

Higher Education: Imperative for Policy

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Education in India has witnessed tremendous changes over the years. In particular higher education, this has become the hot bed of debate. However, when it comes to understanding these changes with respect to policy guidelines, all that one observes is there has been no education policy whatsoever, let alone for higher education, for a long time. However, after this long interregnum, effort has finally been made in the form of the Report of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy, 2016, led by TSR Subramanian. This paper looks at some of the policy concerns raised by this very Committee with regard to Higher Education. There are three sections to the paper. The first section looks at some general assertions of the committee on higher education. The second section delves into committee recommendations on expansion, research and teaching. The last section draws linkages with the previous education policies. Despite some concerns, this paper is appreciative of the efforts of the committee and some of its key recommendations for improving the quality of higher education and can be truly helpful in a new education policy.

A new committee, some new features

The very first chapter of the Committee for Evolution of the New Education Policy, 2016, or the Subramanian Committee reads as “empowering India through quality education”. The Committee recognizes the criticality of education as the most important vehicle for social, economic and political transformation, as an integrative force in society, to provide skills and competencies for the citizens, enabling them to contribute to the nation’s well-being, and thus strengthening democracy and fostering social cohesion and national identity. That education is the key catalyst for promoting socio-economic mobility in building an equitable and just society and a powerful tool for preparing citizens in the knowledge society. As per the committee, the way forward for the proposed New National Policy on Education is on improving the quality of education and restoring its credibility by creating conditions to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and promote transparency in the management of education.

Calling for a national commitment, the Subramanian Committee states that education must be given the highest priority. Whereby it is the duty of Central and State Governments to provide necessary resources and create conditions that are favourable for the process of teaching and learning to flourish. Every opportunity needs to be provided to young persons to get good quality education and acquire skills that lead to employment and entrepreneurship. Since, the basic education infrastructure already exists in India, Governments at the Centre and the States only need to understand the catalytic role they have to play in fostering an atmosphere that enables students to think, to learn, and contribute to the country's development. All that is required is a change in the mind set among stakeholders. Once the

importance of ascribing the highest priority to education is recognized, the corresponding responsiveness and sense of accountability will inexorably emerge.

The Committee does state that since the NPE was last reviewed in 1992, there have been momentous changes in the situation in India and worldwide. These need to be taken into account in formulating a new NPE for the coming decades. The Committee duly points to how the educational scenario not only includes new concepts such as rights-based approach to elementary education, student entitlement, but there has also been a shift in emphasis from literacy and basic education to secondary, higher, technical and professional education, with the ultimate goal of also extending universalization to secondary education as well as reshaping the higher education scenario.

Among some of the key recommendations on education in general include: a high level standing Education Commission be established, with the mandate to continually study the evolving circumstances, the implementation of progress of policies pronounced, and provide timely advice and guidance to the ministry; creation of an all-India Education Service; the outlay on education should be raised to a minimum level of 6% of GDP with immediate effect; use of ICT for improving quality of education; Administrative Tribunals; etc.

As far as higher education is concerned, the committee points to a virtual explosion in the number of universities and colleges in the country. However, with is a secular decline in the overall quality of education. Thus, issues of equity, as also quality has to necessarily be the main focus of any new national policy. Pointing to the ground reality, the Committee observes the mushrooming growth of private colleges and universities, many of them of indifferent quality; leading up to questions about the quality of degrees generally obtained in the system. That not only have issues of regulation, autonomy and fee structure been dealt with in an ad-hoc manner, (now requiring some baselines to be established), even transparent quality evaluation of higher education institutions, and revamping the system of affiliation need to be currently addressed. The menace of institutions based on the philosophy of ‘degrees for cash’ need to be squarely tackled, dignity and social acceptability to high quality vocational training needs to be fostered, women’s participation in higher education has to be also enhanced. The committee points to the immense potential for inducting ICT to aid Indian higher education (and education in general) in myriad innovative ways.

A quest for ‘Quality’: expanding research and teaching in Higher Education

This section looks at some of the policy concerns and recommendations of the Subramanian Committee, 2016, pertaining to expansion, research and teaching in higher education.

A. Mathew (2016), reviews commissions and committees of education, with respect to reforms in higher education along four broad headings- Perception on Expansion and Research, Quality and Teaching, Governance and Re-Organization of Higher Education System, and lastly Privatisation and Private Higher Education. While the TSR Committee in its policy recommendations for higher education touches upon all four aspects- expansion, and research, teaching (and assessment), governance as well as privatization, *quality* is the over-arching guiding principle being hinted at throughout the committee. The Committee very categorically stating that quality and standards of Indian higher education institutions need to be upgraded systematically and sustained at a high level through rigorous screening, innovation and research, recognition of excellence and creativity. What we see is that it is

Quality of Expansion, Quality of Research, and Quality of Teaching that is being suggested. And not necessarily quality being any different from expansion, research, and teaching.

As far as *expansion* is concerned, the Committee states how the upsurge in the demand for higher education after independence, has resulted in a virtual explosion in the number of universities and colleges in the country, as well as in the number of private universities and colleges in the States; however, not really with the required standards. That the mushrooming growth of private colleges and universities; many of them of indifferent quality; has raised questions about the quality of degrees generally obtained in the system. That despite some improvement in infrastructure and significant gains in respect of enrolment and access, new gnawing worries about the quality of education have increasingly bedevilled the (higher) education system. How the respective roles to be played by private-public players is not currently defined. All of these are calling for urgent attention.

Further, the Subramanian Committee questions the utility of higher education in assuring employment, reflected in graduate and post graduate students not getting jobs in their respective fields even after spending several years in acquiring higher education. The problem of educated unemployed youth coupled paradoxically with a shortage of skilled manpower in the labour market, pointing to a clear gap between the focus and quality of education in academia and the actual skills required by industry. How despite the accelerated rate of change, with new technologies and disciplines as well as new knowledge and insights generated, Indian universities do not find a place in the top 200 positions in the global ranking of universities. Even the top ranking institutions in India figure only in the lower echelons of global rankings.

Even with regard to *research*, the Subramanian Committee brings forth the issue of poor research quality in the universities. that the quality and also quantity of research and innovations emerging out of Institutions of higher education and research leaves much to be desired. How there is limited research capacity and the research output is generally of low quality in Indian higher education. That despite nearly 800 universities and 40,000 colleges employing 8 lakh faculty and teaching almost 3 crore students, not many significant scientific or technological innovations have emerged from an Indian institution since independence. Despite a few pockets of excellence the system is marked by mediocrity. Even the National Laboratories of the CSIR and others do not appear to have had any major success over the decades in the field of research, innovation and quality output. That barring some spectacular achievements in the field of Space and Atomic Energy, there is not much to talk about research emanating from India. Only a few universities conduct research of any significance – even these are concentrated in the IISCs and IITs; in short, very little is achieved by the country's higher education institutions in research and innovation. Most private universities pursue no research programmes to speak of; while state universities are generally starved of funds. A shortage of doctorates is significantly impacting research institutions. Indian researchers of high quality generally prefer to go abroad for research; this is reflective of the conditions in India not being conducive for research. The committee also points to how time-bound promotion schemes and the manner these are implemented has considerably diminished the quality of output at the post-doctoral stage. Whereby promotions are only a matter of right and suitability is judged by 'numbers of publications and attendance in seminars' and not by quality. Mushrooming of so-called peer-reviewed Journals, ready to accept and publish practically every paper being another distressing phenomenon.

As far as *teaching* is concerned, the Subramanian Committee points to the constraint of availability of quality teachers, as well as little research on teaching learning in higher education in India. For, according to the Committee, this has implications for maintaining the quality of higher education even as the sector expands. That despite teacher availability in higher education depending upon enrolment in post-graduate courses and research programmes; students at post-graduate level and above constitute less than 12 percent of the total enrolment. Moreover, for most students, teaching is not the preferred choice and comes only after private sector and government employment. Thus, posts remain vacant, in both public and private institutions of higher education. Compounded additionally by, the reluctance on the part of some states to fill posts on a regular basis with the aim of saving the outgo on salaries of full-time faculty; time-consuming recruitment process or delayed recruitment due to litigation. That the alternative of recruiting ad-hoc and part-time faculty adversely impacts the quality of teaching as well as research. The committee calls for recruitment process to be so structured, so as to not only ensure the entry of quality of teachers into the system, but also recruiting and attaching teachers to institutions so that they develop institutional loyalty and commitment to improve the quality of that institution. The Committee also points to how, the introduction of the latest pre-promotion assessment-indicator – the Academic Performance Index (API) has only led to low quality publications and organization of national seminars with the sole intention of giving the participants a chance to enhance their API score.

Among some of the key recommendations of the committee on issues of expansion, research and teaching are: deliberating upon a different type of GER – the Gross Employability Ratio of graduates; having an effective system for assessing the quality of higher education institutions distinguishing between recognition, accreditation and evaluation of the institution under review; developing an easily implementable, operationally feasible, credible and acceptable Quality Assurance Framework for Higher Education, in-line with local requirements as well as living up to international developments and best practices; encouraging self-evaluation, accountability, autonomy and innovation in higher education with an emphasis on high quality research; involve all competent stakeholders in the higher education sector to join in creating a system to undertake quality evaluation and help institutions realize their academic objectives; place each higher education institution in a category-wise hierarchy of institutions according to the evaluated level of achievement; establishing 100 new centres for excellence in the field of higher education, to successfully pave the way for India to host major research and innovation initiatives; designing transparent and rigorous faculty induction and promotion procedures, to accept only the intellectually inclined, for which, a task force of seasoned experts and scholars be appointed; establishing special centres, either in existing university departments or as separate institutions or academies, in order to promote research in various aspects of teaching-learning processes (pedagogical practices, provide professional support to promote the development of teaching skills, encourage the use of modern technology, evolve methods to assess quality of teaching and learning, develop instruments to measure teaching effectiveness and create feedback mechanisms for sharing the results of studies on teaching effectiveness, etc.) in the higher education sector..

However, some *observations* become necessary here.

Firstly, while privatization is a reality, and though the Committee duly points to how the mushrooming growth of private colleges and universities, or teaching shops, have posed questions about the quality, how the ‘respective roles of public and private players needs to

be defined’, in one of its very key recommendations, it ends up considering the private players as almost equal to the public players. This is the recommendation for concerning the establishment of 100 such institutions in both “private” and public sectors over the next 10 years. As well as a Council for Excellence in Higher Education (CEHE) by the MHRD to create policies to foster the establishment of Centres for Excellence, both in the public and private sectors. Based on a commitment from the private philanthropist/entrepreneur *full freedom* should be given to establish such units. This recommendation almost unequivocally gives a green signal for private participation, which is detrimental to goals of equity and also affordability.

Secondly, again looking at the 100 new centres for excellence, it becomes necessary to ask- is quantity really the answer to quality? More so, because the Committee has throughout the document critiqued the sub-standard public as well as private institutions of higher education. Even though the committee states that such institutes of excellence may include upgrading existing institutions to levels of excellence, by suggesting such a big goal of 100 such mixed centres, it in a way falls into the same trap of suggesting a system which it otherwise seems to want to defy. Also, what Centres are these? No disciplinary focus or five-year or decadal goals are mentioned.

Thirdly, be it recommending top 200 universities to be facilitated to collaborate with Indian universities, encouraging ‘high quality’ foreign universities and educational institutions to collaborate with Indian partners, or the focus on improving ranking, this aim of ‘globalizing’ without compromising the basic needs of access, equity and quality appears far-fetched. While the circumstances are such that networking with other countries and universities is bound to increase, but the Committee’s suggests too much open-ness, and its expectation of an *equal* Indian presence in collaborating with foreign players to operate in India are not only idealized, but increased emphasis on matching to global standards might be detrimental to indigenous standards.

Lastly, while the Committee very rightly points to the anomalies in teaching in higher education, it does not focus much about other ways of improving teacher assessment. In place of say, the API or whether there should be different assessments for teaching and research. It puts too much emphasis on the use of ICT. ICT is still evolving and can never be a substitute for the two-way classroom experience.

Three decades: Situating Higher Education

Now if we were to look at the Committee for the New Education Policy, 2016, vis-à-vis the education policies of 1968 and 1986, it must be stated at the outset that apart from the nearly three-decade gap between the last education policy (of 1986 and programme of action 1992) and the Committee for the New Education Policy, there is a difference in the socio-economic as well as political circumstances.

Also, as A.Mathew (2016) observes, India, post-independence adopted a strategy of appointing Committees and Commissions to reform education and enrich its functioning, which has in a way continued later too.

However, only the Education Commission of 1966 lead to the first education policy in 1968. Commissions have come and gone, but only two policies emerged. Or as Jandhyala BG Tilak (2012) puts it, “having no policy on higher education has itself been the policy “of the Indian

Government. Some commissions though, were significant with respect to expansion, research and also teaching. Be it the Chattopadhyay Committee for teaching, the Mehrotra Committee, Rastogi Committee and Chadha Committee on Pay Scales of Teachers, or the latest commissions pertaining particularly to higher education, i.e. the National Knowledge Commission or NKC (2009) (which suggested an overhaul of higher education based on five concepts of: Access, Concepts, Creation, Application, Services, mainly for the development of a knowledge society) and the Yashpal Commission Report (YPC) on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education (2009) (concerning world class universities) did discuss reforms.

But drawing some linkages between the first education policy to the current day Committee of drafting a new education policy becomes important, to establish some key concerns on higher education (in terms of the quality of expansion, research, and teaching at least) that a new education policy duly needs to take account of and make relevant recommendations for.

So, while the education policies of 1968 and 1986 sought limited focus on expansion of higher education, the Committee for the New Education Policy, 2016 puts almost *equal focus on higher education*. Which in itself points to the growth of higher education over the years.

Both the National Education Policy (NPE), 1968 and New Education Policy (NEP) 1986 suggest had a *selective approach to expansion and research*. The policy of 1968 aimed at a planned expansion. A result of the recommendations of the Kothari Commission of 1964-66, the NPE, 1968, as Mathew (2016) points out, aimed at expansion of higher education on the basis of trends of manpower needs and employment opportunities. Replacing open-door access to admission in arts and commerce courses, by a policy of selective admission according to the number of teachers and facilities available while selecting the best among eligible students. Also, new universities could be established only after an adequate provision of funds was made for the purpose and due care was taken to ensure proper standards. The education policy of 1986 though suggested for not only expanding facilities in the existing institutions but also called for urgent steps to protect the system from degradation. However, given the unprecedented explosion of knowledge and despite seeking a “Reorganization of Education at Different Stages”, the NEP, 1986 envisaged higher education to become more dynamic. A normal linear expansion was not possible. More so, because higher education was entering uncharted areas. Thus the 1986 policy not only underscored the “universal character” of universities and other institutions of higher education but it also encouraged more and more autonomous colleges and autonomous departments within universities, even if on a selective basis.

The *committee of 2016* recommends expansion without limits. Its mere recommendation for hundred centres of excellence, without expressing what kind, etc. is mind-boggling.

Even on *research*, for the education policy of 1968, the development of science education and research, particularly of agriculture and industry (in the form of at least one agricultural (single campus) university in every state; practical training in industry for technical education; a continuous review of the these two sectors as well as other technical manpower needs of the country and maintaining a balance between the output of the educational institutions and employment opportunities), was the main focus. On university education, the policy sought special attention for organisation of postgraduate courses as well as improvement of standards of training and research, strengthening centres of advanced study

and establishing 'clusters of centres' aiming at the highest possible standards in research and training. And increased support is given to research in universities generally. The 1986 policy in its section on "Innovation, Research and Development" stated that research as a means of renovation and renewal of educational processes was to be undertaken by all higher technical institutions, primarily for producing quality manpower capable of taking up R&D functions. The 1986 policy not only suggested enhanced support and steps to ensure its high quality on research in the universities, but also encouraged knowledge synthesis, and inter-disciplinary research. It also made the call for research for development for improving present technologies, developing new indigenous ones and enhancing production and productivity, setting up a suitable system for watching and forecasting technology, it also suggested a national body covering higher education in general, agricultural medical, technical, legal and other professional fields, in the interest of greater co-ordination and consistency in policy, sharing of facilities and developing inter-disciplinary research. It made the move from mere focus on industry and agriculture by promising support to research in Indology, humanities and the social sciences.

When we look at the TSR Committee, 2016, unlike the previous education policies, it explains Expansion through *some facts* from the UGC and All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reports. Hence, it is *grounded in reality* as stated in its own document. But it also recommends expansion without limits. While expansion surely cannot be 'few cluster' any more, but it also cannot messed up in hundred centres! A mid-way approach is what is needed, with focus not only on few conventional professional disciplines, but varied.

Both, the NPE (1968) and NEP (1986) considered teachers as the most important in determining the quality of education and their contribution to national development. Commenting on the academic freedom of teachers, the education policy of 1968 suggested that opportunities for teachers to publish independent studies and researches and to speak and write about significant national and international issues should be protected and that teacher education, particularly in-service education, should receive due emphasis. The 1986 policy called for systematic assessment of teacher performance, apart from objective merit-based recruitment, in conformity with spatial and functional requirements. Open, participative and data-based evaluation of teachers as well as reasonable opportunities of promotion to higher grades, associations and also networking arrangements between institutions of teacher education and university departments of education were encouraged.

The 2016 committee also makes a case for teachers, however falling short of suggesting a more holistic method of promotion and career advancement. It does point to manpower-needs studies to be undertaken every five years at the central and state levels to determine the need for faculty positions in institutions of higher education. The recruitment needs have to be forecast well in advance to ensure that the recruitment action is taken in time. The scope for making appointments based upon subjectivity has to give way to rigorous merit based selection, preferably through the Public Service Commission or an independent body set up for the purpose. The 2016 committee calls for a national commitment yet at the same time linking the developments, particularly in higher education to globalization, as well as attuned to evolving a knowledge society. The aspirational bit is missing!

Conclusion

The TSR Committee, despite some of its ambiguities can be considered as a starting point for resuming the dialogue on a new education policy, especially for higher education. Mechanisms for assessment and accreditation (in the form of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council), the PMMMNMTT scheme's aim for teaching learning centres, the NIRF, the AISHE, etc. are some measures already there for ensuring quality in expansion, research and teaching. Thus as far as higher education is concerned, some markers are already available. A new committee has been constituted under the chairmanship of Dr. K Kasturirangan to provide a blueprint for the new education policy. This committee is in the process of consultation. Only a determined effort, towards a new education policy at the earliest is awaited.

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