

Report of the National Knowledge Commission on Higher Education: A Review

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The Report on Higher Education of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) is one in the series, since the Report of Dr. Radhakrishnan Commission (1948). The learned reports, have met with one common fate: they are often quoted but remain largely unimplemented. It is hoped that such of the recommendations of the NKC as are accepted will be implemented.

It may be said, that most of the recommendations, have already been made in the earlier reports. Strangely, the NKC does not refer to any of them though it is stated that earlier reports have been consulted.

Among the recommendation that have found repetition, it is with emphasizing the advocacy of 1.5 to 2.0 percent of GDP for higher education assuming a provision of 6.0 percent for education and drawing attention to the sad fact that 'implicit politicization has made governance of universities exceedingly difficult and much more susceptible to non-academic intervention from outside.'
[P.51]

We may consider the recommendations that are unique to this Report. In order to increase the gross enrollment ratio to 15 percent, the Commission suggests that India needs as many as, 1500 universities by 2015. This recommendation has met with strong disapproval from many quarters. It is, a modest requirement for a country of the size of India and, if implemented, would mean rectifying the following major deficiencies:

- i. With 90% of the undergraduate students, and 66.0% of the postgraduate students in the affiliated colleges, we have today a system, overwhelmed by affiliated colleges which are, in many cases, marginally better than good higher secondary schools.
- ii. We have in the affiliated colleges 84.0% of the total faculty in higher education, comprising only lecturers of different grades who do not, and who are not expected to, do any research. Consequently, only the faculty

members in the universities who constitute a mere 16.0% of the total are expected to do research. In other words, the universities which are to be the prime centres of scholarship, and where there is an uninterrupted flow of young minds play, regrettably, an insignificant role in generating a base for creating new knowledge and new technologies. While China has published 72632 research papers with citation in 2005, the figure for India was 25227. The progressive decline in Indian research can be seen from the fact that the corresponding figures in 1990 were 6991 for China and 11563 for India. The research potential of Indian universities is alarmingly poor. Prof. C.N.R. Rao is reported to have said that "our universities have largely stopped doing research". It is amazing that the situation does not seem to disturb our sleep. The urgent step to improve the health of higher education and research which is really anaemic is to increase the number of universities and transfer higher education from the affiliated college compounds to university campuses.

The number of universities suggested is not too large. Japan with a population of 12.7 crores has 726 universities; Germany with 8.2 crores has 350; U.K. with 6.1 crores has 125; and U.S.A. with a population of 30.4 crores is reported to have 2466. China according to the NKC, has authorized the creation of 1250 new universities in the previous three years [p.49].

Kulandai Swamy has suggested in an article in the Hindu, 18th May 2005, assuming a gross enrolment ratio of 20%, 'we must have a much larger number of university level institutions. We may set a target of about 2500 university level institutions for 2020 and fulfill it in the next 15 years.'

**** the above may be omitted if inevitable to save space***

Having suggested a massive increase in the number of universities, the Commission has broadly outlined acceptable measures for achieving it, namely, the establishment of 50 National Universities, upgradation of deserving colleges into Deemed Universities, establishment of new Universities by the Central and State Governments and private providers.

The role of the private sector in higher education has been stressed by the Commission in unambiguous terms. Consequent to the increase in demand and inadequate response on the part of the Governments, there has been, in the recent years, a quiet, but steady increase in private participation in, general and professional, education. The world is also witnessing a gradual transformation of higher education from public to private good. Against this development, the attitude of the political leadership in India to private participation appears to be, one of seeming disapproval, but unwillingness to prevent, inability to regulate, and in general an indifferent attitude, leading to pervasive co-existence of good and bad. In view of the NKC recommendation, India must formulate a realistic policy for regulated development of private institutions.

The most controversial recommendation is under the section on Regulation. The Commission recommends as follows:

"There is a clear need to establish an Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE). Such regulatory authority is both necessary and desirable" [p.53].

"The IRAHE would have to be established by an act of parliament. It would be the only agency that would be authorized to accord degree granting power to higher education institutions. It would also be responsible for monitoring standards and settling disputes. It should also be thought of as the authority for licensing accreditation agencies" [p.55].

"The Chairperson and Members of the IRAHE would be appointed by the Prime Minister based on the recommendation of a Search Committee"[p.55].

The functions and powers of IRAHE indicate that it will take over most of the responsibilities of UGC, and all the functions of AICTE, MCI and the BCI.

This proposal is extraordinary: the academics and researchers are viscerally anti-regulatory and are prone to opt for self-regulation and peer review. However, growing emphasis on accountability requires a balance between external and self regulation. Consistent with this requirement, it is desirable that responsibility devolves on well established intermediate institutions rather than being concentrated in a single sovereign centre.

The Commission in its defence says: 'the other regulators, say in the sphere of professional education, are often inconsistent in their adherence to principles' (p.54). One wonders whether such a thing may not happen with IRAHE in which all the powers of the autonomous bodies are to be vested. The Chairman and Members of IRAHE are nominees of the P.M. The Chairpersons of all the bodies, i.e., UGC, AICTE, and MCI are also appointed through Search Committee and approval of the P.M. Members of these bodies are nominated by no less a person than the Cabinet Minister of the concerned Ministry. If these persons cannot be trusted, what esoteric powers does the P.M. or the members of the Search Committee exercise in choosing, from the same society, persons, so few, in whom so much is to be trusted, and so absolutely. The immensity and diversity of the task defy any attempt at such a single window operation.

The National Education Policy (1986) has proposed the establishment of a co-ordinating body as seen from the following:

"In the interest of greater co-ordination of facilities and developing interdisciplinary research, a national body covering higher education in general, agricultural, medical, technical, legal and other professional fields will be set up." [para 5.34].

It is an extremely important decision and unfortunately, it has not been implemented. It may be established and designated as National Board of Higher Education, comprising the chairpersons of the autonomous bodies and the concerned ministers as members and the P.M. as chairman.

The National Policy [1986] has also recommended a coordinating body at the State level, designated as State Council of Higher Education. If these bodies are established, we will have an elegant structure of regulatory intermediaries representing an academic hierarchy with proper decentralization and well defined functions.

The NKC, while discussing research, has unfortunately made a patently wrong statement when it observed that, 'we attempted to create stand-alone research institutions, pampered with resources in the belief that research should be moved out of universities' [p.50].

One fails to understand wherefrom the Commission obtained this information. At the time of independence, India created a chain of National Laboratories to meet the emerging needs of development. They were meant to be in addition to the universities and not in the place of universities.

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The affiliating system in India is a curse on Higher Education. The NKC does not seem to realise fully the harm done by it and the consistent recommendations made earlier for its discontinuance. To liberate the colleges from the bondage and the universities from the burden of affiliation, the Education Commission (1966) recommended the autonomous college system. The National Education Policy (1986) has also contemplated, 'the replacement of the affiliating system by a freer and more creative association of universities with colleges' (Para. 5.28).

The NKC while recommending the creation of autonomous colleges does not seem to contemplate the discontinuance of the affiliating system on a phased programme; but on the other hand it suggests that, 'new undergraduate colleges could be established as community colleges and be affiliated with the Central Board of Undergraduate Education or State Boards of Undergraduate Education or with some of the new universities that are established' [p.46].

The creation of Boards of Undergraduate Education would mean more or less uniform syllabus for the undergraduate courses in the State or in the Country and full fledged Bachelors' Degrees being granted by Boards conducting examinations. An Undergraduate degree all over the world is a well recognised stage in university education and downgrading it to an award by a mere examining body is an arrangement non-existent in any country. This would mean grievous devaluation of the undergraduate degree of Indian universities, in the eyes of the

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world which may not differentiate between undergraduate degrees awarded by the Boards and Universities in India.

Kulandai Swamy in his article on 'Reconstruction of Higher Education in India' in the Hindu 18th May 2005 has offered the following suggestion:

"For each major university having a number of affiliated colleges, an autonomous Board of Examinations under the full charge of a Pro-Vice Chancellor must be established. The Vice Chancellor and the Board of Management of the university must be concerned only with the university departments and autonomous colleges."

A Nation or a society must carry out periodically mini revolutions: since it has not happened in Indian higher education we need a major revolution.

It is my considered opinion that the Report on Higher Education of NKC, with such modifications as found necessary may be implemented on a Mission Mode to bring about the much needed major revolution.