

## Private Sector's Role in Indian Higher Education

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'Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. The human mind is our fundamental resource'.<sup>1</sup>

— *John. F. Kennedy*

For the first 50 years since India became a republic, its education sector has been traditionally built on the core principle that it is the State's responsibility to educate its citizens. Towards this purpose, a significant aspect of policy-focus over the last two decades has been on capacity creation. Government has continued to invest in creating new capacities as well as enhancing them in existing institutions. Progress has been made — India has certainly come a long way from 28 universities and 578 colleges in 1950–51 to over 500 universities and more than 25,000 colleges at present. Today, the country has the largest number of higher education institutions in the world and close to 20 million students enrolled.

The present approach towards higher education is governed by the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 and Programme of Action of 1992. Two landmark reports, Radhakrishnan Commission Report (1948–49) and Kothari Commission Report (1964–66), in fact laid down the basic framework for the National Policy on Higher Education in the country. The NPE document acknowledges the fact that 'higher education has to become dynamic as never before' and to this effect outlines a series of steps including encouraging autonomy, specialisation, vocationalisation, emphasis on research and development.

### CHALLENGES BEFORE INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

For all the progress made, even 62 years after India's independence, higher education faces challenges in the critical areas of Access, Equity and Quality.

#### Access

Presently the 15–35 years age bracket has a population of more than 350 million, which is expected to peak at about

485 million in 2030 (Altbach and Jayaram 2010). Providing affordable, good quality, globally relevant higher education to such huge numbers remains one of the biggest problems facing this nation. Unless it is able to get its act together and put in place a wide range of mechanisms, India will be staring at a tsunami of young people approaching higher education and the system will not have the capacity to meet the demand. Such a situation, in the words of Narendra Jadhav, member of Planning Commission of India, would lead to a 'demographic disaster, just adding mouths to feed, not hands that can work' (this statement was made at a Penn State University meeting, see Lane and Kinser 2011).

#### Equity

Making matters worse, there is a wide disparity in higher education Gross Enrolment Ratios (GERs) across states, urban and rural areas, gender, and communities. According to Ernst & Young–FICCI (2011), the GER in urban areas is 23.8 per cent while in rural areas it is a poor 7.5 per cent. Delhi has a GER of 31.9 per cent whereas Assam lags behind at 8.3 per cent. India is already reeling under the rich–poor and rural–urban divide. Education can perhaps be the best tool to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Yet, as these statistics show, there are glaring inequalities in access to education which only further accentuates the divisions in the society.

#### Quality

Reports put out by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) have time and again emphasised that most of the higher education institutions face an acute problem in terms of shortage of academic and physical infrastructure. Lack of innovation, redundant curriculum, an over-emphasis on theory, less importance to research and social sciences, de-motivated teachers and researchers, and no quality monitoring in the education system are prime reasons for such a dismal state of affairs. Hence, it was not at all surprising when a National Association of Software

and Services Companies (NASSCOM)–McKinsey Report (2005) found out that a mere 25 per cent of technical and 10 per cent of non-technical graduates are actually employable. The fact that most companies have to spend huge amounts of time and money training fresh graduates can be seen as an indicator of the skill-set gap between what industry wants and quality of output emerging from the higher education institutions. All these years, governments have focused primarily on capacity-building. The NPE document, perhaps acknowledging the fact that quality of existing institutions needs to be focused upon in a greater way, proposes that 'in the near future, the main emphasis will be on the consolidation of, and expansion of facilities in, the existing institutions' (NCERT 1986: 18).

Indian higher education unquestionably faces huge challenges. While on one hand there is a need to bring as many young people as possible into the higher education fold, on the other it is required to significantly focus on building quality and global competitiveness. Quality of education has a wide-ranging impact on employability and labour productivity. According to official data, India's labour force, which was 472 million in 2006, is expected to be around 653 million in 2031 (Altbach and Jayaram 2010).

India's growth story is primarily driven by its services sector which in turn derives strength from skilled labour force. Unless the country has a nimble-footed dynamic higher education system, it faces the danger of losing its competitive advantage not just to China and Brazil but also smaller nations such as Philippines and Malaysia.

## GOVERNMENT HAS LIMITATIONS

The government cannot provide all the solutions to India's higher education challenges. India's public expenditure on higher education as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is 0.6 per cent (Ernst & Young–FICCI 2009), which is less than what other nations such as United States (US), United Kingdom (UK) and China spend on a per-student basis. Most of the public expenditure on higher education is used up on salaries and maintenance of existing institutions. Majority of central government's spending on higher education is allocated to the University Grants Commission (UGC) (around 40 per cent), which in turn assists colleges, mainly in the form of grants for their maintenance and development. Very little is spent on curriculum, research and technology. Only a few institutions, such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), stand as beacons of excellence amidst a sea of mediocrity. Entrance to these institutions is characterised by a mad rush leading to extreme stress among the aspirants.

## INCREASING PRIVATISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Over last two decades, a rapidly growing Indian economy has led to a huge demand for an educated and skilled labour force. To meet the manpower needs of a dynamic economy, not surprisingly, private enterprises have cropped up to complement public educational institutions, plagued as they are by capacity constraints. In fact, over the past few decades, it has been the private sector that has really driven capacity-creation in Indian higher education. Private presence in higher education got a fillip starting the mid-1980s, coinciding with the reducing investment by Government of India (GoI) and the states. In 2001, when private unaided institutes made up 42.6 per cent of all higher education institutes, 32.8 per cent of Indian students studied there. By 2006, the share of private institutes went up to 63.2 per cent and their student share went up to 51.5 per cent.

Privatisation of higher education is especially noticeable in higher education professional courses such as engineering and Master of Business Administration (MBA), where majority of the institutions offering such programmes have been established by the private sector. So much so, the share of private institutes in the field of pharmacy and engineering is more than 90 per cent. These statistics show that private education players are the norm rather than exception and that privatisation of higher education is now an irreversible trend in India. Critics who argue that education is a social good and should remain exclusively in the hands of the government will find it hard to disagree that given the scale and complexity of Indian higher education challenges, the government on its own cannot single-handedly tackle all the issues.

This is not to say that privatisation is the panacea to all of India's higher education problems. In fact, this phenomenon has brought about its own set of issues and challenges. Yet, the fact that India has a burgeoning youth population that sees education as a ticket to prosperity, coupled with declining education spending by the government, translates into a great demand for private higher education.

## PRIVATISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION REMAINS A COMPLICATED STORY

Despite the huge demand for higher education, especially professional education, Manipal Global Education (MaGE) Services has taken a conscious decision to eschew going down the traditional brick and mortar campus model followed in India. Instead they have decided to focus on building an education services business here. This business presently

spans almost the entire education services ecosystem ranging from university services to assessments, placements and vocational training. It may puzzle many as to why MaGE as a corporate entity is not setting up educational campuses in India, in spite of the fact that the company promoters have the distinction of having set up one of the first and finest private universities in the country — Manipal University.

Answers to this conundrum would become easier to understand once the nature of privatisation happening in Indian higher education sector is examined. What is being witnessed is, to a large extent, ad hoc privatisation — myriad institutes continuing to come up without, perhaps, adequate checks and balances. Definitely, the burgeoning privatisation has reduced pressure on public colleges, but even their most ardent supporters will find it hard to claim that private institutions have brought about great improvements in curriculum, teaching methodology, research and development, and learning outcomes. This is not surprising considering the fact that higher education still remains one of the most tightly regulated sectors in the economy. Privatisation in higher education is a convoluted story with some arguing that Indian higher education has moved from ‘half-baked socialism to half-baked capitalism’ (Kapur and Mehta 2004).

The role played by private enterprise in transforming sectors, such as Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Services (IT and ITES), telecom, banking, etc., is evident. Today, IT’s growth story has put India on the global economic map. These sectors are shining examples of the progress that can be made when private enterprise is allowed to function in a free and encouraging manner. Unfortunately, the higher education operating environment provides certain challenges which dissuade serious players from entering the field. In the following sections, issues that need to be resolved for a dynamic, thriving private enterprise in higher education have been highlighted.

## NOT-FOR-PROFIT STRUCTURE

A higher education institution in India can only be set up by a Trust or a Society. Policy-makers are opposed to setting up of higher educational institutions as for-profit corporate entities, ostensibly because education is a public good and hence should be outside the purview of commerce. As observed earlier, all policies by Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) are based on NPE of 1986. Given the socialist structure of the polity, NPE 1986 has strong underpinnings of social good; not surprisingly, profit-making is a strict no.

However, many of India’s colleges and universities — both private and public — face acute shortages of faculty,

ill-equipped libraries, outdated curricula, and poor infrastructure. Building a good educational institution requires great physical and soft infrastructure, i.e., infrastructure, faculty and research. In an era of soaring market-driven salaries in other sectors, how can there be hope to attract and retain talent if competitive compensation is not paid? All these require great deal of financial resources. Soaring land rates make it even more difficult to recoup investments. Hence, it is imperative that educational enterprises have access to fungible capital, which becomes well-nigh impossible given the ‘Not-For-Profit’ structure of the sector. The need of the hour is to make every possible effort to attract serious players with institutional funding who can enter the sector and build transparent and high-quality institutions.

No doubt the intentions behind having a ‘Not-For-Profit’ structure might be noble, yet the question one needs to ask is whether this is serving the desired purpose. The fact, that everybody including law-makers know but fail to acknowledge, is that commercialisation of education can happen even in educational bodies set up by a Society or a Trust. In addition, it is now 26 years since NPE was written in 1986 (the previous version was in 1968), and a lot has happened in these two and a half decades. NPE is due for a thorough overhaul, including actively considering allowing for-profit entities. The visceral dislike by some policy-makers and bureaucrats towards for-profit education needs to be addressed and allayed.

The government must not equate ‘profiteering’ with the ‘for-profit’ legal structure of an organisation to deliver education. On the contrary, it may actually be better for it to allow legitimate profits in higher education and derive revenues from service tax on tuition incomes and income tax on surpluses made by the institutions. The income made from these corporate education entities can then be ploughed back into education. As it is, the government is applying an ‘education cess’ on everybody.

The for-profit motive will also allow fungible capital to move into the higher education space to create different models for different needs. The present structure in fact dissuades serious entrepreneurs from putting their equity into this sector. This means, the only recourse is debt which increases pressure and in a way creates entry barriers.

On the other hand, there are enough loopholes that allow rampant profiteering to take place. It is indeed ironical that all the regulations have not really managed to keep out players who view education merely as a business with potential high returns. Nobody is surprised when confronted by facts such as many of the private universities and colleges are run by the dubious section of the political class in this country.

Question is, instead of making it mandatory for an educational institute to be set up as a Trust or a Society only, why cannot alternate models be allowed? These could be

borrowed from the corporate sector. Just as all companies are required by law to publish annual reports providing their financial details — specifying their assets, liabilities, profits and losses, the profiles of the board of directors and the management, and various other financial information — every educational institution (whether public or private) should publish such reports at regular intervals, with details of the infrastructure and facilities available, profiles of the trustees and the administrators, the academic qualifications and experience of the staff, the courses offered, the number of students, the results of the examinations, the amount of funds available to the university and the sources of funding, and so on. In addition, every educational institution must get itself rated by an independent and specialised accreditation agency, such as Credit Rating Information Services of India Limited (CRISIL), Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA) or Child and Adolescent Resources and Education (CARE), and publicly announce its rating to prospective students to enable them to choose the institution they want to enrol in.

At one stroke, this will bring in transparency and ensure that every educational institution, whether public or private, is accountable not only to those students who are studying in the institution, but to prospective students and the public at large. Public announcements of the financial and educational records of the institutions as well as their ratings by independent rating agencies will generate healthy competition between the various institutions. In fact, a public company/corporate entity is a lot more accountable to the many constituencies it serves as against a Trust. Whatever is the regime there should be accountability, which is presently not there in the case of Trusts.

It is somewhat gratifying to note that the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan document of the Planning Commission clearly moves the focus from exclusive attention to building capacity, to a more nuanced thrust which puts quality right up front. This change will allow granular movement of the very best of Indian higher education entities — both public and private — to start aligning themselves with global standards over a period of time, while creating clear pressures at multiple levels for institutions to improve continuously. The plan document is only an announcement of intent (besides its primary role of being the funds allotment plan for the government), policy changes — including allowing for-profit ventures in a gradual fashion perhaps — will have to be brought in to effect true transformation.

## HIGHER EDUCATION — AN OVER-REGULATED SECTOR

Multiple regulatory agencies with overlap of functions and mandates govern almost every aspect of functioning of a

higher education institution. Setting up a private university requires parliamentary approval. Unless one sets up a private/deemed university, in order to be able to grant degrees, colleges will have to 'affiliate' with existing universities and follow the existing norms. The system of affiliation in its current form leads to excessive control by a university on the individual functioning of a college. The affiliated college has to toe the university line on virtually every aspect, ranging from intake and syllabus to faculty and examinations. As a result, very little original work or innovation happens in private colleges. Colleges have little incentive to differentiate themselves in the market (Khemani and Narayan 2006).

In the higher education sector, 'inputs' are the students that enter the institute, admission procedures, infrastructure, faculty members, etc. The 'processes' refer to the teaching and delivery mechanisms, the curriculum, etc. The 'output' is the total number of graduates, and the 'outcome' is the quality of these graduates. Following is an example of how All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) regulations impact the inputs and processes but have little to say on outcomes.

- (a) The AICTE norms state the maximum number of students that can be admitted per 'division' and maximum number of 'divisions' allowed in an institution. For example, Engineering & Technology Department can admit 60 students per division and can have a maximum of five divisions, that is, a maximum intake of 300 students in a year. There are similar norms for other areas such as pharmacy, architecture, applied arts, etc. While the intention behind such norms might be to ensure that colleges do not just keep recruiting more and more students, putting restrictions on capacity-intake acts as a big deterrent to private education providers. No genuine long-term private player would want to enter a sector where there are restrictions on growth. Every institution should have the autonomy to decide for itself as to what should be the ideal number of seats it can offer, provided it can prove that it has the requisite infrastructure to do so.
- (b) A new technical programme shall not be started in existing technical campus without prior approval of the Council. When universities in other nations are talking about cutting edge research and open source courseware, the very notion that here even things as basic as introduction of new courses or for that matter curriculum changes need approvals seems archaic and counterproductive.
- (c) Again, there are norms specifying a mandatory list of courses from which a prescribed minimum number of courses have to be offered. Regulatory control over academic processes hampers the ability of an institution

to respond to changing market demands and student needs. In fact, many academicians have called for the system of compulsory grouping of subjects to be replaced by a credit system, which would give flexibility to the students to choose combinations that they want. Having an outdated curriculum means graduates from some of the best colleges enter the job market armed with theoretical knowledge but little idea on up-to-date practices in the marketplace. Employers such as Tata Consultancy, Wipro, Infosys, Hindustan Lever, Reliance, ITC, etc., have no choice but to run training programmes to train college graduates who should ideally require only minimal preparation before becoming productive. For any higher education system to be truly useful and productive, it is imperative that the system is in sync with market trends by constantly innovating in technology, teaching methods and curriculum. For education and industry to be in sync with each other, educational institutions must have autonomy over their curriculum.

- (d) Again, there are specific regulations governing the institution: right from land requirements, building plan and needs of instructional, administrative and amenities' area, to computers, software and even subscription of e-journals. In fact, the norms even prescribe how much area should be allotted for staircases, entrance lobby, and so on.

These are a few examples of how every aspect of higher education in this country is tightly governed. Not surprisingly, such license raj regulations give scope for corruption allegations. While nobody can deny the importance of having rules and regulations in place, it appears that presently almost all rules seek to control the inputs and processes of an educational institution while there are very few that measure student learning outcomes. A lot more debate needs to take place on ways to judge institutions based on parameters such as quality of student outcomes. While minimum requirements need to be prescribed for the setting up and functioning of an institute, a lot more discussion needs to take place on why there should be limits especially in cases of capacity-intake or increase in seats.

## WHY MANIPAL GLOBAL EDUCATION SERVICES CHOSE TO GO ABROAD

Given a complex operating and regulatory environment in India, MaGE has taken a conscious decision to set up campuses abroad. MaGE's journey of international campuses started in 1994 when it affiliated itself with a local private university in Nepal. At a time when the ratio between the doctors in Nepal and its population was 1:25000, the col-

laboration between MaGE and Kathmandu University was one of the first private education ventures catering to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations. Through all these years of political turmoil MaGE has stayed committed to medical education in Nepal and today enrol 150+ students each year.

Apart from Nepal, MaGE has top-notch campuses in various regions of the world: from Dubai in Middle East to Malaysia in Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Antigua in the Americas. Besides strong business reasons for the organisation's presence in each of these regions, they have also been encouraged by the facilitative environment provided by these countries.

Dubai — keen to sell itself as a great investment destination — is a very easy place to structure an education company. For a corporate enterprise such as MaGE, Dubai not only serves as a hub for students from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region but also offers ease of business and very transparent rules regarding issues such as repatriation. Not surprisingly, Dubai has the largest number of branch campuses in the world — 27 branch campuses offering 400 degrees. Today, MaGE has a state-of-the-art multi-disciplinary campus in Dubai International Academic City (DIAC), the world's only Free Zone dedicated to Higher Education.

The latest international foray of MaGE has come in Malaysia where the institution is, on the invitation of the Malaysian Government, in the midst of setting up a comprehensive multi-disciplinary university — Manipal International University. Over one-sixth of medical doctors in Malaysia are alumni of Manipal University (through Melaka-Manipal Medical College, as well as Kasturba Medical Colleges at Manipal and Mangalore). The Melaka-Manipal Medical College was set up by MaGE over a decade ago in partnership with certain distinguished Malaysian entities, including the Melaka Government. Having decided to transform itself into a regional education hub, the Malaysian authorities have been taking a series of steps to facilitate the entry of foreign universities into the country. As in Dubai, it is easy to structure a private education company to run a university in Malaysia. Here, there is a single regulatory window — Malaysian Quality Authority — which handles all approvals, accreditation process, etc. In 1995, the Malaysian Government was faced with a situation where 20 per cent of Malaysian students studied abroad. This cost the country an estimated \$800 million, nearly 12 per cent of the country's current account deficit. To tackle this, previous regulations that prevented the private sector and foreign universities from conferring degrees were dismantled and new regulatory frameworks were put in place. Malaysia's efforts in trying to become a regional hub have started to pay off: 5 years back, the total number of non-Malaysians studying

there was less than 30,000. This year, it is expected to cross 100,000 (Blessinger and Sengupta 2012).

In the earlier sections of this paper, some examples of regulations governing technical education were provided. In order to draw out a contrast with the governance of technical education in India, the engineering education as regulated by Engineering Accreditation Council (EAC) in Malaysia has been examined. The EAC clearly lays out 'Programme Outcomes' — statements that describe what students are expected to know and be able to perform or attain by the time of graduation. While there are broad indicative guidelines, the underlying approach is to ensure that the curriculum, the educational content and the teaching learning and assessment methods are consistent with and support the attainment of the Programme Outcomes. This is in stark contrast to the way regulations are framed in Indian higher education, where almost all focus is on specifying inputs rather than student outcomes.

Again, Brazil's higher education system offers interesting parallels. Based on Ministry of Education, Brazil, *Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira* (MEC/INEP) Education Census figures of 2010, post-secondary education (undergraduate and graduate programmes) in Brazil comprised 5.45 million enrolments in 2010, up from approximately 1.4 million in 1998 (Estacio 2012). The private sector has grown at Compound Annual Growth Rate or CAGR of 9.7 per cent between 1997 and 2010, while the public sector grew at the rate of 5.1 per cent per year during the same period. As a result, the private sector share of the market increased from 61 per cent in 1997 to 73.3 per cent in 2010, while the public sector experienced a decline from 39 per cent to 26.8 per cent (*ibid.*). Such a growth has come about due to the fact that public institutions in Brazil are highly selective; in fact, some would argue 'elitist'. They offer limited capacity-intake and the competition to enter them is intense. Mainly, students from well-off families who have access to required training facilities ace the entrance exams. 'The Brazilian Basic Framework Law for National Education', or LDB, was passed in December 1996 which encouraged private-sector participation in higher education by loosening several regulatory constraints and paved way for education institutions to be organised as for-profit institutions. While government-funded public institutions focus on being centres of research and excellence, the private sector is increasing access to higher education among all strata of Brazilian society, thus serving the country's rapidly growing economy. The government has in fact taken a number of steps to support financing for students in private institutions by launching programmes such as *Programa Universidade para Todos* (ProUni) — 'University for All' and *Financiamento Estudantil* (FIES) that provide scholar-

ships and low-interest loans. To counter criticisms regarding quality of education being provided in private institutions, the authorities have put in place a new two-tiered evaluation system: internal evaluation — a council of students, faculty and employees analyses the performance of an institution; external evaluation — the Federal Council of Education names expert evaluators who analyse the curriculum and faculty performance of each institution (Holzhacker et al. 2009). So while there is an effort to push privatisation, there is also a system of quality control in place. For example, the government has mandated that 30 per cent of faculty in an institution must hold doctoral degrees. The government response to critics of education privatisation is that implementation of a strong, sophisticated quality assurance system can ensure even low-income students in private institutions to attain good quality education.

Providing good quality education at an affordable price to millions is a difficult challenge for any nation. If rising aspirations and rapidly growing manpower needs are fuelling higher education demand in developing nations, then large well-known public universities are facing funding cuts and shrinking revenues in deficit-afflicted developed economies. In such a scenario, a favourable regulatory environment that allows multiple education models to flourish should be encouraged. The focus of regulations must be to ensure a level playing field for all entities and a strong system of checks and balances that enforces adequate supervision on quality of output. Beyond that, the consumers (parents and students) should be allowed to decide. In the last two years, several low-quality private colleges have been forced to shut down due to dwindling students. Thus, it is evident that excess capacity is being weeded out on its own by forces of demand and supply.

MaGE as a corporate enterprise is responsible to its investors which include some of the marquee names in private equity. The organisation is hence naturally drawn to nations that have transparent regulatory regimes and enable it to scale up quickly, i.e., few constraints on growth. One should be able to start and close an institution in a much easier way (of course, in a measured and regulated manner). Similarly, individual institutions should have the freedom to decide what and how to teach, and how to fix the fees and manage costs. Most importantly, one does not want to be castigated for aspiring to build world-class large-scale educational institutions, and in the process of delivering a superior product make money as well. Education market like any other market in India is not homogeneous. Those at the lower end of the economic spectrum of course need to be supported through scholarships, student grants, loans, education vouchers, etc. On the other hand, there are these large numbers who are migrating abroad each

year to countries such as US, UK, Australia, and others. The system needs to be able to serve the entire cross-section of education aspirations.

## CONCLUSION

In India, it seems to be a case of one step forward and two steps back. While the government has introduced various bills in the Parliament, each of these seems to be stuck at various levels. Bills, such as National Commission for Higher Education and Research, National Accreditation Regulatory Authority for Higher Educational Institutions, and Foreign

Educational Institutions, if passed can bring much needed structural changes. There is an urgent need to debate these bills and ensure that they are passed. Most importantly, a change in mindset is required. Perhaps, time has come to remove the stigma associated with profits in the education sector so that legitimate private enterprises can have access to capital and set up world-class institutions that the country needs so badly. A lot of debate has taken place on 'affiliation', 'accountability', 'autonomy', and so on. Everyone seems to agree that a radical overhaul of the higher education system is much needed. Time has now come to walk the talk. Or else India's youth will be left behind in the global race.

## NOTE

1. John F. Kennedy in a special message to the Congress on Education, 20 February 1961, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8433> (accessed 8 November 2012).

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