

Research Paper - Higher Education



Role of Higher Education in Societal Transformation

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It is necessary to recognize that the present approach towards higher education is governed by the 'National Policy on Education' of 1986 and Programme of Action of 1992. The 1986 policy and Action Plan of 1992 was based on the two landmark reports namely, the 'University Education Commission' of 1948-49 (mostly known as Radhakrishnan Commission), and the 'Education Commission' of 1964-66 (popularly known as Kothari Commission Report). These two landmark reports in fact laid down the basic framework for the National policy for higher education in the country.

The University Education Report had set goals for development of higher education in the country. While articulating these goals Radhakrishnan Commission on University Education, 1948-49 put it in following words:

"The most important and urgent reform needed in education is to transform it, to endeavor to relate it to the life, needs and aspirations of the people and thereby make it the powerful instrument of social, economic and cultural transformation necessary for the realization of the national goals. For this purpose, education should be developed so as to increase productivity, achieve social and national integration, accelerate the process of modernization and cultivate social, moral and spiritual values."

The National Policy on higher education of

1986 translated this vision of Radhakrishnan and Kothari Commission in five principle goals for higher education which include 'greater access', 'equal access', 'quality and excellence', 'relevance' and 'promotion of social values'.

India's higher education system is the third largest in the world, after China and the United States. The main governing body at the higher level is the University Grants Commission (India), which enforces its standards, advises the government, and helps coordinate between the centre and the state. Accreditation for higher learning is overseen by 12 autonomous institutions established by the University Grants Commission.

As of 2009, India has 20 central universities, 215 state universities, 100 deemed universities, 5 institutions established and functioning under the State Act, and 13 institutes which are of national importance. Other institutions include 16000 colleges, including 1800 exclusive women's colleges, functioning under these universities and institutions. The emphasis in the tertiary level of education lies on science and technology.

India has made significant progress on the educational front. By and large the improvement made at different levels of education: primary, secondary, higher and technical education has been quite considerable. However, despite these achievements, educational development in India suffers from two serious drawbacks. The first is

that the progress made by geographical regions and social groups differ considerably. Literacy in rural India is 59 per cent in comparison to the urban literacy rate of 80 per cent, as well as considerable inter-state and inter-district variations in educational advancement. Across social groups also the educational achievements differ. The literacy rates among the weaker sections are considerably lower as compared to other groups. Probably the most important is the gender gap in education that still exists after fifty years of planned development.

Several educationists and philosophers have thrown light on the need of quality of education as well as people-centric education and also have come out with possible solutions over it. As Prof. D. S. Kothari, an eminent Indian educationist rightly says,

"Knowledge is vitally important, but if it is to transform society from a state of relative stagnation to one of dynamism and progress, there must be a general willingness and determination to make use of it in the service of the community."

This statement, made more than thirty five years ago finds favour with individuals who are concerned about the direction Indian education is moving towards in building a strong nation. Education is perceived as the most crucial tool for both building up social assets and formation and growth of social capital. This has been proved by research across disciplines, over time. This is also why educational development occupies a central position in social development in any society. Those countries where the levels of education or achievements are low, the aim should be either to improve educational levels or reduce inequalities.

In order to have societal transformation the role of higher education is immensely of great importance. Higher education should not be restricted to classroom experiences only but a holistic and experimental learning needs to be promoted and encourage aiming social transformation. The youth form an important part of society who influence and shape the society's future. They are full of optimism, hope, enthusiasm which needs to be channelised in a positive direction. Education is a continuous learning process for youth be it formal or informal learning. In a community development process, youth participation should be encouraged and should be involved in different programmes.

In higher education, along with curricular activities, due weightage should be given to co-curricular, extra-curricular and extension activities. Activities should be executed keeping society at the centre. Here, I would like to cite some instances regarding our University. University of Pune has established some special departments such as National Service Scheme, Board of Students' Welfare, Adult Education, Environmental Awareness, etc. aiming at societal transformation. The colleges affiliated to the University implement various activities which promote the youths to have direct contact with society to make them aware of the multifaceted problems of society. The Special Winter Camp under National Service Scheme as well as activities under Earn and Learn Scheme foster social values among the youths. With the continuous participation and involvement as volunteers in project activities, they are made aware of their need to develop skills, acquire






higher education and cultivate dignity of labour in order to contribute and be regarded as self-respecting citizens of the society.

The Soft Skills Development Programme for college students benefit them and enable them to get prepared to face the numerous challenges in the era of competition and globalization. The special schemes and programmes for girls such as 'Personality Development Scheme for Girls' and 'Nirbhay Kanya Abhiyan' (Empowerment of women) proved to be really important. Their active participation in such programmes makes them mentally prepared to face challenges in their lives. These kinds of extra curricular activities have direct and indirect connectivity with the social phenomenon which are implicit of societal transformation.

The traditional undergraduate courses are one of the root causes of the problems of unemployment which has direct effect on the social and economical development of the nation. At this juncture, the higher education needs to promote add on, need based courses so as to make youths employable or independent businessman. The short term courses like 'Certificate Course in Communication Skills in English' can benefit the multidisciplinary students for job opportunities. The attempt to overcome the problem of unemployment thorough this way can contribute for the societal transformation. Besides, the projects for the community development with several support organization, both governmental and non-governmental needs to be undertaken. Such projects can involve the participation of youths and people for the mission of the societal transformation.

To conclude, the collective and collaborative effort of social institutions including families, educational institutions, state, voluntary sectors and most importantly, people themselves can bring about community effectiveness. The social assets and consequently the economic development can be built through a regional network of local associations, community groups, corporate sectors, schools, colleges, universities and other organizations. Education policy makers need to move beyond debates about curriculum and governance to consider the effect of social capital. The higher education has to become society-centric.

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