

June 26, 2009

Yash Pal Committee Report on Higher Education: A Review

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The Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education (the Yash Pal Committee) has submitted its report to the Union Minister of Education on June 23, 2009. Given the wide-spread concerns about the current state and trends in India's higher education system, the report could not come at a better time when the new government may want to take major steps to improve higher education.

The Report, written by a panel of eminent educationists, identifies some major weaknesses of the current system that include disciplinary fragmentation and isolation, separation of instruction from exploration, proliferation of single-discipline institutes, erosion of autonomy and democratic spirit of freedom of thought, unattractiveness of careers in education to the talented youth, excessive commercialization, uneven accessibility, poor financing, governance and management, and excessive and inappropriate regulation of colleges and universities. Political pressures and control from the outside find internal resonance in the interested parties within these institutions, often generating resource and attention consuming litigation and many conflicts which are unrelated to their educational mission.

The Committee proposes a bold structural move in creation of a new constitutional body, National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER), to takeover the responsibilities of the Universities Grants Commission, the All India Council for Technical Education, and all educational aspects of 13 professional regulatory bodies such as the Bar Council of India. The Commission will be directly responsible to the Parliament, along the lines of the National Election Commission, to protect it from political interference.

The Commission will serve as the apex regulatory body in the field of higher education in India and seek to redefine the higher education through (1) developing a vision of higher education as reflected in framework for curricula, university benchmarks, international comparisons, educational policies including costs and pricing; (2) advising the union and state governments, (3) creating norms, processes and structures for entry, accreditation, and exit of institutions and programs; (4) developing sources and mechanisms for funding; (5) promote effective and transparent governance; (6) creating a national database on higher education; (7) promoting an environment to attract talented youth to education and research; (8) creating processes for richer environment for learning and exploration through softer interaction among students and teachers; (9) finding ways of gradually freeing the universities from the administrative burdens of affiliated colleges; and (10) reporting annually to the Parliament on the state of higher education.

This three paragraph summary does not do justice to the grand vision of the future of India's higher education that motivates this 94-page document. Every system, no matter how inefficient and dysfunctional, has plenty of beneficiaries. Threatened by proposals for reform, they stand ready with their inside knowledge to rip the reform proposals apart by line, paragraph and chapter. Where is the evidence for this? Prove it first. But as Samuel Johnson said: Nothing will ever be attempted if all possible

objections must first be removed. The Government of India has a clear choice ahead—act now, or spend its five-year term dealing with the objections.

The Report can, however, be improved by strengthening some of its recommendations. It could put greater emphasis on the severity of shortage of talent in higher education and research and the weakness and consequences of the for-profit “investment” model of higher education for quality and innovation. It hardly mentions the responsibility of the business corporation in supporting higher education and does not adequately promote the benefits of regulatory competition in the vast Indian system. Let us consider each of these issues briefly.

Many of the ills of Indian higher education can be linked to the quality of talent in the field. A significant number of the best minds of each year’s graduates will have to be attracted to instruction and research for the Committee’s recommendations to have any chance of success. Perhaps the President of India could congratulate the top 1 percent of each year’s undergraduate class through a letter, letting them know that as exceptional people, they are invited to pursue post-graduate studies with a government fellowship in any field at a university (in India or abroad) that admits them at any time during the five years following graduation. If even a small proportion of such talented graduates accept this offer of a Presidential Fellowship, we shall have significantly increased the flow of talent into education within a decade or so.

In addition to educating some 40 lakh new graduates, Indian colleges and universities also must also educate about 4 lakh new instructors each year. If undergraduate classroom is the wheat farm, the graduate program is its seed farm; whether we eat or starve tomorrow depends on the quality of grain saved as the seed. At present Indian universities grant some 17,000 PhD degrees annually across all fields and, in the judgment of many educators, of mixed quality. Graduate programs, like seed farms, are extremely expensive to run, and yield little revenue to motivate profit-making colleges. Profit-making companies do not invest in educating educators and exacerbate the problem in India. To create and sustain a good system of higher education, the Commission will have to have a “seed farm” division of its own to deal with the problem.

No university in the world has found a way of delivering quality higher education without government or charitable subsidy. Quality education is expensive, and anyone who can figure out a way of running a world class (or even average) university at profit deserves at least a Nobel Prize. Since none of the top 500 universities across the world is run without large subsidies, the source of widespread belief in India that investment by profit-seeking organizations—whether foreign or domestic—in higher education will help deliver quality education is a mystery. There is no such thing as commercially viable higher education beyond low-level vocational education.

While declining in relative importance, government employment is still important in India. Strict written definitions of qualifications for government jobs requiring specific subjects sustain the compartmentalization of education in universities. The Committee’s recommendation on lowering the walls among the disciplines should be accompanied by greater flexibility in defining educational requirements for jobs and allowing greater role for judgment by the recruiting personnel for government.

The Committee’s recognition of the diverse skills needed for management of various operations of universities calls for care in education, training and selection of administrators. Managing academic (programs, faculty recruitment and promotion,

admissions, curriculum and budgeting), financial, facilities, personnel, government, community, governance, and fundraising operations of universities requires a diversity of skills. The NCHER would do well to help universities build such management capabilities and do appropriate succession planning. Improving the management of universities will help increase the chance of success in reaching the goal of university autonomy.

A great many institutions of secondary and higher education in India were created and are run well by charitable trusts. However, the same charitable trust has also become a veil for colleges run by operators who see them as little more than profit-making businesses. The Commission will have to make sure that the not-for-profit trusts are true to their legal charter and do not leak funds to their controlling parasites. Alumni of these institutions could be given a voice in helping the Commission evaluate the operations of colleges run by the trusts.

Finally, the proposed new structure of the Commission should have appropriate features to protect it from the conditions that led to failures of the structures it will replace. Monopoly regulatory power over higher education for a population of 1.15 billion presents a prima facie risk of getting mired again in inefficient procedures and rules. The Committee Report itself recognizes that one-size-fits-all regulation of higher education will not work. For this reason, the Government of India would be better advised to adopt a model of regulatory competition by creating not one but two, or perhaps three such commissions, each acting independently with jurisdiction over the entire country. Absence of monopoly regulatory power will induce these commissions to compete, innovate by trying different models and ideas, allow experimentation, comparisons, imitation and rejection, and ultimately evolve a complex diverse matrix of institutions of higher education appropriate for a large fast developing country to support its ambitions to join countries of the first rank in the world.

The full text of the Report is available at:

<http://www.hindu.com/nic/yashpalcommitteereport.pdf>.

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