Some Issues in Higher Education

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A huge gap in the supply of higher education and demand for it has encouraged private sector participation, but a rigorous regulatory mechanism has to ensure high standards and affordability. More alarming is the serious shortage of faculty in institutions of higher learning, unequal access to the institutions, the non-availability of textbooks in Indian languages and students who are ill-equipped to handle the rigours of college education.

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Higher education is the flavour of the season; there is scarcely a day when it does not feature on the front pages of newspapers – the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) admission fracas, the stratospheric cut-offs announced for admission to the University of Delhi, the foreign education providers' bill, and so forth.

While these issues are obviously important, there are some aspects of the higher education scenario in India that have not caught the imagination of the mass media in ways that others have. Maybe these issues have never been highlighted because of the English-speaking elite bias of newspaper and television reporting.

One issue that has been in the news though is the commercialisation of higher education – the mushrooming of private institutes, universities, colleges and even the growth of the coaching classes industry, like in Kota. The numbers are astonishing – there were 100 private universities and 129 deemed universities (mostly private) in India as of December 2011. This is a massive 36% of the total number of university-level institutions in the country. The number of private professional institutes is equally startling – there are more than 4,000 private institutions imparting professional education. And the private coaching industry has been estimated to have a turnover of more than Rs 50,000 crore, though this number must be an underestimate given the nature of the industry.

Clearly, the higher education space in India is becoming more and more privatised. The reason is obvious – a huge gap in the supply of higher education and demand for it. The number of seats available in government-run institutions is much smaller than the number of people wanting them. In this environment of scarcity, other players enter the arena and there is a rush to start institutions to fill the gap, leading inevitably to an oversupply, as is becoming evident with private engineering colleges not being able to fill their seats. Like any other economic good that is scarce, market forces rush in to fill the gap.

Except that there is a slight hitch – it turns out that education is not a market good in our country. And this is true not just in an ethical or moral sense, but even legally. One cannot run a for-profit educational institution in India. Educational institutions can only be established either by a charitable trust or as a Section 25 company that is formed "for the sole purpose of promoting commerce, art, science, religion, charity or any other useful object". Crucially, "it should intend to apply its profits or other incomes only in promoting its objects". Thus legally profits cannot be taken out of the company but have to be ploughed back into the institution. This means no dividends or other monetary rewards to the promoters of the institution.

Of course, that is not how the real world works. Or else there would not be this proliferation of private degree-giving shops. What is done is fairly well known – huge under-the-table capitation fees, over-invoicing of salaries of genuine employees, fake, non-existent employees on the rolls, over-invoicing of capital expenditure mostly to associated companies of the promoters, consultancy and perks to the promoters, and so on.

This is then broadly the scenario in the private education space. One should hasten to add that there are some excellent private institutions of higher learning

that maintain standards and provide high-quality education, especially in the professional sphere. The following observations are not about these exceptions, which anyway prove the rule.

The question one needs to ask is whether this proliferation is necessarily bad. Interestingly, there are several reasons why it need not necessarily be so.

Compulsion, Not Choice

First, these institutions are not where students go out of choice, in general. Only when a student cannot make it to a government-run institute, say Delhi University, would she consider going to Amity or Sharda University. And this is not just because they are, on an average, of poorer quality. It is also because these institutions are exorbitantly expensive – typically a few lakh rupees per year.

After years of dithering, the government has started to regulate the fees charged by professional institutions. Thus, for instance, business schools can only charge an amount that the state government fixes, based on their expenditure per student. But like what happened when capitation fees were banned by the Supreme Court, promoters find ways around regulatory constraints.

There is a positive side to these institutions. Many of them run courses which are non-existent or rarely found in state-run universities. A diploma in apparel design or export management is not something that would necessarily be available to a student in Delhi University. This in itself is not something a priori bad – an economy as varied as ours does need a variety of skills and if these are taught professionally (a big if, of course), this is a positive aspect. After all, instead of thousands of students doing a plain vanilla undergraduate degree in humanities or commerce, if a few hundred or thousand end up with diplomas in leather technology, apparel design and the like, it cannot really be bad. Especially because our state-run institutions have not yet ventured into these areas.

So, should we argue that these degree-granting shops be abolished? Or should we only insist that they be subject to more rigorous regulation of standards, and possibly fees? A crucial thing in this argument is that the state should not be providing any kind of subsidy in terms of land, power, and infrastructure. As long as this is the case and as long as reasonable regulatory requirements are enforced, and enforced well, on these institutions, there is no reason why their growth should be curtailed.

An interesting parallel can be drawn with the healthcare sector where the huge growth in private institutions in recent years has almost mirrored the growth of private institutions of higher education. The correspondence can be worked out in a pretty accurate way – the mushrooming of nursing homes in small moffusil towns is like the huge number of small degree colleges that one sees, for instance, in Uttar Pradesh, the medium-rung hospitals are like private professional colleges and the five-star, super-speciality hospitals are like private universities. And this growth has been because of the massive mismatch between demand and supply of quality healthcare services.

Of course, this is not to argue that the state should wash its hands off these fundamental necessities. It is a fact that the government hospitals are not capable, either in quality or quantity, to handle the healthcare needs of a large majority of the population. The solution is obviously increasing the reach of state-run, cheap and good-quality healthcare. But that is not happening at a satisfactory pace. Hence the huge private participation in this sector, which may be one of the fastest growing in our economy.

There is, however, a difference. Whereas, on an average, government-run educational institutions are of higher quality compared to private ones, this is not true of healthcare. The quality of care provided by the state sector compares poorly, across equivalent levels, when compared with that offered by the private sector. These statements are true on an average and just as there are some fantastic private educational institutions, there are indeed well-run, efficient and high-quality public healthcare providers and hospitals.

There is another significant difference. Hospitals, especially the big ones, usually get enormous benefits from the state – subsidised land, power, tax and duty concessions for importing equipment, and so on. In lieu of these, they are obliged to provide cheap healthcare to the poor to the extent of a certain percentage of their capacity. This, of course, almost never happens. In the education sector, no direct subsidies or concessions are provided. However, this seems set to change if the recommendations of the Narayana Murthy panel on higher education are accepted and implemented. The recommendations include providing free land on long leases, freedom from regulation of salaries and huge tax concessions for funding. If these are implemented, the whole argument needs to be rethought.

Another phenomenon increasingly being noticed in the health sector is local brain drain – some of the best talent from prestigious government-run hospitals is moving to private, five-star medical hospitals. This is not going to happen in any significant way in the education sector in the near future. Unless foreign universities set up shop here. That will be a total game changer – the prestige, the money and the facilities offered by these would obviously persuade the best faculty to leave.

Thus private institutions of higher learning are not necessarily bad and apart from a rigorous regulatory mechanism, not much needs to be done on this front. It is important to repeat that this is not an argument for the state to step back from the sector. If anything, it is an argument to massively increase the state presence in the higher education landscape to bring some balance to the demand-supply equation.

This leads us to other related issues. Even assuming that the resources can be garnered for a massive increase in state-funded higher education, there remain issues of human resources. The fact is that there are just not enough teachers. A premier university like the Delhi University has more than a third of its teaching posts vacant. So just constructing new universities and IITs will not necessarily help. We need to also undertake the mammoth task of capacity-building – the classic chicken and egg problem. The

Chinese, for instance, have undertaken a huge capacity-building exercise over the last three decades by retraining and sending students abroad for training. And this has paid off in an almost exponential increase in the number of universities in China.

The really crucial issue in higher education is not about private versus state universities. It is about access – access defined in a very broad way of real opportunities for everyone to avail themselves of high quality, meaningful education at affordable rates. Defining access in this broad way, it is evident that the situation is very grim. The first and the most obvious fact is that there are not enough seats in colleges for all interested school graduates. Our gross enrolment ratio at around 13% is pathetic when compared to what it ought to be given the size of our economy. The world average is almost twice this number. And this number masks the massively uneven quality of education – from degree colleges in small towns run in a few rooms to IITs with world-class infrastructure and faculty.

Even for those who do manage to secure a seat in a college or a university, either in the general category or under some reservation, there are huge barriers to a meaningful education. These range from language skills, and a lack of text and reference books in their language to a very heterogeneous school education leading to a huge gap in informational and conceptual training.

Language skills first. In many parts of the country, the medium of instruction at the college level, especially in the sciences, is English. This automatically places a large number of students at a disadvantage. The problem is far more widespread than just those coming from small, moffusil towns. My own experience at the University of Delhi, where I teach a class of about 300 MSc students, testifies to this. I have to teach bilingually because a large percentage of my students just do not understand spoken English. Lecturing to them in English would leave them totally at sea. So, apart from formulae and technical terms, the lecture is given in Hindi and English.

Books in Indian Languages

A related issue is the availability of books in languages other than English. Once again, in the sciences, there are just not enough good quality textbooks available in any of the Indian languages at the college level. This is not an issue that concerns only the small universities. On a personal note, recently a student of mine came to me with a query in a textbook. I saw that he had, in the margins, with help from his fellow students translated every single sentence into Hindi so that he could understand what was there. The non-existence of good reading material in the vernacular was recognised by the National Knowledge Commission, which recommended the setting up of a translation mission to translate material into Indian languages. Work on this has begun, though it will be years before the gap is filled significantly.

Finally, there is a huge gap between what we expect our undergraduates to know and the skills that they ought to possess and what the reality is. Thanks to affirmative action, a number of students entering the university system are from not-so-privileged backgrounds. Some of them are even first-generation learners. But a lack of preparation to handle the rigours of college education is not restricted to those who have gained access through reservations. It is far more general and widespread. How does one expect them to cope with the huge demands that our system puts on their comprehension and informational capabilities?

Again, on a personal note, in my own department, we have witnessed, for instance, failure rates of around 80% in some subjects. This is not to say academic standards must be diluted. But is it fair on students to admit them (because of reservations or otherwise) to colleges and then leave them to their own devices to compete in a harsh, alien ecosystem? Or should there be institutional mechanisms to empower and train these students? These could range from remedial classes in the afternoon or evenings, extensive preparatory classes during the vacations, or some other method to bring all ill-equipped students up to speed. Exactly what form these would take is dependent on local conditions and the availability of resources, both human and infrastructural.

Our department has been discussing the need to have such classes in a particular course for which we find students are particularly underprepared. These classes will be optional and without credits. They would be self-selecting, in the sense that only those who think that they need to take them would take them. The rest would not bother because it does not fetch them any credit.

To conclude, the outlook for higher education is pretty grim. Quantity-wise, there are real bottlenecks in terms of resources and human resources. But, more significantly, the much harder issue of quality will need to be addressed. Otherwise, we might achieve higher numerical ratios, but they would not be meaningful for a vast majority of students.