinary areas have to be created like physical chemistry, biochemistry etc. thereby indicating that boundaries were artificial and will have to be done away with. This is what is being expressed by the Yash Pal committee. It is time we go in for a real credit system in which we may be admitting students to B.A. or B.Sc. and not for B.A. (Tamil), B.A. (Economics), B.Sc. (Physics), B.Sc. (Chemistry) etc.

In this recommendation, it is also stated that normally, no single discipline or specialized university should be created. This recommendation does not appear to be acceptable from an academic angle. There will always be the need to set up single discipline institutions which will cater to the needs of teaching and research in specialized areas and it may not be possible as well as desirable to avoid the same. However they may associate themselves with full fledged universities depending upon their needs.

In para 2.2.4 of the report, the committee has also observed the following; Substantial damage has been done to universities and institutions of professional education by their separation from each other. This has resulted in the students of professional courses not gaining any exposure to the knowledge of society, its economy, politics and culture. To remedy this situation, it is necessary that the curricular framework of the specialized institutions is so designed that they could work in partnership with other institutions in their vicinity. In order to build strong epistemic bridges between different disciplines, it is necessary that professional institutions are returned to the universities.

The foregoing observations are well taken and this recommendation is welcome.

4. Vocational Programmes

The sixth recommendation deals with vocational education. Alienation of this sector can be overcome by bringing it under the purview of universities. It is also recommended that the students of vocational stream in the schools and ITIs should have access to higher education.

Madras University was offering several programmes at a level lower than the degree level. I remember at one time the UGC informed all universities to discontinue all programmes that are at a level lower than the degree level. The present recommendation is to revive lower level programmes. As the boundaries between different levels of programmes are only artificial, it is a welcome move to integrate education at all levels. As a matter of fact Ramamurti Committee recommended setting up of large campuses where if a child enters at the LKG it can study up to the highest degree i.e., Ph.D.

Further great harm has been done to our educational system by the universities dissociating themselves from the school education when 10+2+3 system was introduced. Earlier it was the university which stipulated the course content of the SSLC, which was the entrance qualification (matriculation) for joining the college course. It is time the universities prescribe the syllabi for the school leaving examination i.e., 12th standard. The universities must admit anyone into the system if he gets the grade at the entrance examination (12th Standard examination); must also be in a position to upgrade the

knowledge and skills of anyone who wishes the same. In other words, every university which wishes to introduce Open University programmes must be free to do so. Present practice of giving approval for starting of distance education programmes must go.

5. National Research Foundation

Creation of a National Research Foundation is a welcome move and the foundation may coordinate the present efforts.

6. University Governing Structures

The committee has recommended that new governing structures are to be evolved to enable the universities to preserve their autonomy in a transparent and accountable manner. In other words, the committee recommends autonomy for the universities; but the universities should be accountable and their working must be transparent.

In para 2.2.6, the committee has also observed the following; For infusing accountability in any organization it is necessary to prescribe certain performance criteria. This device is useful for the institution to work in an autonomous manner. A university's performance can be assessed by asking what steps it has taken to reduce gender, caste and class asymmetries, the modality of such steps and their outcomes.

I am of the opinion that it is important that the universities evolve processes for self evaluation. Further, review of the work and utilization of funds by the parliament or legislature as the case may be is absolutely necessary. The details may change from time to time.

The work of the universities which receive funding from the Government must be reviewed by the legislature or parliament as the case maybe Presently the annual reports and audited statements of accounts of the Universities established by the Union Government are placed before the parliament. But there is practically no discussion. It is unfortunate. If the members of parliament are required to undergo a course in university laws, if they aspire to become an education minister or head committees and commissions that may be set up by the Government in the department of education as envisaged in para 1 of this write up then there will be informed debate on the working of the universities especially before passing of the education budget. After the setting up of

the National Commission, it should submit annually to the Parliament its comments on the annual reports and audited statements of the universities. This will go a long way in improving the governance of the universities.

In respect of the universities not funded by the Government, the National Commission may review the working of these universities by scrutinizing their annual reports and audited statement of accounts and place a consolidated report to the Parliament annually.

7. Deemed Universities

The committee recommends that the practice of according deemed university status be stopped forthwith till the National Commission takes a view on it. I feel, firstly it may be better if the commission is set up and it may be asked to give its considered view on the same and secondly, a study of how the provision for declaring an institution as a deemed to be university was operated upon in the earlier years will show that except for one or two institutions, the others are single faculty institutions. My view is as these single faculty institutions could not be classified as universities, these were declared as deemed to be universities for purposes of giving grant by the UGC. It is the latter practice of using this provision for indirectly establishing private universities is to be curbed.

8. Establishment of Inter University Centres

The recommendation of the committee for establishment of several Inter University Centres is a welcome one.

9. Isolation of IITs and IIMs.

The committee recommends that as the IITs and IIMs were created in the first phases of nation building and kept out of the traditional university structure to give them the desired freedom. With the enormous potential they have, they should develop into full fledged universities and be model institutions. The idea is to prevent isolation of the study of engineering and management from other knowledge areas.

I am of the opinion that it may not be necessary that every institute must teach subjects of all faculties. However interaction may be possible. The main issue is that during the course of years a hierarchy has been created among the educational institutions. In other words even a junior most faculty member in an IIT or an IIM is considered better than the senior most faculty member in the same subject in a university or a college. This type of mentality must go. This change of mentality is possible only if our curriculum at all levels infuses in the minds of the learners that every institution has its own aims and objects; and aims and objects of different institutions differ from one another and they are not comparable. What is important is the extent to which an institution has fulfilled its own aims and objects.

10. Setting up of 1500 Universities

The recommendation of the committee to upgrade 1500 colleges is not a feasible idea. There is no doubt our country needs more university level institutions. But as the number of colleges that have been approved by the UGC for purposes of giving of grants is only about 5000, there may not be 1500 colleges that can be upgraded. As a matter of fact it is not known how many of the 200 or so autonomous colleges may be ready for up gradation? It may not also be possible to identify sufficient number of clusters of colleges to evolve as universities. The first step may be to try to study all the existing colleges and help them to get approval under the UGC Act for receiving grants. There after, sufficient number of clusters and individual colleges may be identified for up gradation as universities.

11. University and the Real World

The committee recommends that the universities must establish live relationship with the real world outside and develop capacities to respond to the challenges faced by rural and urban economies and culture.'

In para 2.2.1, the committee has observed the following: The syllabi are such that they do not give an opportunity to the students to apply the knowledge gained in the university to real life situations. The syllabi should be designed with a view to inducting the student into a community of participant citizens. All syllabi should require the

teachers and students to apply what they have learnt in their courses to a local situation, issue or problem. Curricular reform in this regard would include exposure and engagement with different kinds of work in the form of summer jobs or internships and should include both manual and other kinds of work.

This is an excellent idea. However, several years ago, the Bharathidasan university introduced a project work in the final semester of the undergraduate programme. But this was dropped after it was in force for two years. It is better to study why this failed and appropriate provision may have to be taken in order that the new proposal may succeed.

12. Teacher Education

The committee recommends that all levels of teacher education are to be brought under the purview of higher education. The committee has also observed in para 2.2.3 as follows: The absence of university level interest in preparation of teachers for the primary and preparatory levels has resulted in poor academic quality. This is to be overcome by the universities having programmes for primary and preprimary level teachers. There is also a need for a full fledged orientation programme for newly recruited teachers of colleges and universities.

The foregoing observations and recommendation are well taken.

13. National Testing Scheme

The committee recommends the institution of a national testing scheme. Such a scheme will lead to a hierarchy of examinations and unhealthy competition. Rather the National Commission may review the 12th examinations conducted by the various authorities and advise them.

14, Other Recommendations

The other recommendations are: quantum of central financial support to state universities to be increased; expansion of higher education system to be evaluated and assessed continuously; establishment of a National Education Tribunal; and setting up of

Task Force to follow up the implementation of the recommendations. These recommendations are well taken.

15. Observations not translated as recommendations

There are two observations which have not been translated as recommendations. i.e., 1. Divide between Research Bodies and Universities and 2. Erosion of Democratic Space.

In para 2.1.2, the committee observed: Over the years, there has been an increasing tendency to treat teaching and research as separate activities. The committee suggests that all universities are to be teaching and research universities. All research institutions are to connect with the universities in their vicinity and create teaching opportunities for their researchers. This observation is well taken. Schemes may have to be devised by the National Commission for the successful implementation of this suggestion.

In para 2.1.4, the committee has observed: For a considerable length of time following independence institutions of higher learning succeeded in providing a space where dialogue between rival social forces and ideologies could take place in a peaceful atmosphere. However over the last few years erosion of this space has surfaced in different parts of the country. In this situation creation of new knowledge by free and open inquiry cannot take place and thus the idea of a university is lost. It is important that we learn to acknowledge and appreciate differences and not try to homogenize everything.

This is an important and timely observation; but I do not know why this observation has not been translated as a recommendation. At present there appears to be a fear among the academics that if they express any view that is contrary to the views of the party in power, their future prospects may become bleak. Therefore, for all practical purposes, there are no free and frank discussions on any topic in our universities. Consequently in due course, there will not be any informed public debate on any topic of public interest. This situation has developed because there is no real autonomy for the universities. The remedy lies in the observations made in para 1 of this write up.

16. Other Relevant Issues

There are several other relevant issues which have not been touched upon by the committee. I feel the following deserve consideration:

- Students going abroad for higher studies

One estimate is that the students spend 7 billion dollars annually

- Role of Government in Education
Freedom to learn and freedom to teach
- Problems faced by Hindu Educational Institutions
- Medium of Instruction
- Study of Religious Texts
- Credit System
- Teachers – Inculcation of Professionalism
- Societal Control vs Government Control
- Subject content
Appropriateness, as developed in our country

