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India's Higher Education in Search of Relevance and Excellence – Role of Flexibility

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Abstract

After globalisation of market, requirement of skilled manpower has dramatically changed. To meet this requirement, higher education system in India, can play a crucial role. In past, corporate world, governmental organisations and education system used to work independently. In present context, Indian higher education system needs to create synergy with corporate world and society in developing their course module, syllabus and in launching new programs from time to time.

Modern Indian higher education was established in India in the year 1857 with the establishment of Universities of madras, Bombay and Calcutta by the British. Since then lot of changes have taken place in education system but not up to the requirement of corporate world and need of present society. As such, there is an urgent need to address issues of quality, excellence and relevance in Indian education system. Education system need to be revamped in terms of quality and mode of teaching, development of curriculum to fulfil the need of national development with international benchmark, innovation and creativity in assignments and projects, cross flow of teachers, scientists and experts between industry and institutions, expanding links and developing network with educational system across the world for effective utilisation of national resources.

Under new regime under WTO also, competence has become cardinal principle of success in international operations. Therefore for Indian education system, it has become very important that it should exploit its excellent potential in higher education to meet national and global requirements. To meet these challenges after globalisation, Indian education system needs to be flexible. Flexibility may be in form of autonomy, recruitment of faculty, developing course curriculum, deciding different educational programs and its duration, funds for research and innovations, fee structure, involvement of students and faculty in decision making, transparency, developing linkages with other institutions etc. In this paper, authors have tried to discuss challenges for Indian education system and the role of flexibility in this context with complete transparency and accountability to society and the nation.

Keywords: *Challenges, Excellence, Education system, Flexibility, India*

Introduction

India has one of the world's largest higher education system comprising of 556 Universities and

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31,324 affiliated colleges and institutions enrolling a total of 14.6 million students in its graduate programs in disciplines spreading over a wide canvas from Arts, Commerce and Business to Pure and Applied Sciences, Engineering, Technology, Pharmaceutical, Dental and Medical Sciences on one hand and Professional Courses in Law, Architecture, Town Planning, Physical Education, Para-Medical, Fashion Design, Media and Communication, Hospitality and Hospital Management on the other, as per FICCI (INDIA) and Ernst & Young Report of 2011. The unique feature of India's higher education system is that it is predominantly dominated by undergraduate education especially in engineering, technology, medical, pharmacy and has registered a phenomenal growth during the last two decades after the globalisation of India's economy.

While the Gross Enrolment Ratio has registered an impressive growth to 13.8% in 2010 as against 6.0% in 1990, low employability of graduates, low industry relevance of academic programs and lack of vibrancy of culture of research and innovation remain as a major concern for higher education in India. In this context, it is important to realise that the industry requires ready-to-run kind of professionals to meet and greet the challenges of the knowledge economy. Further, the institutions of higher learning are required to play a major role in the growth of society-centric, industrially relevant technologies. A typical technological university is required to be a major hub of world quality education and research equipped with an environment of technology incubation and new product development. It also needs to produce manpower relevant to the industry and should possess competencies and values of today's technology intensive, professionally rejuvenating and ethically highly demanding work environment.

To meet the challenges, Indian higher education system needs to be flexible for innovations in curriculum. Curriculum innovation is essential for sustainable development (Chhokar, 2010). Flexibility may be in form of academic and administrative autonomy, recruitment of faculty, design and development of course curriculum, flexible timeframe for completion of academic programs and flexible rewards and recognition systems to promote quality and merit.

Indian higher education system has undergone massive expansion in post-independent. India with a national resolve to establish several Universities, Technical Institutes, Research Institutions and Professional / Non-professional Colleges all over the country to generate and disseminate knowledge coupled with the noble intention of providing easy access to higher education to the common Indian. The Public initiatives played a dominant and controlling role in this phase. Most of the Universities were Public institutions with powers to regulate academic activities on their campuses as well as in their areas of jurisdiction through the affiliating system. Even the private institutions enjoyed large-scale financial support in the form of grants from the public exchequer.

Private funds as well as individuals played key roles in the cause of higher education. The new regime under WTO where competence is the cardinal principle of success in international operations has made it abundantly clear that the country should exploit its excellent potential in higher education and training facilities and prepare itself to export the Indian brand of education to foreign countries. For many reasons –political, social, philosophical, economic as well as educational– there has long been an interest in increasing the flexibility of participation in higher education. Rapid developments in computer and network technology, particularly the escalation in Internet use during the latter decades of the 20th century and the emergence of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s not only intensified the motivation of institutions and governments to offer more flexible forms of participation in higher education but also led to a surge in experimentation with new pedagogical methods and new forms of digital learning resources and interactions.

New delivery systems that increase the effectiveness of learning at a distance, new organizations such as virtual universities, and other models of teaching and learning are forcing higher education to change the way they do business (Berge, 2000). Fry (2001) is of the viewpoint that if universities are to compete in a global higher education market they must embrace the technological advancements such as e-learning and use them as a strategic tool so that they are capable of transforming educational and business practices. E-learning has its own benefits such as it provides many ways to increase communication between class members and faculty, including discussion boards, chats, and e-mails which results in increase in motivation among the students. E-mails can be used by instructors to remind learners about forthcoming events and how they have performed academically (Stephenson, 2001). Online education instills in the students a sense of equality whereby each student can express himself or “speak up” by posting his views on discussion forms which is boon for shy and anxious students. This promotes more confrontational and direct communication between students. Traditional teaching relies primarily on physical attendance and if students wish to work on joint projects they must coordinate schedules but with the use of web-based collaborative tools and asynchronous discussions this is no longer an issue and reliance on physical attendance can be done away with. Using e-learning and web-based advanced techniques, there is a growing emphasis on leveraging advanced technology. In the area of case teaching, for example, the field is witnessing a steady increase in the use of CD-ROM cases and web-based materials. Web-based integrated software packages for e-learning have recently been developed that provide flexibility by creating two sets of capabilities:

- (1) Assembling multimedia content created by a variety of authoring/publishing software programs into a course; and
- (2) Managing course registration, administering and recording tests online, and tracking course and program completion.

Therefore e-based learning is also important driver for flexibility in supply chain. Bhattacharya and Sharma, (2007) have focussed for e based learning for Indian Universities to improve their reach in different corners of country. It will also have impact on flexibility of delivery systems. In many countries internationally, the umbrella term ‘flexible education’, incorporating flexible learning, flexible teaching and other related terms, has come into common usage in higher education. There is no universally agreed definition of what is meant by flexible education (Casey & Wilson, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 1997; Ling, *et al.*, 2001; Morrison & Pitfield, 2006; Nicoll, 1998; Normand, Littlejohn, & Falconer, 2008; Nunan, 1996; Sappey, 2005).

In this paper, the authors have examined the role of flexibility in the context of development of world class institutions as also to rejuvenate and revitalise higher education in India.

Need for Flexible Education

After globalisation of markets, need of corporate world as well as other private and government departments has dramatically changed. Human capital plays very important role in growth of a country (Batra, 2009). Now education needs to develop holistic personality of an individual. Rationales for flexibility include the commercialisation of higher education across the world. As government funding declines (Morrison & Pitfield, 2006) and numbers of conventional entry students decline (Casey & Wilson, 2005), there is a need to compete for new student markets, particularly overseas fee-paying students (Bigum & Rowan, 2004) to bolster institutional income. Till now mainly American and European universities try to take maximum students from other countries. It is a big source of resource creation for these foreign universities. Now considering the economic scenario, Indian universities and institutions also require changes in their curriculum

and teaching pedagogy to make it more competitive and acceptable across the world. Education system needs to be more flexible for meeting these changing requirements. It has been argued that to be effective in a world based on capitalist and competitive economic production systems, higher education needs to transform itself to reflect this environment, and to restructure its work practices and relationships (Nunan, 1996). Flexible education is seen to offer increased efficiency of education delivery that would be attractive to institutional administrators (Bigum & Rowan, 2004; Nicoll, 1998), as well as providing marketing advantages to be used in the competition for students between institutions, both locally, nationally and internationally (Kirkpatrick, 2001; Sappey, 2005). Thankachan *et al.* (2009, 2010) have also observed that Indian technical education is not changing as per industry requirements and expressed need for quality and flexibility in Indian Technical education system. Other reasons for flexible education are:

- Changing demand by students for flexibility in time/place/mode of study (Casey & Wilson, 2005).
- Need for widening access to higher education through flexible delivery modes (Morrison & Pitfield, 2006; Nicoll, 1997)
- Changing needs of industries and employees.
- Need to respond changing government policies.
- Changing teaching pedagogy from time to time.
- Changing requirements for faculty competencies.
- Geographical and time limitations.
- Pressure on educational institutions to be more industry oriented.
- Need for education system to accommodate changes in technology and new advanced developments in concerned area.
- To make educational system more economical and suitable for all category/religion of population.
- To provide flexible learning opportunities for students to overcome barriers of distance, location and circumstance;

Forms of Flexibility in Education System

Education system can be flexible in different forms. Requirements of particular form of flexibility may change from situation to situation. Different forms of flexibility may be:

- Flexibility for launching different programs of different levels such as degree/diploma/certificate etc.
- Flexibility in recruitment of faculty and in deciding the appropriate qualification.
- Flexibility in conducting their own entrance test with appropriate eligibility criteria.
- Flexibility to decide duration for a particular program and mode of teaching for that program.
- Flexibility to change course outline from time to time and to decide different components for evaluating the students.
- Flexibility for doing collaborative research or signing MOU with other universities to have joint academic activities.
- Flexibility to establish their new campus within country or in any other part of the world.

- Flexibility for deciding faculty and staff strength.
- Flexibility to decide incentives schemes for attracting good faculty and to motivate them continuously.

Barriers for flexibility in Education System

There are many factors which affect adversely for initiatives to bring flexibility in Indian education system. Currently in most of the Indian institutions, learning is teacher focussed rather it should be students or industry focussed. In Indian context, it is felt that in many of the reputed Indian Universities, their course curriculum and teaching pedagogy have not been changed for so many years. Even in reputed University such as Delhi University, for changing annual system into semester system, university administration faced lot of problems from different quarters of faculty and students. Teachers and students union have been also found major hurdles in making changes in most of the Indian universities. Some times Government also make changes in educational system without taking consent from different stakeholders. Recently Government of India tried to introduce uniform entrance exam for engineering and management institutions but it faced lot of resistance from different quarters due to lack of coordination strategies and confidence building measures among different stakeholders. At the same time, there are some institutions in India, which have got sufficient financial as well as academic autonomy specifically Indian Institute of Technologies (IITs) and Indian Institute of Management (IIMs). It is observed that these institutions are highly proactive in changing their course curriculum, mode of teaching pedagogy, recruitment and selection process of faculty and students. They are also empowered to launch different performance based incentive schemes for their faculty. Due to these schemes, faculty of such institutions are highly performance and research oriented for their career growth. Some of the most common barriers in flexible education system are:

- Lack of commitment and financial support from government.
- High political interference in academic affairs/policies.
- Lack of infrastructure in institutions to make changes in their course curriculum or for changing mode of delivery.
- Lack of linkage between industry and institutions.
- Feeling to maintain status quo in most of the faculty members thereby they do not want to update their knowledge.
- Lack of interest among the students to make extra efforts for new learning/innovations.
- Lack of accountability among some of the faculty members.
- Ineffective performance measurement systems for faculty and students.
- Lack of effective and efficient feedback from the students.
- Lack of involvement of alumni in academic affairs of their institutes.
- Less connectivity between students, faculty and industry due to lack of IT applications and information flow across the chain.

Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

Based on changing global economy and market requirements, education systems have to be proactive in making different changes in their various activities. Effectiveness of an educational system will depend that how effectively they accommodate the changes required in terms of course curriculum, teaching mode, recruitment of teachers, examination pattern etc. Making change is quite difficult but it has become obvious now that to compete in globalised market,

our education system has to be dynamic with time.

- Develop well articulated and coherent program and course level policies that would aim to deliver consistent teaching and learning material for students
- Ensure student readiness for flexible modes of study
- Developing clear teaching and learning support mechanisms to assist academic teachers in advancing their teaching and learning strategies by providing centralised resources and technical support.
- Encourage staff to be innovative and experiment with, designing and developing flexible models of learning by explicitly recognising and rewarding their efforts in this area
- Providing sufficient opportunities for Publicising research papers and linking the performance with reward and promotion through teaching excellence.
- Strengthen pedagogies related to collaboration and networked learning by developing faculty interest and knowledge in constructive and anticipatory learning.
- Providing sufficient academic and administrative autonomy to Institutions by Government.
- Creating conducive environment for new online learning and other changes.
- Effective accreditation system to ensure quality in higher education.
- Providing world class infrastructure equipped with all modern technology and tools.
- Encourage Public Private Partnership in higher education to avoid any resource crunch for this sector.
- Higher education in all areas such as Science, Arts, Medicine and Engineering etc should be encouraged.
- Complete transparency should be maintained in the working of Executive/Academic Bodies and other Governing Councils of the Universities.

This study has tried to bring major challenges and recommendations for providing flexibility in Indian education system. These findings will be quite useful to explore global opportunities, provided Government take proactive action and develop effective strategies for continuous improvement of the system. However at the end, authors would like to conclude that in name of flexibility, quality and content of higher education should not be compromised. For this effective control mechanism consisting of all stakeholders need to be developed and made functional.

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