

A Vision for Higher Education Reform

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A Note on the E-book

This e-book is a collection of articles and opinion pieces contributed by the research team of Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR), a public policy think tank based in Kochi, Kerala, to 'Pallikkutam', a monthly education magazine published by the Rajagiri Media, Kochi. The articles are intended for studying the various challenges affecting the education system - both school and higher education- in India, with a focus on the state of Kerala, and suggesting policy alternatives to tackle them.

These articles were originally published in the time span of a year and are reproduced in this e-book in the chronological order of their publication dates. Although the articles have been significantly edited to suit the style of a book and ensure ease of reading, certain aspects remain true to the original. The use of different currencies instead of sticking (or converting) to one (say, Indian rupee) in the articles is due to the different publication timelines of the original works and, hence, the slight variations that may occur in the exchange rates.

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Foreword

Skill and quality are two quintessential attributes of education, and the need of the hour in the Indian education scenario. After independence, India has worked hard to provide access to mandatory primary education, which is evident from the massive hike in its literacy rate from 20 to 74 percent (1951–2011). The UNESCO list of countries 2016 states that youth (15–24) literacy rate in India is 91 percent. Yet, educated unemployment is prevalent in the country, with one-third of total unemployed people holding graduate degrees.

India will be among the youngest nations in the world by 2030. With nearly 140 million people in the college-going age group, one in every four graduates worldwide will be a product of the Indian higher education system. The complexity of the system stems from India's need to maintain standards and uniformity along with existing challenges – access, equity and quality.

This e-book is a compilation of articles and opinion pieces authored by CPPR research team led by Dr D Dhanuraj. It probes the real problems of the Indian education system and guides us towards a future model for the system, articulating an ambitious vision for higher education reform. We hope that this document serves as a clarion call for all stakeholders in India's higher education system, including administrators, regulatory bodies and governments to identify areas of improvement in enhancing quality and quantity of higher education, issues of governance and policies, support for academic and physical infrastructure and greater financial resources.

This e-book aims to move beyond the limitations of the present and work towards realising the real potential for transformation that the future holds.

Author Profiles

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The Mysterious Case of the Higher Education System in India (Part 1)

D Dhanuraj and Rahul V Kumar

India's education system has undergone several reforms since independence. Literacy rates, which roughly reflect these changes, have increased from less than 20 percent in 1951 to approximately 74 percent in 2011. However, the implementation of education reforms poses challenges at various levels. Despite the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE), 2009, and programmes such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) for universal primary education, the structural constraints in the political economy of India have delayed the proper implementation of multiple reforms. For instance, child labour is still a major impediment in achieving the goal of primary education for all children below the age of 14 years.

It is worthwhile to note that the net enrolment ratio at the primary school level is close to 98 percent, whereas the net attendance ratio is approximately 82 percent. The net attendance ratio in secondary schools is only 55 percent. This indicates that the policy of universal education has not been able to sustain students for completing their primary and secondary educational requirements¹. Considering the significantly increasing population, India has reached a point whereby any delay in developing an efficient education system is likely to affect the demographic dividend. While the country has fared well in boosting literacy rates, the rate of educated unemployed has been slowly increasing. A report by Alakh N Sharma of the Institute of Human Development (IHD), New Delhi, reveals that one third of the total unemployed people in India hold graduate degrees². This is a cause for concern because approximately 64 percent of the country's population will be in the working age group by 2020. The population in the age group of 15–34 was a staggering 430 million in 2011.

¹ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/india_statistics.html

² <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/opinion/interviews/Without-jobs-Indias-demographic-dividend-will-be-a-disaster-Alakh-N-Sharma/articleshow/30233665.cms>

Reforms in the Education Sector

This article is based on the hypothesis that higher education became a profitable investment avenue from the time it was opened up to the private sector, due to a prolonged period of state control. This period of control left the market longing to invest in those areas where the state never focussed its attention. Such avenues could have been systematically exploited and the quality of education improved a long time ago. So there is a need to analyse whether the recent policies in education have been accommodative to these concerns. It is pejorative to judge the education system based on literacy rates. However, it is worthwhile to look at the education policies followed by the states with low literacy rates. The federal government as well as the state governments have a concomitant apathy towards education reforms. The Indian education system, which is complex at the primary education level, seems easily manageable at the higher education level. While education institutions are meant to be registered as not-for-profit organisations, the lack of genuine investors in the sector has turned it into a money-spinning industry. The reason could be the exacting rules and regulations pertaining to the field that discourage genuine players from investing in the higher education sector.

Table 1 shows the number of colleges recognised by the University Grants Commission (UGC) across states in India and the number of colleges with the status of Colleges with Potential for Excellence (CPE) among them.

Table 1: Colleges with Potential for Excellence³

State	Number of 2(f) and 12(b) Colleges ¹	CPE Colleges as on 30.08.13
Arunachal Pradesh	10	1
Assam	288	10
Chhattisgarh	160	7
Gujarat	482	18
Haryana	170	9
Himachal Pradesh	60	3
Jharkhand	115	4
Karnataka	762	29
Madhya Pradesh	487	7
Meghalaya	30	1
Mizoram	25	-

Nagaland	30	1
Odisha	458	12
Punjab	243	12
Rajasthan	274	12
Sikkim	8	-
Tripura	17	-
Uttar Pradesh	1659	23
Uttarakhand	72	-
West Bengal	432	18
Andhra Pradesh	626	24
Kerala	247	13
Delhi	83	-
Jammu and Kashmir	160	1
Manipur	58	2
Maharashtra	1179	49
Puducherry	25	1
Tamil Nadu	461	17
	8621	274

From among more than 8000 UGC-recognised colleges in India, the UGC grants the CPE status to only 274 colleges, which is less than 4 percent of the total number of colleges. Kerala, Arunachal Pradesh, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh have at least 5 percent of their education institutions recognised as CPE. Although the mandatory target of the UGC is to recognise 3 percent of colleges with strong eligibility requirements in each state and union territory as CPE, the proliferation of colleges leads to question such provisions.

³ This target scheme of the UGC selects colleges based on several criteria. The UGC funds the selected colleges to improve and strengthen their infrastructure with the aim of furthering their potential.

⁴ 2(f) and 12(b) Colleges: "The UGC had notified regulations for recognition of colleges under Section 2(f) of the UGC Act, 1956. The colleges are brought under the purview of the UGC in terms of these regulations, as and when the proposals are received from the colleges for inclusion under Section 2(f) and they are found fit for inclusion as per the provisions contained in the regulations. Apart from inclusion of colleges under Section 2(f), the UGC includes the colleges under Section 12(b) of its act in terms of rules framed under the act. This makes the colleges eligible for central assistance from the Government of India or any organisation receiving funds from the Central Government." (http://www.ugc.ac.in/recog_College.aspx)

Despite a large number of government or UGC-recognised colleges in the country, there is a sharp rise in the number of private universities that follow the UGC guidelines (Establishment and Maintenance of Standards in Private Universities Regulations, 2003). The state legislatures have the final say in the matter of granting the status of private university to an education institution. Though private universities operate without financial assistance from the state, a Supreme Court ruling has made UGC recognition mandatory for them. Periodic inspections and appraisals by the UGC are compulsory for the functioning of private universities in India. Latest numbers confirm that there are 184 private universities across 20 states in the country.

Table 2: States with Private Universities

State	Number Of Private Universities	Number of 2(f) and 12(b) Colleges	Literacy Rate	Literacy Rank ⁵
Arunachal Pradesh	5	10	66.95	34
Assam	3	288	73.18	26
Chhattisgarh	6	160	71.04	27
Gujarat	17	482	79.31	18
Haryana	16	170	76.64	22
Himachal Pradesh	16	60	83.78	11
Jharkhand	3	115	67.63	31
Karnataka	8	762	75.6	23
Madhya Pradesh	12	487	70.63	28
Meghalaya	8	30	75.48	24
Mizoram	1	25	91.58	3
Nagaland	2	30	80.11	15
Odisha	3	458	73.45	25
Punjab	8	243	76.68	21
Rajasthan	38	274	67.06	33
Sikkim	4	8	82.2	13
Tripura	1	17	87.75	4
Uttar Pradesh	21	1659	69.72	29
Uttarakhand	10	72	79.63	17
West Bengal	1	432	77.08	20

Source: Compiled from the UGC

⁵Literacy rank is evaluated on a national scale to show the relative position of the states with private universities compared to the rest of India.

Table 2 shows a major disparity as to how policies affect higher education. The 20 states listed in the table have private universities enacted through state legislations. At least 13 of these states have relatively lower literacy rates than the rest of India. Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh rank 33 and 29, respectively, among all the states in India, which roughly indicates the condition of primary and secondary education in these states. However, an analysis of the number of universities and colleges in the two states presents a contrasting picture. Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh together account for nearly 30 percent of private universities and approximately 33 percent of UGC-recognised colleges in the country.

Another observation is that only two of the top 10 states in literacy ranking feature in the list of states with private universities. While the list is conspicuous with the absence of south Indian states, Kerala in particular, it is also indicative of the wrong turn that the educational apparatus of the country is taking. Among 21 private universities in Uttar Pradesh, politicians have active stake in the management of seven universities, while businesspersons hold key positions in the management of another seven universities. In at least one of these universities, the vice-chancellor and his relatives have been accused of rape and murder of a student. For all the attention that the rising literacy rates are receiving, India has to face such harsh realities in the near future. What needs to be explored is the reason for the unrestrained growth of the country's higher education institutions that are increasingly infested by cronyism. A better alternative is longed for.

July, 2014

The Mysterious Case of the Higher Education System in India (Part 2)

D Dhanuraj and Rahul V Kumar

The challenge to the Chattisgarh Private Sector Universities Act, 2002, in the Professor Yashpal versus Chhattisgarh State case is an interesting case study to begin this analysis. The Supreme Court (SC) observed:

“The consistent and settled view of this Court, therefore, is that in spite of incorporation of Universities as a legislative head being in the State List, the whole gamut of the University, which will include teaching, quality of education being imparted, curriculum, standard of examination and evaluation and also research activity being carried on, will not come within the purview of the State Legislature on account of a specific entry on co-ordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education or research and scientific and technical education being in the Union List for which the Parliament alone is competent. It is the responsibility of the Parliament to ensure that proper standards are maintained in institutions for higher education or research throughout the country and also uniformity in standards is maintained.”¹

The case against a state legislation sanctioning private universities in Chhattisgarh opened up a gamut of issues on the operation of such universities. As a follow-up, the University Grants Commission (UGC) adopted a series of steps under the UGC Act, 1956, to regulate and monitor the standards of these institutions. The guidelines were set primarily under the UGC (Establishment and Maintenance of Standards in Private Universities) Regulations, 2003. Subsequently, the number of private universities in the country increased to 184 between 2003 and 2014. These universities enjoy legislative sanctions in their respective states.

Certain observations in the UGC legislation are important and worth analysing.

¹<http://indiankanoon.org/doc/564368/>

The UGC Regulations, 2003, notes:

1. "Each private university shall be established by a separate State Act and shall conform to the relevant provisions of the UGC Act, 1956, as amended from time to time."
2. "A private university shall fulfil the minimum criteria in terms of programmes, faculty, infrastructural facilities, financial viability etc., as laid down from time to time by the UGC and other concerned statutory bodies such as the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the Bar Council of India (BCI), the Distance Education Council (DEC), the Dental Council of India (DCI), the Indian Nursing Council (INC), the Medical Council of India (MCI), the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), the Pharmacy Council of India (PCI) etc."
3. "A private university established under a State Act shall operate ordinarily within the boundary of the State concerned. However, after the development of main campus, in exceptional circumstances, the university maybe permitted to open off-campus centres, offshore campuses and study centres after five years of its coming into existence."²

The third clause happens to be the most flouted clause, as it has repeatedly led to legal sanctions against several universities. The second clause corroborates that the higher education sector is not devoid of regulations. In fact, this clause is a clear case of over regulation and inconsistent with the state laws, as envisaged in the SC judgement. However, the first clause is the most crucial one because it allows a state government to sanction each private university through a separate act. A comparative analysis shows that the UGC regulatory mechanisms are no different for government and private institutions. However, it should be noted that the first and third clauses would find it hard to go together. The first clause implies the lack of a transparent and comprehensive legislation, which endangers the basic tenet of equality before law. Since the intent is to promote private universities (the state has to clarify its position on the

² This clause refers to the widely debated issue of opening offshore campuses or campuses outside the state limit, where the university is established. The approval of such centres was subject to certain conditions and monitoring by the UGC. However, private franchisees, including coaching centres, offering courses on off-campus sites, have often exploited this clause. (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/UGC-warns-students-about-franchisee-tie-up-with-private-institutions/articleshow/20826121.cms>).

policy), the state has to ensure a level-playing field for all competent parties. Each state has to frame rules for the entire sector and not for individual applications. When the sector accommodates transparency and equality, the focus will gradually shift to improving the quality of education, upgrading courses on a timely basis and making higher education avenues accessible to all. These guidelines should be incorporated in the legislation rather than giving space for arbitrage.

Case Study 1: Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh has 21 private universities registered under separate acts. Instances of some of these acts of selected universities are noted below. The data were collected from the websites of these universities.

1. Mangalayatan University, Uttar Pradesh Act and notified by the Government of Uttar Pradesh as Act No. 32 of 2006 by its Gazette No. 362/VII-V-1-1 (Ka)-12/2006 dated October 30, 2006.

2. Mohammad Ali Jauhar University Act, 2005 (UP Act No. 19 of 2006), Notification No. 710/17-2005 VII-V-1-1 (Ka) dated June 19, 2006.

3. Invertis University, Uttar Pradesh has been established as a State Private University at Bareilly by Act No. 5 of 2009, State Legislature of Uttar Pradesh; with reference to State Government Notification No. 1105(2)/LXXIX-V-1-10-1 (Ka)-29/2009 dated September 1, 2010 on the above subject, UGC is directed to say by Reference No. 8-23/2010 (CPP-I/PU) dated February 7, 2011 that Invertis University, Bareilly has been established by an Act (No. 22 of 2010) of State Legislature of Uttar Pradesh as a State Private University.

4. The Noida International University is a UGC-recognised university and sponsored by the Maruti Educational Trust. It was given the status of a university by the Government of Uttar Pradesh vide notification No. 1108/79-vi-1-10-1 (Ka) 23-10 Lucknow, dated October 12, 2010, Act No. 27 of 2010.

5. Monad University, Hapur was established vide Act No. 23 of 2010 of the Government of Uttar Pradesh. This was published in its Official Gazette on October 12, 2010.

The implications and significance of these acts are not easily available until a Right to Information (RTI) application is filed. For instance, some of these acts are confusing, such as in the case of Invertis University. The heterogeneity of legislations compels to question their implications.

Case Study 2: Rajasthan

Rajasthan provides some vital clues on the drawbacks of state legislations or UGC regulations that prevent genuine players from entering the field of higher education in the country.

Rajasthan has notified the Guidelines for the Establishment of Private Universities by a separate act replacing the Rajasthan Private Universities Act, 2005. The guidelines cover three stages that determine the approval process for opening a private university in the state – an application stage, a secondary stage, where a government committee approves the sponsoring body of the private university, and a compliance stage, where the government ensures that the conditions are met. While these umbrella guidelines exist, some of the terms are questionable. There is no clear definition on the constitution of the government committee and the criteria for selecting the committee members. The power accorded to the committee to evaluate the proposal of a sponsoring body based on its background and the potential of the courses proposed to be offered is dubious and disputed. Since these conditions are subject to interpretation, they can be fiddled with, allowing the entry of fraudulent elements into the higher education sector.

The second problematic term is with regard to the financial requirements for setting up a private university. The application fee for the sponsoring body of a private university is Rs 1 lakh. The endowment fund is between Rs 75 lakh and Rs 2 crore. As per the norms of the UGC regulatory body, the sponsoring body should invest in books worth Rs 10 lakh initially and undertake to invest Rs 50 lakh to purchase more study materials in the first three years of the university's functioning. The regulations also stipulate the purchase of computers and furniture worth Rs 20 lakh for the university and an additional investment of Rs 1 crore in infrastructure in the first five years.

While there are clear guidelines on investments in infrastructure and reading materials for the functioning of a private university, it is equally important to provide specifications on the type and quality of journals or books that the university should procure. The guidelines, however, do not allow for such specifications. While it is accepted that a 'university' has huge institutional criteria, which can be met only through a large capital flow, the conditions stipulated for the entry of trusts, a society or a section 25C company as a sponsoring body prompt to raise questions on the possibility

of crony capital finding space in the sector. The guidelines discuss the amount to be dispersed but do not mention the outcome of such an institutional setup.

Reflections from the above Observations

The premise of this essay emphasises the importance of private participation in higher education. This step has sufficient gains not only in innovations in curricula but also in challenging the norms set in the Indian educational environment. However, the case studies and a keen observation of the education sector in India reflect the lack of proper regulation on private universities across the states. Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh are highlighted as case studies because of the proliferation of private universities in these states. There are serious issues in the legislations sanctioning private universities in the two states, not only when individual acts legislate the existence of these universities but also when blanket guidelines promote such institutions. The way forward for the private university environment in India may not be the existing regulatory provisions under the UGC. In fact, the UGC has to redefine its role of being a grant giver and regulator. The continuous monitoring of the private sector in higher education would require the functioning of an independent regulatory authority. This would be the first step to ensure transparency in the higher education sector. The intent and objective of private universities needs to be redefined. The failure of existing systems and processes in the sector was what led to the making of private universities in India. If these failed rules and frameworks regulate the private universities also, it will be a waste of time and resources and nothing short of a national shame.

Aug, 2014

MOOC – The Game Changer

D Dhanuraj

It is said that there are six types of YouTube interfaces that adjust automatically according to the type of gadgets used and connectivity speed. With such mindboggling provisions in the internet and the availability of cheap smartphones and tablets, the education sector is undergoing tremendous transformations.

Until a few years ago, the focus, in most of the developing countries, was on enrolling maximum number of students to colleges, so that the growing economy of these countries would have direct benefits out of it. The opening up of borders, trades and services called for skilled and trained manpower, which facilitated the mushrooming of higher education institutions in India. Despite the welcome move to allow private and self-financing education institutions to operate in the higher education level, the quality of education imparted dented the chances of most of these institutions to establish and brand themselves as institutions of excellence.

According to the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), more than 1.5 million engineering graduates are trained in India every year. However, the rate of recruitment from many of these institutions is negligible, leading to strains in the socio-economic milieu of many families across the country. Both unemployment and underemployment are sending out worrying signals in the sector. Recent studies show that it is not confined to the engineering field. The disturbing trend of underemployment looms large on the higher education sector in the country.

India produces around five million graduates every year but majority of them are poor in subject knowledge, and lack analytical and communication skills. The education system of the country stresses predominantly on theoretical learning, giving little relevance to practical and interdisciplinary approaches. Educators lack exposure to the functional skills that the industry requires. Most of the faculty for engineering colleges have had

hardly any industry exposure. In fact, college managements prefer graduates with teaching experience to qualified professionals with industry experience. It would be injudicious to expect an educator to be acquainted with the practical issues and industry standards without a firsthand experience of the workings of the industry.

While industry tie-ups are encouraged to overcome the challenges prevailing in the higher education sector, improvement in the quality of teaching is dubious. Faculty improvement programmes or quality improvement programmes are deficient in terms of quality and legitimacy. The teaching aids and methods are not updated for years. Given the poor quality of education offered, many self-financing colleges fear shutdown. To complicate the situation further, parents are not willing to shell out the money that these colleges demand for fear of unemployment and underemployment.

Bringing Education to the Masses

It is in this context that Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) offered by top universities from Europe and America gains significance. The idea behind MOOC is to bring education to the masses, giving anyone living anywhere in the world, albeit with access to the internet, an opportunity to study college- or university-level courses and gain a quality educational experience. A review report on MOOC published by the UK government describes MOOC as providing "... opportunities for brand enhancement, pedagogic experimentation, recruitment and business model innovation ...". Famous MOOC platforms include Coursera, Udacity and edX. Many Indian players, who are successful at the school level, are also testing the water. While these courses are generating interest among students, they have become popular among professionals, who seek to improve their skill sets on various aspects of job competitiveness.

As is the case with every social, economic or political reform, MOOC has not escaped the disapproval of traditionalists. The critics of MOOC argue that learning is a complex social and emotional process, and question the ability of MOOC to replicate classroom learning through online courses. They claim that MOOC is simply an advanced form of the distance learning system. However, in a short period, MOOC platforms have been able to encourage meet-ups and group learning among students from the same city. While some of these courses offer certificates, subject to the successful completion of assignments and pass in online written

exams, many participants opt for MOOC platforms to improve their learning and understanding of a subject for career development. Unlike the system in India, where syllabus updation takes ages, MOOC syllabuses are updated regularly and peer reviewed, thus giving the participants a unique opportunity to access the pool of the most up-to-date reading materials and other toolkits to enhance their subject learning and processing. The participants report positively on learning experiences and innovative formats of pedagogy, and highlight themes such as access, empowerment and community building among participants and academicians. Though it positively favours net-savvy participants at present, improvements in online technologies are expected to reduce the disparity among participants with regard to access, content, quality, accreditation, pedagogy, poor engagement with weaker learners and exclusion of learners without networking skills.

MOOC may not replace education institutions but the message and intent are welcome. It demands improvements in classroom teaching with better aids and content development. Both teachers and students can draw on MOOC as a benchmark to the learning and understanding of their subjects. It also offers students an opportunity to address their doubts and go beyond classroom-oriented reading lists. MOOC provides avenues for innovating, maturing and deepening, leading to the upgrade of courses for the managements of education institutions. The managements can also build business models to augment industry tie-ups and support courses using online platforms, learning from MOOC experiments. The industries can be encouraged to request the job applicants to list the successful completion of courses on MOOC platforms along with college certificates in order to give weightage to recruitments.

From a policy perspective, MOOC opens up a plethora of innovations in the Indian higher education sector. The availability of free education materials could challenge the conventional practices in the sector, and alter the nature of education institutions and their capital investments. MOOC platforms could also be modified to provide free and unbounded avenues for millions of students, who otherwise may not get an opportunity to experience the benefits of education. It is high time that the country tweaked its discussion on 'education is mass industry' taking into account the advantages of online platforms such as MOOC, while designing the future policies of higher education.

How Skill Vouchers could Bolster Employability

D Dhanuraj

The nation is going to polling booths to elect the 16th Lok Sabha and the debate is entrenched on the type and nature of policies that the new government will adopt to accentuate economic growth. The buzzword in campaigning is 'entrepreneurial climate'. Irrespective of political ideologies, almost all the political parties are trying hard to win over young voters by promising jobs, investment friendly environment and entrepreneurial climate, once they are voted into power. It would be a huge challenge for any government to convert its poll promises into policy programmes in short spans such as a hundred days, as it demands innovative action plans and out-of-the-box thinking. A government considering its poll promises as political agenda may not be able to deliver what the country desires. It requires comprehensive handholding arrangements among all stakeholders to benefit the youth at large.

Education vs. Employability

Though various initiatives like Operation Blackboard, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Mid Day Meal Scheme may have helped reduce the number of school dropouts, the quality and skills imparted in schools remain debatable. It is even more dismissive at the higher education level, where more than 50 lakh students graduate every year.

¹The National Employability Report – Graduates (Annual Report 2013) by Aspiring Minds observes that the employability of graduates varies from 2.59 percent in functional roles such as accounting to 15.88 percent in sales-related roles and 21.37 percent for roles in the business processing and outsourcing (BPO/ITeS) sector. The issues are aplenty at the recruitment level, some of which are poor communication skills and lack of analytical and cognitive skills. The report also says, “Not more than 25 percent of the graduating students could apply concepts to solve a real-world problem in the domain of finance and accounting. On the other hand, on average, 50 percent graduates are able to answer definition-based/theoretical questions based on the same concept. This shows that even though students have exposure to the concepts, they really do not understand them or know how to apply them.”

¹National Employability Report – Graduates, Annual Report 2013, Aspiring Minds

While this is the case of the educated youth, the less educated youth also lack employability skills. On one hand, the traditional and conventional channels of education fail to meet the demands of the industry. On the other, labour-intensive sectors lack the suitable set of skills among youth with low education profiles.

Sluggish Growth

India's labour markets have been stagnant for the last 20 years with 12 per cent manufacturing employment, 50 percent self-employment, 90 percent informal employment and 50 percent agricultural employment. While demographic dividend presents a huge pool of workforce to the country, economic slowdown has affected job creation. Lack of employability that is adding pressure to an already dull job market is making things worse.

The current thrust on the manufacturing sector necessitates a ready-to-deploy labour force essential for the overall growth of the economy. The National Manufacturing Policy, 2011, aims to create 100 million additional jobs in the next decade. Data show that 10 lakh youth will join the labour force every month in the next 20 years. If India does not capitalise on its escalating manpower in this phase, the benefits of demographic dividend will not be realised.

The setting up of the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) as a public-private partnership to train skilled workforce is a commendable initiative of the central government. Its objective is to contribute significantly (about 30 percent) to the overall target of skilling or up-skilling 500 million people in India by 2022, mainly by fostering private sector initiatives in skill development programmes and providing funding. Vocational Education and Training (VET) has been the major thrust area of the council over the years. It has set up 29 sector skill councils at the regional level. But the evaluation of the success rate of these training programmes is quite complex in terms of benchmarking development in the learning outcomes of the participants. There is no incentive on individual training, in keeping with the requirements and expertise demanded by the industry. The present structure also limits competition and choices among the students, while incentives for the service providers to offer focussed results and placement-oriented programmes are missing. This scenario warrants the idea of skill vouchers for better and effective service delivery of the skill training programmes.

² Great Potential of Skill Vouchers – <http://jeevika.org/great-potential-of-skill-vouchers/>

Skill Vouchers

²A skill voucher is an instrument given to an individual or enterprise, which enables the recipient to sign up for VET from any education institute accredited with the provider of the voucher. The payment for VET tuition is made with the voucher. The student can add top-up contributions to the voucher in case of any additional payment. Upon the completion of training, the accredited institution redeems the voucher from the government. This would encourage private institutions that are closer to market activities to take up the challenge of imparting skill training to both highly and less educated youth.

The scheme can be a great move towards encouraging private companies to set up finishing schools in their specific areas of work. The respective companies or their counterparts could absorb the successful participants of such programmes. The recruiters can do the benchmarking, while the trained students can bear the brand logo of the private companies that trained them. This would be different from skill training programmes offered by the government, where the gap between industrial and potential employment opportunities may still exist.

High growth areas such as manufacturing, automotive, retail, trade, transport, construction, hospitality and healthcare have the ability to provide training on the required employability skills to the potential workforce. Skill vouchers are better solutions to address the grievances about the poor quality of skilled labour, so that private companies can invest tremendously in the training aspect, as it is with the engineering giant L&T now. This will help in potential demand-driven innovations in skill training programmes that are required to meet the challenges on the employability front of the NextGen.

May, 2014

Debugging Tips for the Higher Education Sector in India

D Dhanuraj

If the decisive mandate to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to rule the country without any hassles of forming a coalition had surprised many pollsters, the choice of Smriti Irani to run the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) was the biggest surprise in post-election times. In the past, the MHRD has been in the heart of the storm for various reasons, including the dismal performance of the minister in charge and the introduction of provocative and inalcitrant syllabi. The decision to appoint Smriti Irani raised many eyebrows trading on the traditions of the party in power. Ms. Irani, of course, comes from a different genre of politicians of the present generation, and her life and work so far are quite impressive for fighting the odds to become a significant name in national politics. However, the surprises do not end here. It is quite astonishing that reform-oriented Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not try to restructure the ministry by giving it a makeover as the 'Ministry of Education', thus putting an end to the debate on the roles and responsibilities of the wider connotations of 'Human Resource Development'.

The MHRD plays a pivotal role in the country's economic growth, as it controls, regulates and facilitates the avenues of education as well as employability, which are crucial for growth and inclusive development. Education is a powerful tool and medium for any government to leverage the demographic dividend and the increasing opportunities coming to India. The status quo of the higher education sector is not encouraging for Ms. Irani. Hence, it is imperative to examine some of the most crucial issues requiring immediate attention and action from her.

The Challenges

The higher education system in India is the largest in the world in terms of number of institutions (646 universities and 33,023 colleges) and third

¹ Deloitte, Indian Higher Education Sector Opportunities Aplenty, Growth Unlimited!, 2012

largest in terms of enrolment (17 million), just behind China and the US¹. Yet, it has failed to increase the general enrolment ratio. As of now, 16 percent of students in the college-going age group enrol for higher education in India, whereas the world average is around 25 percent. There has been no attempt to increase the number of seats in different branches of study in accordance with the raise in the number of aspiring candidates of the post-liberalised age.

Another handicap of the higher education sector in India is the lack of industry linkage. The steps taken for providing industry linkage met with bureaucratic delays and red tapes, as is the case with most government initiatives. Autonomy has been widely debated but the political masters find excuses to purge it. Though 100 percent Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is allowed in the education sector, riders for the entry of foreign universities to India decimate reciprocity.

India is still a failure in providing quality education avenues. The course structure and syllabus in Indian universities, especially in government institutions, remain unrevised for many years. They are often discordant with industry and market expectations. Above all, Indian universities lack research and innovation facilities and the ecosystem to encourage them. None of the Indian universities is listed among the top 200 universities in the world. The existence of multiple agencies in the business of affiliation, approval and regulation of higher education institutions is also a major challenge. This practice has not done any good for the sector.

These multiple challenges in the higher education sector have led to the mushrooming of private education intuitions in the last two decades. While reformists and educationists argue for the crucial role of private institutions to harness the potential of the present and future generations, the central and state governments are ill-equipped to deal with the emerging situation of private universities gaining the upper hand in the country's education sector. This is because of a lack of accountability and transparency along with the entry of unethical investors in the sector.

There are two obstacles to the central government's efforts to meet the challenges by raising resources to invest in higher education.

1. Lack of competency and management practices in government institutions and the difficulties to scale up existing centres of excellence in higher education

2. Disproportionate rise in demands against available resources

The estimated value of the higher education sector in the country is USD 11 billion² and the government spending is around 3.2 percent. About 94 percent of the students enrolled in government-funded (48 percent of total enrolments) or government-controlled private institutions come under the state higher education system. This shows that the federal states have a major role in lifting education standards in India. The MHRD's role shall be confined to facilitation and not over regulation.

Some Debugging Tips

The creation of an education fund to improve the access, equity and quality of education institutions is one of the several debugging options for the erratic higher education sector in India. This fund could also be used for facilitating state-of-the-art infrastructure in higher education institutions.

Instead of having multiple agencies like the University Grants Commission (UGC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and state education departments, the formation of a national regulator to oversee the sector can solve multiple issues. A single regulatory body to govern both government and private institutions is the need of the hour. Such a framework would act as a cohesive and integrated planning body between the federal states and the union.

Skill and quality are two quintessential attributes of education. An increase in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) supplemented by quality education avenues would help bridge the gap in the employment market. To increase GER, the government has to increase spending in the sector and frame robust policies to attract private players to establish centres of excellence in education. Steps to encourage genuine private investment in the sector would help ease the cost of 'edupreneurship' in India. The 'unholy' nexus between unethical education entrepreneurs and corrupt government officials and politicians is the result of license permit raj prevailing in the sector. Instead of unscrupulous elements finding their way into the education sector to stash their black money, framing open and transparent policies would invite genuine private equity investors and serial entrepreneurs to engage in the domain. As a result, the quality of education institutions they promote will improve over time.

¹ Deloitte, Indian Higher Education Sector Opportunities Aplenty, Growth Unlimited!, 2012

The HRD Minister should decisively plan the vision document of the higher education sector and the role perceived for both state and private players. More autonomy and freedom should be granted to government and private universities in administration, admission policy and faculty recruitment along with deciding the fee structure. Regulations should be rationalised for reducing input-based constraints that hinder the operational autonomy of universities. The cost of setting up an education institution varies from region to region. Unfortunately, there has not been any sincere attempt to estimate the cost of different streams of education so far, since elements like government subsidies and exemptions on land, building influence the cost in most cases. Hence, the priority of the HRD Minister should be to value and estimate the budget of each course offered in the country in an unbiased and independent manner.

June, 2014

Ease of Doing Business in the Education Sector in India

Pooja Sundaresh

When the World Bank came out with its 'Ease of Doing Business' (EoDB) index, several low-ranked countries were discomfited. The index ranked countries based on several parameters such as the ease in setting up a business, time taken to obtain permits and licences, and procedures followed for the closure of a business, to name a few. Business here widely covered commercial activities across all sectors such as manufacturing and engineering, retail, information technology, infrastructure and education.

The education sector is one of the fastest developing sectors worldwide. India Ratings report that the education sector in India had a market size of nearly USD 110 billion in 2015, inclusive of 1.4 million schools and over 36,000 higher education institutions. These numbers, however, do not reflect India's demographic advantage, which refers to the dividends arising from having a large population of youth, who can become a highly productive future workforce. Hence, there is a need for opportune investments in the sector in order to accommodate the growing student class.

However, rather than capitalising on the advantage, the restrictive regulatory environment that exists in the Indian education sector has been driving out the potential involvement of private players in the sector. As Benjamin Franklin once said, "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." In this respect, the government has to set right several policy maladies that impair the sector, while simultaneously opening up a freer market to make room for private investments.

Regulations in the Sector

The key factor that has dissuaded private entrepreneurs from investing in the sector is the not-for-profit policy, which mandates routing 85 percent of the profits back into the sector. While the very concept of entrepreneurship is to solve existing challenges, questioning this philosophy will only keep investments at bay. Ironically, the not-for-profit rule has been inadvertently promoting the entry of fraudulent elements

into the sector, as education institutions enjoy tax benefits. Developed countries such as the US and UK have commercialised their education sector, thereby enabling multiple education institutions to sprout up and cater to the needs of the growing number of education seekers. Data provided by the National Conference of State Legislatures in the US show that student enrolment in for-profit institutions has increased to 225 percent in the past two decades. Currently, about 2.2 million students attend for-profit colleges in the US.

India's education policy deals with several other impediments. There are layers of regulatory bodies mandating overlapping rules and regulations. Educationists across India have suggested that the government should work towards coming up with uniform and simple policies that can be comprehended by all. The proposal to set up a national higher education regulatory board gains significance in this context.

Setting up an education institution is a complex and protracted affair in India. An institution cannot function, unless it is affiliated to a government university. The approval procedure requires submission of over 30 different documents to multiple departments at the state level. The riders for the establishment of an education institution in the country include possession of many acres of land that vary between three and five acres from urban to rural areas and huge capital investments. Many genuine entrepreneurs perceive these entry-level riders as unreasonable demands. The not-for-profit policy adds to the burden of these financial outflows in the initial stages of setting up an institution.

It is imperative that the state governments adopt a single window system to grant approvals and licences to start colleges in the country. New Zealand and Singapore that topped the EoDB index have their entire approval process completed in 0.5 days and all the necessary documents submitted to a single government department.

Alleviating barriers in the sector would help recover the sector's growth rate and contribute to skilling India's youth. Opening up the sector to for-profit institutions will attract genuine domestic and foreign players to invest in the higher education sector in India. Reputed universities such as the Yale University and Georgia Tech University are planning to set up institutions in the country. Setting aside certain barriers will help promote the country's growth in the field of education and attract other top universities from around the globe. India that has the world's largest student population can directly benefit from such a move – from a restrictive to a business friendly environment. Encouraging private players in the sector may ultimately lead to stimulating employment and fostering economic development in India.

March, 2016

Independence in the Higher Education Institutions in India

D Dhanuraj and Rahul V Kumar

Two events in the recent past have broached the issue of the independence of the higher education institutions in India in designing and offering courses.

The first involved a standoff between the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Indian Institute of Technologies (IITs). The UGC issued a circular to all higher education institutions, including 16 IITs, stating that the degrees offered by them should be in concurrence with the prescribed UGC norms. The IITs, in turn, contended that they were outside the ambit of UGC regulations and, hence, had no requirement to follow UGC mandates. However, several clauses of the UGC Act, 1956, are predisposed to challenge the contention of the IITs.

The second incident followed a UGC circular that made Hindi lessons mandatory in UGC-accredited institutions. The Tamil Nadu government opposed this move, arguing that the circular is not applicable to the institutions in the state. Though the UGC later withdrew the circular, the question remains whether a regulatory authority can prescribe the content for teaching in higher education institutions.

Section 22 of the UGC Act, 1956, justifies the two UGC circulars. It says, “The right of conferring or granting degrees shall be exercised only by a University established or incorporated by or under a Central Act, a Provincial Act or a State Act or an institution deemed to be a University under Section 3 or an institution specially empowered by an Act of Parliament to confer or grant degrees.” The UGC has used this clause to limit the academic independence of universities in India in designing and developing courses.

On July 5, 2014, the UGC issued a gazette notification with the approval of the central government, naming the specific degrees ('approved nomenclature' numbering 129) that universities could grant for their higher

education courses. This gazette publication allows universities to offer integrated and dual degree programmes with the freedom to offer “additional interactive courses”. However, this freedom is subject to regulations prescribed by the UGC and other statutory authorities.

In this scenario, two broad questions should preoccupy stakeholders in higher education in India.

1. Do the existing courses reflect the contemporary requirements of the job market? If not, does it call for a restructuring of the courses?
2. How efficiently can institutions design and introduce new and innovative courses?

Case Study: Kerala

A case study of the higher education sector in Kerala will help address these questions. State universities and affiliated colleges (aided and unaided) dominate the sector in Kerala. There are two deemed universities in the state. Recently, nine colleges in Kerala were granted the status of autonomous institutions. The performance of these institutions can be judged only in the near-term, when they start producing results. There are no private universities in the state.

Given the scenario, do the courses offered in Kerala's university system reflect requirements in the job market? Professional courses offered in various affiliated colleges train students for specific industrial requirements. However, traditional courses in social sciences and sciences do not enjoy general acceptance. Many of these courses offer little exposure to related career prospects. Very few students pursuing traditional courses tend to specialise or continue research in these disciplines in universities. While majority of the students prefer institutes providing professional courses for higher education, the fact remains that the preference stems from potential job openings. Due to this, traditional courses in history, politics and economics are not treated on a par with professional courses.

Two arguments hold true in the education scenario of Kerala:

1. Existing courses and knowledge generated in traditional disciplines in affiliated colleges are insufficient and inefficient
2. Traditional disciplines lack an understanding of the current market requirements

Creating the premise for re-examining the courses and developing innovative training methods could directly influence these conditions. However, traditional courses face another major challenge. The demand for professional courses has created a competitive market in the education sector, where the demand for traditional courses is fading. Hence, the challenge for the latter is to rejuvenate itself.

The Yashpal committee report on renovation and rejuvenation of higher education notes that, "... there is a need to expose students, especially at the undergraduate level, to various disciplines like humanities, social sciences, aesthetics etc, in an integrated manner. This should be irrespective of the discipline they would like to specialise in subsequently." Such a merger is likely to alter the status of traditional disciplines, even as it reorganises and strengthens professional disciplines.

The second question on how efficiently education institutions can design and introduce courses should be dealt with in this context. There should be a definite career path for students taking up traditional disciplines. If not towards the job market, it should provide them with opportunities for pursuing serious academic research. The requirement thus is to free affiliated colleges from the universities. This step has certain benefits. First, it would redefine the role of universities as centres for generating new knowledge through research. Second, it would allow the erstwhile affiliated colleges the independence to design and create courses. The prevailing system where affiliated colleges are tied to the universities is unduly affected by political interference. For instance, although the UGC gazette gives accredited colleges the freedom to offer "additional interactive courses", the existing system in Kerala would entail the university syndicate to approve it, while autonomy should allow these decisions to be made at the college level.

The way forward is important. Today, the UGC as a regulatory authority aims, at times, to go beyond its mandate. However, its limited outreach is evident in the manner in which most of its circulars are trivialised and discarded at the federal state level. The need of the hour is an efficient and proficient accreditation system with properly defined rules. Accreditation and rating should be independent of political interference. Autonomy to higher education institutions and their freedom to design courses would effectively operate under such favourable conditions.

Trial and Error in the Indian Education Sector

D Dhanuraj

Controversies continue to plague the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and the minister in charge. The ministry's decision to end German language learning in Kendriya Vidyalayas and impose Sanskrit in its place, and the suggestion to introduce a common syllabus at the national level are perceived as imperious to a secular and democratic nation. Many of these issues are settled for the time being, but such inconsistent policy decisions will affect the desired outcomes from the country's educational system.

India is projected to be one of the world's leading economies (among the first four) in another decade. This observation has created a sense of triumph among us as citizens of the country. However, we forget to understand that for any growing economy, 'quality education' is a key supplementing factor. In India, policies imposed by central and state education departments generate a lot of discussions and debates, and court controversies, whereas, discussions on flexibility and innovation that could bring a sea change in the sector remain on the backburner.

Making Informed Choices

I started using the internet in 1998 and mobile phone in 2005. At the time, they were expensive but, luckily, others were funding me. Yet, neither the funders nor the education institutions bothered to teach me how to use them. I belong to the generation that witnessed the growth and development of computers – from desktops to laptops to tablets. In the phone segment, I have seen the transformation from basic bar phones to smart phones with remarkable features. I remember one of my friends presenting a note on the future of computers, educating us that the camera and computer would be integrated, in the early years of development of desktop computers. I did not understand his arguments then, but today, I use my tablet to document all the events that I attend, ignoring the costly camera I had bought a few years ago. This taught me the valuable lesson of

informed choices and the freedom to choose them. Imposed learning is not always the right choice to many.

There is an element of spontaneous order in the whole business of evolution, adaption and maturity. It takes time but yields interesting results. The same logic can be applied in a modified way to school education by providing stakeholders with opportunities to innovate and adapt. In the school education sector in India, many consider, and it is a fact, that there is a division in the quality of education imparted in rural and urban areas. Students from the urban middle class are sent to elite schools, where they learn the prerequisites of reasoning, analytical skills, interpersonal skills and mental ability, and prepare for professional education. Government schools that cater to the students in rural areas and backward regions are generally dysfunctional and notorious for the continuous nonattendance of teachers.

The students of government schools are most vulnerable to the trial and error methods in the education sector that successive governments follow. The parents of such students worry more about the classroom environment and teaching methods than the syllabus and content. While choices are aplenty, people from poor economic backgrounds and those living in rural areas find it difficult to send their children to quality schools for the lack of money and support systems. While state governments offer scholarships and grants to needy students, such benefits are confined to government schools and the application procedures are complex and time-consuming.

Kerala has successfully addressed these issues through systematic reforms in the education sector. The state has a high density of schools, and the competition among government, private and aided schools ensures quality outcome, transparency and accountability among the stakeholders. However, this is not true for many other Indian states. Children are forced to study in government schools, as their parents cannot afford the exorbitant fees charged by private schools. While philanthropy in the school education system has played a major role in the development of the sector for many decades, the ecosystem is not encouraging in other parts of the country.

Innovation in Education

The American education system has tried to offer many innovative solutions to similar challenges. One early proposal was that of 'vouchers'. A

school voucher is a coupon or certificate awarded to a parent or to a private school on behalf of a parent, so that a child can attend a private school. The introduction of school vouchers led to a massive protest by the teachers' union across the states, criticising the government for promoting private education and undermining the quality of education in public schools. Another criticism was that it denied opportunities for children with special needs. Further innovation in the domain led Arizona Governor Jan Brewer into signing education savings accounts, officially called the Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA), into law on April 12, 2011.

A critical feature of ESA is that it enables parents to purchase several educational products and services. With ESA, parents can choose from a wide variety of online classes, personal tutors, educational therapies, textbooks and private schools. In fact, parents do not have to send their children to private schools and can opt for a combination of home school lessons, virtual school classes and individual public school classes. ESA allows individuals to deposit up to USD 2000 per year in an educational savings account for an eligible beneficiary (child) without being taxed on earnings from interest, dividends or appreciation, as long as the beneficiary uses the fund before the age of 30 for qualified educational expenses. The benefactor should open the account and make all contributions before the beneficiary turns 18. The age limits of 18 and 30 are waived, if the beneficiary has special needs. This waiver allows for fund transfers to ¹ESA after age 18 and the assets to remain in the account after age 30. This system helps corporate companies and individuals, who fund a child's education, to monitor the progress and quality of education imparted. These provisions in the ESA provide competitive informed choices for parents and allow children to choose from among different educational practices.

Let us hope that the central and state governments will put an end to the trial and error methods in the education sector and focus on the actual issues that deter the development of the sector. Let us hope for an India where all children, rich or poor, urban or rural, are empowered to have umpteen options to choose from for their education.

Jan. 2015

¹<http://goldwaterinstitute.org/article/new-day-school-choice-education-savings-accounts-turn-3-years-old>

Is the ASER 2014 an Eye-opener or just another Annual Report?

D Dhanuraj

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Centre released the ASER 2014 on January 13, 2015. This is the 10th report, which, in the centre's own words, "... is a summary of what we have observed over the tenures of UPA I and II. It is also a baseline for the new government and what it has to deal with ..."¹

ASER has been making waves in the Indian education circle for many years and is a reference point for academicians, administrators and investors. Every year, there would be an intense debate around the report, upon its publishing. In a few days' time, the report becomes a routine affair and then, just another document.

This year, the report also tried to compare the ASER to the National Achievement Surveys (NAS), conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) every year. The comparative study concludes that, "... estimates generated by these assessments neither cover the same populations nor assess the same content, their results are not comparable ..."²

Different media houses in the country publish different rating reports for college as well as school education. These reports may not be comparable but they have opened and widened the scope for informed discussion and choice among the stakeholders to improve the education system. However, how well this information is utilised for the betterment of the system is a point to ponder. Various reports on education indicate different trends in the education sector. Some may highlight the lack of infrastructure and absence of quality teachers, while others discuss the poor quality of education and lack of incentives for parents to send their children to school. In a multicultural society, the government alone cannot

¹ Madhav Chavan, ASER 2014: 1

² ASER 2014: 319

address the multitudinous issues vexing the sector. It demands transparency and participation of all stakeholders.

Achieving Universal Enrolment

Every ASER will have results, upon which many would agree and others would disagree. However, these results are considered a reflection of the education system in India. For instance, the ASER 2014 states that India is close to achieving universal enrolment for the age group 6–14, with the percentage of children enrolled in schools at 96 percent or above for six years in a row. Universal enrolment was a challenge that everybody, including the central government, wanted to address for many decades. Now that this mission is about to be accomplished, the question is what next. If the fulfilment of universal enrolment took many decades and cost millions of rupees to the exchequer, we should ask ourselves whether we have reached the fullest potential and efficiency in an efficient and systematic manner. We should contemplate whether the practice that we adopted for achieving this goal was the best possible one. If we do not assess and learn from the past, we may tend to build on the same practices, and then there is no way we can improve the system. As is said, “Those who do not know history's mistakes are doomed to repeat them.” Are we ready to accept the failures in the implementation of policies in the past or do we disregard them? We are faced with a question of meaningful governance and policymaking.

Once we attain the goal of universal enrolment, what about retaining the trend and improving the quality of education. What happens if the methods and policies that we adopt to address these issues follow the same course? Can we afford such delays and expenditures any further?

Providing Quality Education

According to the ASER 2014, 30.8 percent of all children in the 6–14 age group in rural India are enrolled in private schools. In 2013, it was 29 percent. The private school enrolment rates in the elementary stage are greater than 50 percent in five Indian states, which include Manipur (73.3 percent), Kerala (62.2 percent), Haryana (54.2 percent), Uttar Pradesh (51.7 percent) and Meghalaya (51.7 percent). For a policy maker, this is useful information and more than just a trend. This breaks the myth that parents would seek governmental assistance to educate their children. With the aspiring mass of the society on the rise, people are open and informed about the status of education through various channels. They are careful in

making decisions. The relevance of government spending and planning for the status of the education system, believing that spending more money and resources will help alleviate the problems, is being challenged.

This is indicated in another portion of the ASER. “Only 6% government schools do not have toilets but an additional 28.5% do not have toilets that are usable. 18.8% schools do not have girls' toilets and 26% have girls' toilets that are not usable or are locked. So, meeting this target should be relatively simple . . .” This is mostly true with various schemes and plans in the field of school education.

Superimposing structures and institutions alone cannot make improvements in the education sector. We need 'edupreneurs' and innovative tools to improve the system. Whether it is through the aided school system or voucher system or skill vouchers, the scope of participation and accountability should be enhanced rather than spending the limited resources on unaccountable systems. The ASER 2014 should not become another bunch of papers published every year but be able to guide us in the right direction. Every stakeholder in education should work towards bringing about reforms and innovation to wipe out the bugs that plague the education sector in the country.

Feb. 2015

An Account of the Woes of the Indian Educator (Part 1)

D Dhanuraj

The issues and challenges faced by educators in the higher education sector across the country persist, thanks to the policies of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). The quality and output of the country's education system are directly dependent on the quality of its educators. This first of a two-part series will focus on government-run arts and science colleges in Kerala and the various guidelines that plague the sector, leading to poor quality outcomes.

The most cited reasons for the fault line in the education system followed in government-run arts and science colleges are the lack of educators with doctorate degrees or PhDs, lack of continuous learning and exposure in the field of expertise, and inefficient infrastructure. Based on these conventional thoughts and assumptions, many institutional arrangements, reforms and revisions have been introduced into the system. Contrary to the expectations, these reforms and revisions have not produced the desired results. From faculty recruitment to day-to-day operations, these colleges continue to wrestle with multifarious challenges.

A Case for Competent Educators

Two critical factors need to be analysed in the case of lack of competent educators – the type and extent of training and understanding the aspiring educators have, when they are recruited and inducted into the system, and the type and extent of training they are given after recruitment for their smooth transition to become competent educators.

The number of job opportunities in sectors other than the education sector has a direct influence on the quality of education imparted by those who aspire to become educators. The job market in Kerala is short of variety and options, due to policy issues and a lack of competitive environment. Those who return to Kerala after earning MPhil or PhD degrees from reputed universities in India and abroad are often left with the

only option of 'teaching' as a profession, since the state has no major industrial players like Amazon or Google offering them jobs. Of course, there are many who are passionate about teaching and take it up as a profession with great pride. However, often, it is seen that there is an element of disconnect between expectations and personal aspirations and the ground reality.

If one is educated in a foreign university, his or her teaching style and work-time pattern will not match with the realities in Kerala. On the other hand, a locally educated person will find it difficult to understand the qualitative disruptions taking place in the education sector across the world and the way they matter for students in Kerala. When training programmes are imparted to young educators through various official channels, the actual competitiveness of such programmes should be measured in terms of how they can effectively cater to the qualifications and exposure levels of different sets of candidates. If the market is open and up for varying quality experiences, solutions could have been figured out in the process itself.

Time for an Unconventional Approach

In a standard case, an academic calendar starts in June and ends in March. However, the most relevant academic specifics are missing from the calendar, except in the case of exams. In the last few years, examination calendar has been the focus of many universities, as inordinate delays and frequent postponements had caused public resentment. If these issues seem to be fixed now, lots remain unattended.

Many education experts contended that late arrivals and early departures of teachers were the primary reason for the inefficient functioning of government colleges. This led to the introduction of the punching system in college campuses. However, there was a lack of emphasis on quality time and space for academic pursuits, including research and expositions. The issue is not lack of punctuality and discipline but the education culture attributed to the system over the years. There is a need to inculcate an academic space for freethinking and intellectual explorations that are guided by the faculty. Success and failure cannot be dependent on a single indicator called 'results in examinations'. A college should be a place that identifies and strengthens the skills and abilities of a student with teachers as facilitators. This will be a detour to the conventionalists (of Kerala), as it demands more irregularity within the framework of the academic calendar.

When available quality time is offered or mentioned in the theoretical framework of the punching system, it leads to another quixotic challenge faced by educators. The time they will devote to subject teaching and the time they will spend on clerical work. Mostly, clerical work deals with the purchase of books and sports kits, conference and seminar budgeting, preparing the vendor list for purchasing lab equipment, and, sometimes, stationery and office furniture, and the numerous records that need to be maintained in each case. Most of the educators complain about the laborious tasks, which are part of the obsolete and impractical accounting practises of the education department. One might wonder if the books could be ordered from e-commerce websites like Flipkart and Amazon. This author was told that the education departments have not yet approved these websites. Teachers still follow the convention of visiting bookstalls to purchase the books. The result - educators spend more time in the market than in the campus. The education department should set up a distinct procurement and purchase department, as per the advice and priorities listed by the faculty. This will liberate the academicians from the frittered responsibility of clerical tasks and motivate them to excel and lead the world by innovation and research.

March, 2015

An Account of the Woes of the Indian Educator (Part 2)

D Dhanuraj

An Account of the Woes of the Indian Educator (Part 2)' will explore in detail the factors affecting the higher education sector in Kerala.

There is no doubt on the need for educators updating their knowledge and understanding of their subjects. The college or university they are attached to should provide the best environment for intellectual exploration and clinical labs in their pursuit of knowledge. Unfortunately, the colleges in Kerala are politicised, due to excessive state control over matters related to education.

The student cadre of major political parties in the state reins in university vice-chancellors and college principals. As a result, their effectiveness and abilities are often compromised, while being caught up in the quagmire of keeping their personal integrity versus the fraudulence of the political equations of the governing body, from time to time. Appointments to key posts are clouded, as the education system is devoid of transparency at many levels. Though the position of vice-chancellor is prestigious in the academic community, it is becoming a challenge for honest men and women to accept this designation. Some dare to withstand the pressure extended by political cronyism, while others yield to it.

Improving Quality of Education

Coming back to the educators, academic experts say that exposure to successful foreign education models is a key to improving teaching quality. However, there is a cumbersome procedure involved, if an educator wants to travel abroad to participate in an international conference. In Kerala, it requires applying for permission at various levels – from the Department of Collegiate Education to the Chief Minister's Office. There is no logic behind such a tedious process, as regular laws will deal with any violation of law or illegal activity by the professor/teacher, while being abroad.

Online presentations/video conferencing/webinars can save both time and money. Unfortunately, they are not yet popular with the academic communities in the country. Our colleges are mostly ill equipped with poor broadband connections and inadequate conference facilities. Moreover, the teachers are not exposed to the technological novelties in the academic milieu. The days of approval systems are now passé, and it is high time that the educators were more concerned with webinars and online communities of scholars. As long as promotions and increments depend on the number of publications and presentations made in conferences held in India (foreign trips are tricky for the above reasons), the standard and quality of teaching and research could only be watered down. This is because quantity has to be accommodated over quality for an oversupply of scholars and a shorter demand of institutions.

Revising Outdated Guidelines

The prevailing seminar guidelines are outdated and there is an urgent need to revise them, reflecting the current reality. Under the present guidelines, the teachers are asked to pay huge sums after auditing, citing flimsy reasons. For instance, Rs 35 per person/per day for refreshment, Rs 750–1000 for the resource person, who is supposed to speak at a session of 90 minutes, and the purchase of stationery limited to Rs 1400. It is clear that these norms are outdated and only help to complicate matters further. Hence, those who want to organise constructive interactions and seminars find it strenuous to get speakers on board under the rigorous guidelines. So they will be forced to deviate from the set rules by rigging the procedures.

It is difficult to raise the bar in a rigid framework of conferences and seminars, especially when the regulators, implementing agency and beneficiaries remain with the organisers. This raises serious issues with the top-down approach or centralised planning existing in the academic circles.

Redefining Universities as Centres of Excellence

Now let us move on to probe the issues plaguing the education system at the university level. The most important responsibility of the universities in Kerala continues to be conducting examinations and conferring educational degrees, and not promoting research. One should strive for strengthening the colleges so that they shall become autonomous and independent, and the universities shall become centres of excellence in different areas of research. In a state like Kerala, the public's trust in the

universities and colleges is waning, so any proposal to have in-house examinations and evaluations would raise doubts about the transparency of the system. If private universities are allowed to operate in Kerala and all the universities are given a level-playing field to set the norms, the autonomy of the colleges publicised through their certificates would be valued in a market economy and benchmarked along with the global best or, at least, the national best. This would reduce the scope of malpractice and abuse in the system.

'Equality' has to be the focus of the argument for promoting higher education in Kerala. The resource allocation of the government has already strained the sector, as demand and merit take a backseat in the decision making process. The decline in the quality of higher education is inevitable, given the ecosystem prevailing in the sector.

The government of any day should see improving the quality of higher education as its greatest social commitment. Alas, the government is bothered not about quality but quantity, which is a measurement of how distributive its justice is to the society. There is no objective evaluation of the cost of services delivered in the education sector. As a result, competitive environment and level-playing field are missing from the sector.

April, 2015

The Fiasco of Engineering Colleges in Kerala

D Dhanuraj & Deepthi Mary Mathew

The golden era of engineering colleges in Kerala is ending. The Kerala Technological University (KTU) has indicted 23 colleges, where not a single student was admitted this academic year. Another 13 colleges, where student admittance was less than 30 percent are also under observation. The plan for the closure of nonperforming engineering colleges in the state comes in the wake of stringent measures put forward by KTU. As per an order issued by the state's higher education department, all colleges offering B. Tech and M. Tech courses have to be affiliated with KTU. Set up in 2014, KTU is now the regulator in the field of engineering education in Kerala, where any form of regulatory mechanism was absent for nearly a decade. Most of the problems that popped up in this domain were due to the absence of a regulator. The corrective steps initiated by KTU can help to clean the mess in the technical education sector in the state.

The Rise and Decline of Engineering Colleges

The boom period of engineering colleges in Kerala began in 2001, when the cabinet headed by Chief Minister A K Antony adopted a landmark policy that allowed the private sector to start self-financing colleges offering professional courses in the state. Of the total number of seats in the colleges, 50 percent were to be filled as per the admission norms followed by government colleges, and the rest were left to the college managements to decide. This understanding resulted in a steady increase in the number of engineering colleges in Kerala, owing to the prolonged demand for technical courses.

Despite the emergence of a large number of engineering colleges, there was no commensurate improvement in the quality of professional education offered in the state. The pool of engineering colleges made the engineering degree comparatively cheaper, as the banks in Kerala made a beeline to offer education loans to the students. The 'engineering degree

syndrome' in the state propelled the students to depend on education loans, without appraising the value of the newly emerged engineering colleges. There was also a substantial increase in the flow of students from Kerala to the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu for pursuing studies in engineering.

Today, the private engineering colleges are not able to sustain the momentum, and the cycle of demand and supply has reached a saturation point. This is evident from the large number of seats lying vacant in several engineering colleges in the state. Around 118 self-financing colleges were able to claim only 40 percent of their merit seats. The banks that supported the students through education loans are also getting into trouble, as these loans have transformed into non-performing assets (NPA). The total outstanding education loans in the state add up to Rs 9370 crore, of which total NPA amounts to Rs 100 crore.

The government is trying its best to fill up the vacant seats in the engineering colleges. It has put forth measures like relaxation in the selection criteria, including priority for marks scored in class 12 public examination over entrance examination. It would be interesting to speculate the next move by the government to save the ailing engineering colleges in the state. Probably, it would scrap the concept of engineering entrance examination altogether. However, whether these measures will provide any meaningful solution to the real problem is doubtful.

Cleansing the Sector

The cleansing of the technical education sector could have happened even before, provided we had a mechanism to assess the quality of engineering colleges in the state. Credit Bureau Information Limited (CIBIL), a credit information company in India, collects and maintains records of an individual's payments on loans and credit cards. This information is used to create Credit Information Reports (CIR) and credit scores for individuals, which will be provided to banks and other credit institutions to evaluate and approve loan applications. In the same line, a record on education loan defaulters in the state could be linked to the institutions where they have studied. Defaulting shows the inability of a student to repay the loan, as s/he is not able to find adequate employment. This throws light on the failure of the education institution to equip the student with necessary skills and quality for the job market or lack of interest shown by companies in campus placements from that institution. If the students from a given institution form a large part of the loan

defaulters, and proper reports and credit scores are maintained in line with CIBIL, it will discredit the institution. The banks will be unwilling to provide education loans for students opting for the institution. Ultimately, the market mechanism will operate, leading to the closure of the institution. If such a mechanism had existed in Kerala, we would not have witnessed a mad rush for engineering colleges.

The government should be able to adopt sound policies that will help reform the higher education sector in Kerala. The quantity of education institutions does not matter. What matters is the competency of institutions in imparting quality education experience to students.

Nov, 2015

The Symbiosis of Universities and the Society: An American Experience

D Dhanuraj

On an official trip to the US as part of the 'International Visitor Leadership Programme' (IVLP) last month, I had the opportunity to visit the leading think tanks and universities in the US. I was lucky enough to visit George Town University, George Washington University and George Mason University at Washington, Columbia University at New York, North Carolina State University at Raleigh, De Paul University at Chicago and University of Michigan at Michigan, to name a few.

Most of these universities have a long tradition of more than a century and are known for their academic freedom, credibility and intellectual prowess. All of them are proud of their alumni, who have served important positions in the political, social and economic spheres globally. They are supported by endowments and philanthropic contributions, in addition to state funding (in the case of a few) and industry support.

Breaking the Wall

My experience in the US universities has been strikingly different from my experience with the various universities across India. The first visible difference is the absence of a compound wall or a big arch that demarcates and separates these universities from their immediate neighbourhood. They are beautiful architectures with mixed surroundings. I could see busy streets (they follow the traffic rules so it is not as noisy as it is here), lined up with restaurants, commercial offices and public parks, adjoining the university buildings. These spaces are not confined to the teaching and student fraternity but are integrated to be part of a larger community of residents. Universities here are construed as centres of free space for interactions and exchange of knowledge and information with all stakeholders of the society. Uninhibited and constant interaction makes a huge difference in knowledge creation and research activities in these centres of academic excellence. Alas, here in India, we believe that

universities should be secluded. I wonder if this segregation is meant to ward off the influence of the local community over the students.

Most of the universities in the US have strong motivating partners in industries and chambers of commerce and industry. These partnerships have formed healthy platforms for industry and academia dialogues, enriching research collaborations. In Raleigh city, I interacted with the Research Triangle International (RTI), an initiative to support and facilitate the academic brilliance of the universities around the town, namely, North Carolina State University, Duke University and Chapel Hill University. The whole area has been developed to retain and harness the talent pool that graduates from these universities, so that the different types of institutions (companies, think tanks, government bodies etc) can set up their operations to absorb these talents. This increases the chances of the best talents staying back and building their career in the city, thus boosting the state economy. The presence of universities around provides the institutions with ongoing linkages with the latest research demanded by emerging scenarios. It was obvious how closely these different institutions worked for the common good. The fact that these universities are known for their excellence in academics and the US is known for its scientific pursuits and contribution to the betterment of the humanity does not surprise me anymore.

The Kerala 'Model'

When I try to think of just one thing about the universities in Kerala that I could be proud of, I am disappointed. The universities in the state are riddled with petty politics, while academic brilliance is pushed to the backstage. They are plagued by a lack of vision and waste their resources on overly politicised senate meetings and their approvals. They are burdened with the business of affiliation and conducting examinations, and have little time for intellectual pursuit, which is, in fact, their primary responsibility. If the universities need to achieve academic excellence, it should create an open and competitive atmosphere that will attract the best talents from, at least, around the country to join university education in Kerala. Somehow, the entrenched belief that the universities are to be funded by the state (we are suspicious of private funds for their motives and agenda) has to give way to accountable and honest interaction with everyone in the society.

We need to build institutions of excellence first. Then we should do away with the clichéd aversion to having industry–commerce–education linkages. Think about initiatives like Start-up Village and Infopark in Kochi.

Universities and colleges around have shown little interest in regular interactions with these institutions and building knowledge societies around the city. The local governments should harness the expertise of the colleges to improve their governance, service delivery systems and brand building. The colleges should demolish the barriers of entry to broadcast the knowledge created by them on a day-to-day basis. They should promote interactions with the local communities and leaders in commerce, industry, finance and technology. The faculty and student fraternity should be the flag bearers of development and innovation in the region in order to brand the entire ecosystem legitimised on vibrant and intellectual summits committed to everybody. Kerala could be tipped for global centres of academic excellence and innovation, since it has already achieved the basic human development indices. If this is to happen, the universities should be open to ideas and ready to accept the freedom for academic brilliance.

Tail end: How did Google became so popular and invincible in a few years' time? The answer lies in the restricted knowledge sharing practices that universities followed or the constraints they have had in the past. They believed in hiding information and restricting access to information, but Google promoted information sharing and limitless access to information. Google is now an inevitable element in our everyday lives, while universities are certainly not!

Dec., 2014

How does Number Matter to Schools?

Deepthi Mary Mathew

The education sector in Kerala has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. From the problems related to the publishing of the Class 10 public exam results to the textbook crisis, the controversies in the sector spell out the obvious – the 100-percent literate state is losing its glory in the field of education.

Challenging the Teacher's Package

Recently, the High Court of Kerala struck down the provision in the Kerala Education Rule (KER), which lays down a teacher–pupil ratio of 1:45 to determine the staff strength of the schools in the state. The judgement came against the backdrop of the teacher's package announced by the state government on August 6, 2015. As per the package, for all the teaching posts fixed in 2010–11, the government will sanction only those appointments after 2011–12, owing to retirement, death, resignation, promotion and transfer. The teacher–pupil ratio of 1:30 and 1:35 will be followed for lower primary schools and upper primary schools, respectively. However, from 2015–16, the teacher–pupil ratio of 1:45, as laid down in the KER, will be applicable.

The High Court of Kerala had annulled the first teacher's package announced by the state government in 2011. The second teacher's package, the subject matter of this article, was announced after consultations with the managements of some of the government-aided schools. However, a group of aided school managements filed a petition in the High Court against some of the provisions in the package. The apprehensions about the package were with regard to the teacher–pupil ratio and the condition of seeking prior approval from the government for the appointment of the teaching staff in government-aided schools. The court stayed the teacher's package for two months and later, struck down the contentious provisions in the package.

One of the findings of the Kerala High Court regarding the teacher–pupil ratio was that it was against the norms specified by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE). The court held that the teacher–pupil ratio should be calculated based on the strength of the students in each class and not on the strength of the students in the entire school. The RTE Act sets a teacher–pupil ratio of 1:30 for lower primary schools and 1:35 for upper primary schools, as against the ratio of 1:45 prescribed by the KER. Since education comes under the Concurrent List, the court held that the centre's decision would be final and the norms stipulated in the RTE Act should be followed. The court has also ruled out the need for seeking the government's permission for the appointment of the teaching staff in government-aided schools.

The Number Game

Though the debate here primarily concerns the teacher–pupil ratio, the case of the appointment of the teaching staff also pops up in the context of government-aided education institutions in Kerala. Nearly 57 percent of a total number of 12,627 schools in the state were in the aided category in 2012–13. This confirms that the government-aided schools continue to be a big player in the education sector in the state. The government is liable to pay the salaries and pensions of all the teaching and non-teaching staffs in these schools. The mounting salary and pension expenditure has become a burden on the ailing state exchequer. The government with the new teacher's package tried to limit its future financial burden by restraining future staff appointments. However, with the High Court order, new vacancies should be announced to fulfil the 1:30 and 1:35 teacher–pupil ratio criteria in lower and upper primary schools. This will only augment the financial burden of the state.

The question before us is whether this number game really matters. At the end of the day, what is important is what a child has gained from education. The government should be able to come up with a better mechanism to define its support to aided schools and delineate its role in regulating these institutions. The managements of the aided schools should be allowed to function effortlessly. The schools should be financially and operationally independent, and competitive enough to impart quality education to the students. While the enrolment of students to government and government-aided schools is decreasing, there is a proportionate increase in the number of students seeking admission in private schools. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2014, Kerala

is one among the top five states with the highest private school enrolment rate (62.2 percent) in the elementary stage. Evidently, less than 40 percent of the students in the state go to government or government-aided schools. This confirms the fact that the students prefer private schools to government or government-aided schools, when it comes to quality education. The schools that succeed in imparting quality education to the students will persist in the long run, while others will cease to exist.

The need of the hour are progressive and long-standing reforms in the education sector in Kerala. Only then can the state ensure that it will be known for the quality of education imparted in its education institutions rather than the unwarranted controversies created by a weak education system.

Jan., 2016

Untangling the 'Autonomy' of Higher Education Institutions in India

D Dhanuraj

The debate on the quality of education institutions and the courses they offer has been raging for many years. The demographic dividend is still an elusive panacea, given the dismal state of education in the country. While few higher education institutions from India are listed in the global ranking of academic excellence, meritocracy has given way to mediocrity, and political intervention in the running of academic institutions has ruined the case for transparency in the sector. India has adopted a highly centralised system of regulation in higher education by constituting different (sometimes, overlapping) bodies to manage the sector from the time of independence. These structures are not suited to take on the present challenges and global demands in the field of education.

The Autonomy Debate

Various reforms are proposed to tackle the changing circumstances in the education sector. One of the priority areas of suggestion is granting 'autonomy' to the colleges with an established record of academic excellence. The autonomy debate starts with the kind of autonomy suitable for these colleges. As per the reports of various committees appointed to study the matter, the first step in the process is granting academic autonomy, which gives the institutions the freedom to design their courses and syllabus, prepare examination timetables etc. Under academic autonomy, the teaching staff of the institutions will evaluate and assess their students. This proposal is close to the theory of education ('teachers are the best evaluators of the performance of their wards') and one of the best practices followed by most of the leading academic institutions in the world. Academic autonomy helps colleges to adapt to the changing demands, employ innovative practices in designing new courses, bring the best talents to the faculty and best practices to managing the institutions, and utilise the campuses for imparting the best knowledge to the students

by going away from the dictates of the present university regimes. The colleges will be able to raise resources by introducing new courses and exposing the teachers and students to various industries and market-oriented avenues. In the case of traditional courses, the state could continue assured support for a reasonable time, even if there are no takers, citing the virtuous cycle and transient nature of success and selection of courses.

If India ranks poor in producing Nobel laureates and filing patents, the reason is the lack of autonomy in its universities and higher education institutions. Therefore, the debate on autonomy has another interesting dimension. The colleges with academic autonomy depend on the universities for their administrative requirements, because of which both the parties are not autonomous in their core functions. The present university system in India is doomed to fail, as it focuses on administrative tasks rather than research and innovation. Most of the universities have more than a hundred colleges affiliated to them. These colleges are located far away from the universities, the distance thus hindering the sharing of resources and responsibilities like faculty, library and syllabus upgrade.

Government Control versus Autonomy

The recent controversies related to the autonomy debate are worth examining. Many academic experts have opposed the power the Ministry of Human Resource and Development (MHRD) wields in the administrative functioning of IIMs and IITs. The debate is more or less to retain the autonomous functions with these institutions of national importance and do away with the proposed framework of administration by MHRD. At the same time, Maharaja's College in Ernakulam, Kerala, witnessed more than a month-long strike against the move to grant autonomy to the college. The issues raised in Maharaja's included the fate of reservation and continued state patronage after granting autonomy. These are unwarranted arguments because the gazette notification by the state government on autonomy provides the flexibility to return to the status quo ante on completion of five years of autonomy. The notification also states that autonomous institutions should follow state rules, until a new set of rules and regulations is formalised. These two different scenarios of IITs/IIMs and Maharaja's demand the creation of a higher education regulatory board, scrapping government control through the bureaucratic network. As long as the University Grants Commission (UGC) continues to operate as a grand dispensation agency, it cannot work as an effective regulatory board in the higher education sector.

Untangling the 'autonomy' of higher education institutions in India is feasible by adopting certain practical steps. Funds and scholarships could be instituted for students instead of colleges. The procedures for establishing and sustaining higher education institutions should be simplified under a regulatory board, so that the demand–supply mismatch in the sector can be minimised. This could pave the way for the establishment of academic brands based on market-tested qualities essential for the survival of the students and institutions. Academic freedom is essential for the success of any education institution. Along with academic freedom, education institutions should be encouraged to raise resources for attaining global standards and scale, independent of political interference and academic bureaucracy.

Aug, 2015

How Market Competition Failed to Deliver Quality School Education in Kerala?

D Dhanuraj

It is a widely known fact that the achievements of Kerala in the sectors of education and health are comparable with those of the developed countries. The recognition for the value and role of education in social development came as early as 1817 in the form of a royal declaration in the princely state of Travancore, which stated universal education paid for by the state as an objective of state policy. The role played by religious organisations and progressive movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, supported by the rulers of those times, to establish schools set a new era in the education sector of Kerala, unlike other parts of the country, by the time India attained independence in 1947. The Education Bill of 1957 was another milestone that helped to universalise school education in Kerala. Schools owned by private managements were given incentives in the form of aid and recognition, which eventually led to the proliferation of schools in the government-aided sector by the 1970s and 1980s. Gender discrimination in school education was unheard of in this part of the world and the respect accorded to the sector, guaranteed by the Education Act of 1957, attracted the toppers in university education to teaching jobs.

Privatisation of Education

The onset of economic liberalisation in India had two immediate impacts on its education sector. First, job opportunities mushroomed in other sectors (though it was not the case in Kerala), and skilled graduates started looking for career avenues other than teaching. Second, the quality of school education deteriorated, which resulted in the deterioration of the quality of higher education in the increased number of professional colleges. With the job market revolving around the sprucing up of overall talent and soft skills, a realignment of thought process among the parents did take place during this time. They started believing that English medium education will work miracles for their children in their future careers. Many

started questioning the quality of education in government and government-aided schools, which led to the revision of syllabus and introduction of new tools and techniques in pedagogy. Due to the lack of transparency and the inability of the policy makers to communicate effectively with the affected parties (parents and students), the parents started opting for schools recognised by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). Increased demand for private education, which was only natural, as private became the buzzword of the 1990s, and the liberal stand taken by the state government of the time augmented the setting up of more privately managed CBSE-recognised schools in Kerala. Along with this, the change in the demographic level (due to the low fertility rates) increased competition among the schools in Kerala, as the number of students started dwindling.

In the past 10 years, private school managements and teachers have had to push their manoeuvres in the art of sales by offering freebies such as free bus service to attract children to their schools. Naturally, this would have raised the competition among the schools along with the quality of school education. However, an evaluation of the sector raises many doubts about how this market principle has been practised in the state.

Politics at Play in Declaring SSLC Exam Results

There is an evolved practice of the Ministry of Education becoming the regulator and sole authority for issuing licenses in the education sector (remember, the party in power that does not have any independent outlook holds the key). The declaration of Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examination results by the Education Minister has become a political tool for the party in power to boast its prowess. The fact that the Board of Secondary Education, an independent authority, conducts the SSLC examination, makes one question the rationale behind the minister declaring the results. The trend has become obviously churlish in the last couple of years with every government influencing the valuation settings by making it more and more liberal. This has led to quantum leaps in the SSLC examination results of Kerala in the last decade. This year, the pass percentage is 95.47 percent, which is the highest in the history of the state.

Going by the political overtures, it is difficult for any government (as long as the Education Minister declares the results, at least) to emphasise on

merit and quality, while directing the evaluation of answer papers. Some may argue that the quality of education has improved over the years, which is being reflected in the SSLC results. However, this argument falls short with a brief evaluation of the performance of the students in the higher education level and their standing in the job market years later. The pass percentage in higher education institutions has not increased or led to quid pro quos similar to SSLC results. The limited number of seats in the higher education sector should have brought the cream out of the best. However, interactions with college teachers and managements reveal that many students are unable to communicate effectively even after graduation. Companies have opted out of recruitments from the education market in Kerala stating that most of the candidates are not suitable for their workplace for lack of understanding of concepts and soft skills. Many of the professional education institutions are strained, due to the low quality feed, which, in a sense, contradicts the quality exhibited at the SSLC level.

The state government's decision to give weightage to the marks scored in the higher secondary examination for the professional course entrance examination has changed the preferences of the parents again. With the increase in pass percentage and high marks awarded to the students passing the SSLC examination, most of the parents are bringing their children back to the Kerala syllabus. In a way, this move would save many government and government-aided schools from closing down. As a result, pressure is mounting on the CBSE schools in Kerala to be more liberal in their evaluation process. The government has also decided against issuing no objection certificates to more private schools.

Rank Schools, Not Students

The debate in this article is not about the quality of education in CBSE schools against state schools, but the choices and options given to the parents and students. Demand in the market reflects the state of affairs in the sector. Hence, any government of the day should not rule the matters in the education sector in its favour, as it distorts a competitive market, which, in effect, depreciates the quality of education. In the case of private investments in education, the investors would have exercised due diligence in this effect. The participatory nature of the institutions in Kerala has the in-built mechanisms to set a level-playing field, if the system fails in due course.

What we require is an efficient and transparent ranking system for schools similar to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) published by Pratham. With the high density of schools in Kerala, the market offers opportunities to conduct a survey for ranking schools. Though it may sound difficult in the school education field, unlike in the higher education sector, surveys are feasible in Kerala. Along with pass percentages and enrolments, indicators like location, infrastructure, including the condition of school buildings, toilets, drinking water facility and playgrounds, qualification of teachers, pupil–teacher ratio etc could be incorporated in the survey. In addition, the number of students enrolled for higher education and the pass percentage could be tracked in the longer period. This information available in the open domain could offer a more balanced approach to improve the quality of school education in the state.

May, 2014

Higher Secondary or Higher Education: Is the Government Confused?

D Dhanuraj

The allotment of new batches to high schools to upgrade them to higher secondary schools has set off the latest controversy surrounding the education sector in Kerala. Since its introduction, the higher secondary sector has been courting controversies in regular intervals. The pre-degree, which was the forerunner to the higher secondary, also had its share of polemics in the 1980s.

It was in the early 1990s that the government decided to set up higher secondary courses to replace pre-degree courses by delinking them from colleges. There were predominantly four subject groups under the pre-degree system catering to different combinations of subjects. Science, humanities and commerce streams replaced these subject groups in the early years of plus two courses. Different combinations were introduced later.

Higher secondary batches were allotted in the high schools of yesteryear. While the early phase of school education (up to the high school level) was demand driven, facilitated by government policies, the allocation of higher secondary schools was roughly based on the replacement criteria. When the universities were responsible for offering the pre-degree courses, the seats were split among the three main universities in the state. With the introduction of the higher secondary, these structures were replaced at the state level by a single board under the Ministry of Education. Thus, the allotment of higher secondary courses to high schools came to be based on a number game.

Selective Privatisation of Education Sector

The traditional private education managements in Kerala have been active and omnipresent in the school education level. However, the conservative administrative system and political class was averse to the

opening up of the arts and science college sector to private managements. Therefore, the best practices in the school level did not graduate to the higher education level. This limited the scope and scaling up of the education sector. Additionally, the regulatory systems and over-protective policies of the government stymied the growth of the higher education sector in the state. When the government finally decided to frame a policy for setting up self-financing colleges offering professional courses, the damage had already been done.

There is no doubt that the powerful private managements contributed significantly to the school education system in Kerala. With the less number of job opportunities and shrinking space for industries, school education became an avenue for the job aspirants in the 1980s, leading to a distorted demand and supply equation. This increased the bargaining power of the managements, as they become one of the chief custodians of jobs in Kerala. While the demographic dividend of Kerala was confined to high enrolment rates, due to the proliferation of schools, the state failed in building an ecosystem, which would carry the benefits of the school education to the higher education level. The 'aided' system in Kerala thus become a tool for political bargain for the different private school managements during the allotment process for higher secondary courses, as it inaugurated fresh rounds of teachers' appointments, which yielded good returns for the managements.

Innovations to Disrupt Distortions

The distorted mechanisms that Kerala has practised over the years render complications in deciding the options and choices for the number of seats to be allotted at the higher secondary level. On the one hand, there is an increasing tendency to ensure 100 percent success rate at the high school level, leaving merit in doldrums. On the other hand, there is a profligacy of engineering colleges. The conventional arts and science colleges continue to offer outdated courses with low quality content, which deters students from joining them for fear of fewer career options. Added to the woes are the low fertility rates and passing of the demographic dividend from the state. There is also the issue of excess teachers at the school level. The open school system is highly unpopular because of the social and cultural prejudices predominant in the education system. There is an argument in favour of allotting more number of seats to the schools in north Kerala,

since the schools in south Kerala have higher secondary seats in excess. At the same time, several higher secondary schools have reported vacancy of seats, similar to the case of many self-financing engineering colleges in the state.

There is no single solution to these vexed issues hounding the higher education sector of Kerala. It demands an overhaul of the sector and innovations at every level of education. Innovations and new models are viable at the school level, since the state has almost assured school education to every child. The presence of private unaided sector could be a balancing force at the school level to ensure quality and competition. At the higher education level, the state could attract private players to set up skill development courses and certificate programmes. The policy ought to be to open up the sector for autonomous colleges and private initiatives, if the government does not have adequate resources to set up new colleges. The autonomous colleges and private universities should be allowed to choose their syllabus and academic programmes. The role and responsibility of the government is not in dillydallying with unnecessary regulations but ensuring that all students have enough options to choose from.

Sep., 2014

An Evaluation of Activity-oriented Learning in Schools

D Dhanuraj & Lekshmi R Nair

The success of Kerala in the field of school education is considered a benchmark for the rest of the country. Despite being championed as a state with a high literacy rate and well-established schooling system, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) by Pratham indicates that several concerns continue to hassle the quality of school education in Kerala. Ever since the implementation of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in the mid-1990s, the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) Kerala have taken several steps towards the implementation of the practices followed in the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) system in the state.

For the last two decades, Kerala has been engaged in a process of continuous revision of its school curriculum and pedagogy, shifting away from textbook-oriented teaching to activity-oriented learning methodologies. To this end, a new set of textbooks, which followed an 'outcome-focussed assessment approach', was introduced in 2014 for classes two to ten, after repeated calls for change in textbooks so that they would fall in line with the changes in the curriculum of other education boards in the country. These initiatives were aimed at improving the quality of school education with a focus on developing skills such as critical thinking, rational thinking and interrelated knowledge among the learners. Since a considerable amount of money has been invested in this exercise, it is necessary to assess whether the intended learning outcomes were achieved or not. It is also necessary to assess the rate of improvement in the quality of education imparted in the schools.

Study Reveals Abysmal Performance of Class Four Students

A recent study conducted by the Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR) on the performance level of class four students in mathematics and

general science in government and government-aided schools shows that despite the initiatives aimed at improving the quality of school education, there has been no significant gain in the learning outcomes of these students. The results from the field study reveal that students continue to spell even basic words wrong and cannot solve simple arithmetic operations such as multiplication and addition. Moreover, many schools still follow the traditional teaching methods in spite of the shift in focus from textbook-oriented teaching to activity-oriented learning. The study also found that the performance of students in schools in areas classified as 'tribal' by SSA Kerala was abysmally poor compared to those from schools in urban and rural areas.

Based on the findings of the study, one of the main reasons for the poor performance of the students could be that schools focus on completing the curriculum as opposed to delivering quality education that will result in learning. This is because there is a great focus on enforcing the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE) that stresses on age-appropriate learning and stipulates the completion of the syllabus within the allocated time. As a result, the system fails to lay a good foundation in basic learning in the child's early school years.

The workload of the teachers has increased significantly, due to the focus on activity-oriented learning, as it is in addition to the task of completing the syllabus within the stipulated period. Moreover, studies based on surveying the teachers show that the teachers are unacquainted with the principles of activity-based learning, regardless of the huge amount spent on training the teachers by SSA Kerala. All these issues have resulted in the utter failure of the curriculum reforms implemented in the government and government-aided schools. The rising popularity of unaided schools recognised by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) or Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) in Kerala could be owed to the poor quality of education imparted in the government and government-aided schools.

SWOT Analysis of Education System

Education reforms aimed at improving the quality of education in the government and government-aided schools in Kerala are reduced to

imitating changes carried out in the curriculum of other education boards. Whether the existing learning environment in these schools is conducive to the proposed reforms and the teachers in these schools are capable of putting them into practice need to be evaluated properly before enforcing the different reforms.

Prior to experimenting with frequent changes in curriculum and pedagogy at the school level, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of the existing education system in the schools should be conducted. As long as SSA continues to distribute grants to schools, the system will not allow competition and innovation. A state such as Kerala that faces second-generation issues will be confined by universal approaches. Therefore, it is time to go beyond the conventional grant-based approach.

The standardisation of activity-oriented learning is a major challenge, as the abilities of the target group, the students, vary from place to place. A systematic and continuous analysis of the target group is an important element in the process. The introduction of technology and audio-visual teaching aids in pedagogy is also essential in this media age. The scope of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) and smart classrooms can be expanded in order to promote collaboration between teachers and learners, locally and internationally. This will reduce the burden on the teachers, save time and improve the performance of both the teachers and students.

May, 2016

Debating Kerala's Claims about Literacy (Part 1)

D Dhanuraj and Rahul V Kumar

This series of two articles tries to examine the condition of Kerala's school education system, with a focus on the districts of Wayanad and Palakkad. These articles hinge on the case studies of the schools catering to the community of Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the districts to highlight certain challenges and suggest policy alternatives to cope with them.

Introduction

Kerala's achievements at the school education level have been noticeable and praiseworthy compared to the rest of the country. As per the Economic Review of 2013, the state has 12,627 schools, of which 56 percent are government-aided. It is believed that Kerala's tryst with literacy has reached a point, where the state ought to be self-satisfied. Based on this complacency, Kerala has ascended a higher platform to address second-generation problems in school education. These problems are perceived as technical in nature and, hence, cured with an expanding bureaucratic apparatus. Two decades after Kerala has been declared a 100percent literate state, the search should have focussed on understanding the various possibilities and potentials of furthering the education system. The reforms should have been intended for unbridling these possibilities rather than tying them down for want of technical improvement.

The Context

A few months ago, 'The New Indian Express' published a story based on the findings and data from a study by the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA). The study revealed exceedingly high dropout rates among students from the ST community in Wayanad and Palakkad districts. These figures were higher than the official findings of the state, which is 37 percent. The Economic Review of 2013 puts the overall dropout rate

among schoolchildren in Kerala at 1.05 percent, while it is 3.71 percent for ST students. The figures provided by KILA could have several implications. In the case of students, these implications can be broadly categorised as follows:

1. the students were unable to attend classes, due to social, economic or other technical constraints that hinder easy access to schools
2. the students found it least interesting to attend schools

In the case of Kerala, the government policies are aimed at remedying the first category of problems. This category is significant because it is preferred by the state administration to expand its reach on particular communities. Providing more benefits to improve social, economic and technical amenities expands the administrative and bureaucratic wings, and implies increasing costs towards funding the activities.

The second category of implications is mostly misunderstood by the state administration. It is often considered a cue to the fact that schools and infrastructure should be modified to attract more students. Hence, reforms and schemes like smart classrooms, midday meals, distribution of accessories like bags and umbrellas, etc have been attempted to draw parents to enrol their children in schools.

The case studies of the two districts highlighted in the KILA study will help understand the implications of such state-led efforts. The authors of this article were fortunate enough to have had an opportunity to visit several schools in the districts and consult education experts to understand the nature of the problems confronting these schools.

Case Studies: Wayanad and Palakkad

As per the official estimates presented in the Economic Review of 2013, Wayanad and Palakkad have high dropout rates compared to the rest of Kerala. These numbers, however, remain particularly high for the students in the ST category. Both these districts also have high enrolment rates for ST students compared to the rest of the state.

The case study of Wayanad is particularly important, considering that the enrolment rate of ST students in the schools here is the highest among all the districts in Kerala. The dropout rate of ST students here is as high as 5.34 percent in government schools, while it is 3.32 percent in government-aided schools. The statistics prompt to question the effectiveness of the

corrective measures implemented by the state in the field of education. There is a need to analyse if the existing strategy has helped improve the education scenario in the district or was misguided.

The authors conducted a sample survey of the schools in Wayanad and Palakkad to understand the true nature and causes of the issue of dropouts among students belonging to traditionally vulnerable communities. The survey revealed that the official figures could be masking certain important trends. Here are some observations from the study:

1. While the official figures put the overall dropout rate of students in the ST category close to 7 percent, the study found that the trend is not the same across classes or grades. Lower primary and higher secondary levels have high dropout figures for ST students. For instance, the dropout rate among boys in the ST category in class one in Wayanad is approximately 8 percent, while it is 18 percent in class 11.
2. The trend is even more striking in the case of students belonging to the ST category in Palakkad. Nearly 15 percent of boys and 6 percent of girls dropped out in class one. Six percent of boys dropped out in class two. This indicates that a large majority of the enrolled students, especially boys, in the ST community quit school at the lower primary level. It is also worth noticing that 15 percent of girls in the ST category dropped out in class eight.
3. There are specific schools that contribute to high dropout rates in Palakkad and Wayanad. The schools in Munderkarad, Pampampallam and Naikara in Palakkad were conspicuous for their high dropout rates.
4. Administrative compulsions and stricter norms have coerced the school authorities into duping the system. Certain schools are compelled to falsify records to show full enrolment. As a result, while several students are enrolled nominally, many of them are actually absent. The authors were informed of the practice of spot admissions on the fifth working day in schools. Teachers visit ST colonies and add names of potential students to the roll list. However, many of these students never find their way to schools.

Interviews with education experts and heads of education institutions to understand the reasons behind the issue of high dropout rates among ST students provided biased observations. While some of them blamed the

communities for 'not understanding the benefits' of education, some underlined instances of inadequate transport in the regions considered backward. There were also reflections on the social and cultural hurdles in bringing the children belonging to the ST category to schools. Issues like child labour and child marriage, problems that Kerala had supposedly overcome, were allegedly prevalent among these communities.

Though these blame games prevail in the popular discourse on education, they might be hiding the actual challenge confronting Kerala's primary education sector. Rather than picturing the problem of inability of bringing a community to school, it is worth examining if the state administration is being obstinate in adhering to what it believes is good for the citizens. The education system of the state has to shift to a higher trajectory and move past traditionally accepted views.

May, 2014

Debating Kerala's Claims about Literacy (Part 2)

D Dhanuraj and Rahul V Kumar

The prevalence of high dropout rates among students belonging to the Scheduled Tribes (ST) community in Wayanad and Palakkad districts of Kerala impelled the authors to ponder the actual challenges confronting the state's school education system. The general understanding among experts in the education sector is that Kerala has moved from its first-generation challenge of providing universal education to a set of second-generation challenges, whereas the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is trying to address the first-generation challenge. The second-generation challenges consider quality and inclusion as major factors warranting the state's attention, while access and availability are considered to be first-generation challenges. Interactions with various stakeholders in the education sector confirmed that these first- and second-generation challenges, while continuing to exist, present inherent problems affecting the education sector in Kerala.

On the forefront of these problems is state control and regulation, which prevents innovations in education. The existence of informal and single-teacher schools indicates the demand for such systems as against the institutional system, which has become the norm. In Wayanad alone, there were reportedly 38 single-teacher schools. In 2010, there were approximately 1500 students studying in such schools. Teachers continued to teach in these schools, despite the fact that they earned a meagre salary of less than Rs 3000 a month. However, the state administration and SSA believe that these systems need to be formalised and institutionalised as per the existing standards (they cite Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD] instructions to justify their stand). In the process, some of the single-teacher schools were closed down. Field trips by the authors of this article series failed to track most of the children, who were forced to discontinue their education, due to the closure of single-teacher schools.

State Incentives Curtail Freedom of Choice

Many stakeholders continue to believe that the state could do more in the field of education. They perceive education as a principal-agent framework. The assumption is that education can be made attractive through incentives offered by the state to its agents. However, this is a complex web. It is difficult to identify the kind of incentives (midday meals or umbrellas or cash transfers) that could attract children to schools, or for that matter, who should be receiving the incentives (teachers or students or parents). Identifying incentives to lure children to schools has been a traditional response of the state to show inflated enrolment figures. However, it is obvious that these incentives, ranging from scholarships to free umbrellas, have not solved the issue, at least for groups like the ST students in the districts that the authors visited. It largely reflects the cost of resources and manpower wasted on such efforts.

Has Kerala failed to identify the right kind of incentive to cure the second-generation challenges? Alternatively, has it failed to expand the scope and purpose of education? An expansion in scope and purpose ought to be the priority, considering the fact that information technology and communication is developing at an unprecedented pace. Among the many problems highlighted by the experts for the increase in dropout rates, the most obvious was poverty, which directly influences high dropout rates of ST students.

There is no simple or single step to stamp out poverty but there are underlying issues, which, if addressed appropriately, could provide people in need with alternatives. The authors' discussions with experts in the education sector showed that most of them held the view that the ST dropouts were students who were waiting to be helped. The ST communities are traditionally categorised as 'Others', who do not understand the importance of education. Hence, policies targeting specific groups aimed at forcing them to join the mainstream and perform standardised tasks. In the case of education, such standardisations backfired. Sitting in classrooms beyond a few hours was often difficult for

some of these students. The problem seems simple when it is assumed that ST students who dropout are not rational enough to understand the need for education. The state and its administrative instruments bypass the need to re-examine the actual problems. Poverty limits mobility as well as the ability and freedom to choose from different options. When the government subsidises and directs the process of education to particular groups, it is reaffirming limited mobility and choice for these groups. When you are paid to stay in the same place and to educate under similar circumstances, there seems little choice or incentive for you to move ahead.

Certificate Economy vs Skill Economy

From discussions with the representatives of teachers' unions, the authors realised that they preferred the status quo with greater government intervention at various levels of school education. Increased government intervention has created denser bureaucratic networks and newer constituencies of people looking forward to depend on these networks. In time, this has also reduced incentives to depend on individual insights and experiences to move ahead.

There is a crisis brewing in Kerala's school education system. Many recent studies reflect this view, of which the most notable are the Annual Survey of Education Report of 2014 and the study conducted by the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT). These studies substantiate the findings of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) in 2012. All these findings indicate that Kerala is indeed losing its position as a forerunner in the school education system. The case of Wayanad and Palakkad is a pointer to the gaps in the state's educational achievements. Although there is sufficient access to higher education, the failure of the school system severely affects the quality of higher education in the state. The phenomenon of near universal pass at the 10th grade by doling out extra marks to students, despite their dismal performance in individual exams, displays a gross misunderstanding of the purpose of education. The state follows a system that endorses a 'certificate economy' as a prerequisite for jobs. This, in turn, undermines the 'skill economy' that should have taken its place.

In Kerala, education is still perceived as emanating from formal and standardised institutions based on the criteria set by the state. Sir Ken Robinson, a highly revered educationist, views the conformity system in education as directly affecting creativity in schools. Curiosity is what drives the process of education, and not compulsion and conformity. Imagination and innovative practices in learning are killed in the process of formalising education. It is high time that Kerala expanded and widened the scope of the term 'education', providing it with the option of flexibility as per demand.

June, 2015

A Vision for Higher Education Reform

**D DHANURAJ
RAHUL V KUMAR**

"This e-book is a compilation of articles and opinion pieces authored by CPPR research team led by Dr D Dhanuraj. It probes the real problems of the Indian education system and guides us towards a future model for the system, articulating an ambitious vision for higher education reform. We hope that this document serves as a clarion call for all stakeholders in India's higher education system, including administrators, regulatory bodies and governments to identify areas of improvement in enhancing quality and quantity of higher education, issues of governance and policies, support for academic and physical infrastructure and greater financial resources."
