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Higher education in India- The past glory of excellence, the downfall, and an attempt to rise again

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ABSTRACT

The current study titled “Higher Education in India –The Past Glory of Excellence, the Downfall, and an Attempt to Rise Again” is a quantitative study to analyse the perceptions of people about the Higher Education in India. The investigator used random sampling method to collect the information through an online survey. The sample consisted of 40 individuals who are directly or indirectly involved in the higher education system. The study revealed that India had enjoyed a well renowned higher education system and world class universities. India contributed immensely towards Science, Mathematics, surgery and medicine. But the statics show that now India’s performance in higher education in the global level is alarming and shameful. The young generation wants to move to world- class universities abroad for their higher education. The findings of the study shows that most of the respondents are aware about the positive aspects, negative aspects, brain drain and the current scenario of Indian Higher Education System. The finding also shows the Indian Education System needs radical changes and more investment from the government towards its development. There was a strong opinion that Indian universities should respond to global changes and also work hard towards the skill-based training rather than the age old theory-based learning.

Keywords— Higher education system, brain drain, colonial system, global changes, skill-based education, human resource, social reforms, NAAC, accreditation agencies, policies, funds

1. INTRODUCTION

No doubt, the higher education system is the backbone of any developing country. The human resource is trained in the universities. India had a very rich history of nurturing mankind through holistic education. Our ancient universities not only provided education for living and enlightenment, but also contributed richly towards all the branches of knowledge. Ancient Indian Education was sought as a means of self-realization, as a means to the ultimate end of life. Ancient Indian schooling can also be interpreted as being essentially the product of the Indian knowledge theory as part of the underlying scheme of life and values. The scheme fully takes into account the fact that Life includes Death and the two make up the whole truth. This gives a specific viewing angle, a sense of perspective and balance where the material and moral, the physical and spiritual, the perishable and permanent interests and values of life are clearly defined and strictly distinguishable¹.

The ancient Indian education system was immensely popular and students came from different parts of the world to study in those universities. Nalanda and Takshashila were some of the prominent names among them. For centuries Nalanda mahavihara remained a base for higher education of the Buddhists. Nalanda was a kind of university where monks came from every corner of the country as well as abroad and they felt proud and prestigious to have the chance to study here at Nalanda. It was really the highest academic distinction of the day to be a student of Nalanda².

But eventually, India became a follower of western education which was imposed upon us by the colonial powers. The British failed to create a genuinely national educational system for a common democratic system of public schools as part of an independent India. The British failed to develop a meaningful synthesis between East and West values and cultures. British education policy was ineffective in its nature, aimed at producing effective and loyal officials only. The British neglected Indigenous education needs of Indian society³ It is a sad fact that we are still blindly following the colonial system of education, which neglects the federal aspect of our country, its values and identity. This study titled “Higher Education in India –The Past Glory of Excellence, the Downfall, and an Attempt to Rise Again” is an attempt to analyse the perception of the educated people regarding the reality of Indian higher education system.

2. RESEARCHABLE QUESTIONS

- What is the role of higher education in developing its human resource?
- How are the goals of education directly related to the needs, aspirations and present demands of the society?
- How has the colonial system of education affected the quality of our higher education?
- What are the differences between the education in ancient universities like Nalanda and Takshashila, and education in the modern universities of India?
- How does brain drain seriously affect the development of the country?
- How are the poor standards of higher education system in India attributing to brain drain?
- What are the steps taken by the government to improve the higher education system?
- How do accreditation agencies like NAAC help in improving the quality of education in India?

3. METHODOLOGY

An online survey method was used to collect the information from the sample. A questionnaire was prepared in Google Forms and was sent to the participants of the survey through online medium. The responses were collected and analyzed and the interpretations were drawn.

3.1 Population of the study

The population of the study includes all educated male and female citizens of India who are directly or indirectly associated with the higher education system. This includes the research scholars, retired professionals from industries, retired professors and teachers from various cities of India who fall under the age limit of 22 to 65 years.

3.2 Sample of the study

The sample of the study consists of 42 individuals from the population which includes all educated male and female citizens of India who are directly or indirectly associated with the higher education system. This includes the research scholars, retired professionals from industries, retired professors, and teachers from various cities of India who fall under the age limit of 22 to 65 years.

3.3 Tools used for the study

A rating scale was prepared by the investigator in Google Forms to collect responses from the participants.

3.4 Limitations of the study

The study is limited only to the opinion of respondents collected through Google Forms towards the overall understanding of the objectives, importance, problems, and implications of higher education system in India, and the government initiatives for improving the higher education system.

4. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

The analysis of the data was done using Google Forms. It was found that majority of the questions were responded to positively by the participants, and most of them agreed with the statements given to record their response. The analysis of the data is given below:

Table 1: Demographic background of the participants

S. No.	Demographic Information	Ranges
1	Age	22 years-65 years
2	Locality	All over India
3	Educational Qualification	Graduates, Post graduates and Ph.D. holders
4	Profession	Teachers, Assistant Professors, Retired Educationists, Industrialists, Research Scholars

Table 2: Education- The Backbone of National Development

S. No.	Statements	Responses in Percentage			
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	The goals of education are formulated as per the needs, aspirations, and present demands of the society	23.8	54.8	14.3	7.1
2	The education system promotes national integration, social integration, moral and spiritual values of citizens	31	50	19	0
3	Strategic reforms in Education are a social revolution itself	28.6	64.3	7.1	0
4	Universities play a major role in developing human resource.	33.3	61.9	4.8	0
5	India, as a developing country must invest more on higher education	76.2	21.4	2.4	0
6	India was home to some of the greatest universities in the world like Nalanda and Takshashila, which had contributed greatly towards the growth of mankind	66.7	28.6	2.35	2.35
7	The ancient universities like Nalanda and Takshshila encouraged dynamic, flexible, and skill- based holistic development of the individual	47.6	47.6	2.4	2.4

8	Universities in the present day are not on par with the high standards of excellence and popularity of universities in the past ^{35.7}	35.7	47.6	11.9	4.8
9	The popularity and global ranking of present-day Indian universities are quite disappointing	21.4	59.5	16.7	2.4
10	Brain drain can be due to lack of good universities offering innovative courses in tune with global trends and job requirements	26.2	61.9	11.9	0
11	Brain drain causes loss of skilled human resource, thereby causing irreparable damage to national economy and development	40.5	50	9.5	0
12	Even though some universities within the country are trying to introduce innovative courses, students still opt to study in foreign universities	28.6	61.9	4.75	4.75
13	Students and parents generally believe that the quality of education is better in foreign countries when compared to the Indian higher education system, which is still following theory-based knowledge building	31	54.8	9.5	4.7
14	People believe that studying abroad offers them a better possibility of working and settling overseas	54.8	38.1	7.1	0
15	The glorification of English and the lingering colonial legacy has damaged our self-esteem and traditional values	31	52.4	14.3	2.4
16	Colonial educational practices gives low priority to India's federal structure and reduces our cultural identity	28.6	52.4	16.7	2,3
17	The Right to Education Act is considered a dynamic and progressive step towards ensuring equity and equality of education	42.9	52.4	2.35	2.35
18	New Education Policy is capable of bringing urgent reforms in higher education	19	54.8	19	7
19	Policies and reforms are numerous in our country, but all that we require is a political will to transform our education system	42.9	52.4	4.7	0
20	UGC, NBA, AICTE play a significant role in the expansion and development of higher education	35.7	54.8	4.75	4.75
21	There is an increase in the funds and aids allotted to universities and higher educational institutions by the government towards meeting global educational standards	16,7	61.9	19	2.4
22	Accreditation Agencies like NAAC have significantly improved the quality of higher education system	19	66.7	14.3	0
23	Presently, accreditation is a voluntary exercise, but it should be made mandatory for all institutions	40.5	54.8	4.7	0
24	In the name of accreditation and ranking, most universities concentrate on data collection and gathering evidences and thereby comprise on humane values	31	61.9	7,1	0

5. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study revealed that the educated youth and elderly of India strongly believe that India is not a beginner to the higher education system. The educated population is aware about India's poor performance in higher education and agreed to the fact that India should invest more in higher education system in order to develop its resources. Indian universities should focus on global trends in higher education rather than sticking to colonial system of education. Most of them admit that brain drain is a serious threat towards India's progress. Parents and students are attracted towards foreign education institutions because they strongly believe that Indian universities lack the innovations and the punch to cater to the ever-rising demands of modernization. The study also revealed that UGC and other agencies significantly contributed towards the growth of the higher education systems in the country. An accreditation agency like NAAC also has a significant impact on improving the quality of the higher education institutions in India. There is a strong opinion that the accreditation practices by NAAC and other agencies need to be made mandatory for all the higher education institutions to improve the overall quality of services in universities and colleges.

6. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

India was home to some of the greatest universities in the world like Nalanda and Takshashila, which had contributed greatly towards the growth of mankind. The ancient universities encouraged dynamic, flexible and skill-based holistic development of individuals⁴. These universities were very popular and contributed to all the branches of knowledge. They operated as knowledge centres for students from all around the world. But now, these great universities remain just as a part of our rich history. The quality and standards of universities in the present day cannot be compared with the high standards of excellence and popularity of the universities in the past. The presence of our universities in the list of top 200 universities in the global

ranking of universities is still only an unfulfilled dream. Universities like Nalanda and Takshashila provided world-class system of education considering the needs and skills required by the society back at that time.

After colonial powers took over the administration in India, education was formulated to cater to only few sections of the society. The glorification of English and the lingering colonial legacy has damaged our self esteem and traditional values. Colonial educational practices give low priority to India's federal structure and reduce our cultural identity; but even after independence, we are still following the English system of education. "The systemic challenges that afflict the Indian higher education system are tied to its long colonial history as well as its present developing country status. Thus, it is important to identify how well the captivation with producing world-class universities serves the Indian higher education system, and the society at large ⁵."

The popularity and global ranking of present day Indian universities are quite disappointing. One of the possible reasons for this is that we are still following theory-based education and traditional classrooms. The goals of education must be formulated as per the needs, aspirations, and present demands of the society. The education system should promote national integration, social integration, moral and spiritual values of citizens. Strategic reforms in Education are a social revolution itself. Universities play a major role in developing human resource. India, as a developing country, must invest more on higher education. Poor funding by government and lack of good universities and colleges within reach is a hindrance to higher education for all. It seems very doubtful that any of the current universities in India would soon become world-class⁶.

Another critical side effect of poor higher education system is brain drain. Brain drain can be due to lack of good universities offering innovative courses in tune with the global trends and current job requirements. Brain drain causes loss of skilled human resource, thereby causing irreparable damage to the national economy and the country's development. Even though some universities within the country are trying to introduce innovative courses, students still opt to study in foreign universities. Students and parents generally believe that the quality of education is relatively better in foreign countries when compared to the Indian higher education system, which is still following theory-based knowledge building. People believe that studying abroad also offers them a better possibility of working and settling overseas. There is a growing awareness about brain drain. It is a loss that actually exists in practice; however, there is growing awareness of the possibility that skilled migration can bring prosperity and economic growth for both migrants and countries that send them⁷.

Right from the period of colonial government, several commissions were appointed to find out the needs and problems associated with Indian higher education. The British government brought out several policies to improve the higher education system. The Indian Universities Act appointed in 1904 on the instructions of Lord Curzon was one among them. The University Education Commission of 1948, under the chairmanship of Dr. Radhakrishnan, made a number of significant recommendations on bringing improvements in various aspects of the higher education system, which were intended to bring about profound changes in universities in response to the rapid changes in the global arena. After independence some critiques have claimed that it is easier for India to establish its own higher education while others support an open door and the notion that market will have a positive effect on Indian higher education. India now desperately needs new ideas-so it is not beneficial to separate the program from foreign principles and practices ⁸.

The UGC Act (1956) is another milestone in the development of the Indian higher education system. The Right to Education Act is considered a dynamic and progressive step towards ensuring equity and equality of education. The New Education Policy (2016) is capable of bringing urgent reforms in higher education, but it is also widely criticized by all sectors of educationists, citing its ignorance of the ground realities of the Indian education system.

Policies and reforms are numerous in our country, but all that we actually require is a political will to transform our education system. The UGC, NBA, and AICTE play a significant role in the expansion and development of higher education, but this alone is not enough. It is true that there has been an increase in the funds and aids allotted to universities and higher educational institutions by the government towards meeting global educational standards. Indian Higher Education needs more modest investment than some other fast-growing economies and below European expenditure levels. From the outset, emphasis was placed on meeting the demands of mass access and expansion instead of building a meaningful, high-quality university sector, and even financial support for mass access was inadequate⁹. Higher Education was never funded adequately. India spend a modest 1.22 percent of its GDP on post-secondary education in 2011/2012¹⁰

Accreditation Agencies like NAAC have significantly improved the quality of higher education system. India's National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was established in September 1994 as an autonomous body by the University Grants Commission (U G C), as a result of the National Education Policy (1986) recommendations. It was intended to evaluate and accredit higher education institutions, as well as evaluate the quality of education they offered¹¹. Presently, accreditation is a voluntary exercise, but it should be made mandatory for all institutions. In the name of accreditation and ranking, most universities concentrate on data collection and gathering evidences, thereby comprising on humane values. Accreditation practices should not be downgraded into data collection practices. Evaluation practices in private and public universities should be uniform so that the students of public universities do not suffer. It is generally observed that private and autonomous institutions push its academic standards higher by granting more marks to its pupils, all in the hopes of accreditation and ranking. Very unfortunately indeed, even now, one of the key indicators of excellence in Indian universities and colleges is just the level of performance of students in mere pen-paper tests. A drop in quality at the bottom of Indian higher education is, to some degree, an unavoidable consequence of mass enrolment. And this can be seen worldwide, students with inadequate academic qualifications will access higher education¹²

“Government of India is willing to achieve universality of education but the limiting factor is the financial resources at the disposal of the government. Indian Ministry of Human Resource Development has proposed “Public–Private-Partnership (PPP) as an alternative to improve access to quality school education while ensuring equity and social justice.” (Ministry of Human Resource Development (2009), Public Private Partnership in School Education (Draft Note), http://mhrd.gov.in/model_school)¹³

7. IMPLICATIONS

The study suggests that the higher education system needs urgent reforms in all the areas. The government should allot more funds towards development of universities to attain global standards. In a country like India most of the universities are centred in cities. More universities and institutions of higher education have to be initiated in rural areas to cater to the needs of the major youth population of India who cannot afford the expenditures of city life and city-based institutions. The courses offered in universities should focus on sustained development within the locality; and it also should help youth find jobs within their own village or the country. As one looks at educational proposals, it is clear that the government had very small goals and never attempted to dominate the area. Instead, the downward pressure prompted the government to broaden its remit, but it did so while avoiding financial responsibility for education¹⁴.

8. CONCLUSION

Universities are tasked with building a valuable and efficient human resource equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. Therefore, the responsibility of the development of not only the country, but also its education system falls upon the shoulders of universities and other institutions of higher education. The challenge of coping with expansion demands, combined with political and other pressures on higher education, meant that existing strengths could not be exploited and that both quantity and quality could be built up¹⁵. Well-developed universities which focus on the growing needs of the present age and on shaping students into well-rounded persons of the society is therefore, a prerequisite for the betterment and growth of our nation.

*“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action-
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”*

(Rabindranath Tagore, 1910, Gitanjali)

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