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A Historical Overview of Quality Reform in Universities and Colleges

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Abstract

Over the ages, India's higher education environment has seen significant change, which has been characterised by a number of quality changes in its institutions. India's university system developed during the colonial era, the post-independence period, and into the modern age, starting with the founding of antiquated educational institutions like Nalanda and Takshashila. This historical overview charts the four major stages of quality improvements in Indian institutions. First, back in antiquity, when institutions prioritised intellectual development and comprehensive learning. Second, the colonial era ushered in Western academic standards, global techniques, and organised formal schooling. The third phase began following independence. The founding of institutions like the IITs, NITs, and AIIMs, as well as the UGC's involvement in standardised higher education, are examples of the substantial focus on research-intensive universities that was placed during the 20th century. The emphasis on internationalisation, certification procedures, research enhancement, and digital integration characterizes the modern period, which is our fourth phase. In order to democratise access to higher education, there was a noticeable increase in the number of universities and colleges at the same time. The National Knowledge Commission, the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), and the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 are analysed as important reform milestones. The study looks at how the paradigms of quality assurance and improvement are evolving. This essay aims to draw attention to existing initiatives for excellence, discuss problems, and imagine a time when Indian institutions would lead the world in higher learning. A vital resource for policymakers, educators, and scholars looking to understand the complex trajectory of quality reforms in Indian institutions, it also emphasises the crucial insights provided by the historical narrative. The challenges facing India's higher education system are highlighted in this essay, along with factors affecting quality in higher education and current problems with quality reforms.

Keywords

Higher education, Quality reforms in NEP 2020, Quality assurance, History of higher education, Strategies for quality reforms

Introduction

India's higher education system is one of the oldest in the world, with roots in legendary centres of learning like Takshashila and Nalanda. The Indian subcontinent has historically been a melting pot of several knowledge systems, with roots in Vedic traditions, Buddhist academics, and subsequently, Islamic academia. This academic history has undergone significant changes throughout the ages, from the Gurukul system that defined the intellectual and spiritual pursuits of ancient India to the founding of institutions during the colonial era that set the foundation for modern higher education. Beyond academic knowledge, education in India is seen as a crucial pillar of nation-building, a sign of advancement, and a tool for empowering people to overcome societal challenges. It raises awareness of social obligations and rights, distinguishes humans from other animals, and emphasises the value of education in determining how far society has come. Higher education saw a bold growth and democratisation throughout the post-independence era, with renowned Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) institutions

acquiring recognition on a global scale. However, as 2020 drew near, issues with quality, fairness, and access plagued India's higher education, despite its embrace of digital revolutions and new pedagogical paradigms. The goal of this research paper is to completely examine the development, successes, and difficulties of higher education in India up to the crucial year of 2020, setting its trajectory in the perspective of global trends and determining its route for the future.

The history of higher education in India

The history of higher education in India is extensive and goes all the way back to the Vedic era. Scholars' residences were converted into colleges in towns like Kashi and Mathura, first as a result of Brahmin culture. While Vedic traditions flourished, Nalanda University rose to prominence as a major international centre of learning throughout the Buddhist era. Students from many Asian nations flocked to ancient centres of learning like Nalanda, Taxila, and Vikramashila. However, European ideas had a significant impact on modern higher education in India. The necessity for English-based education was emphasised in the Mount Stuart Elphinstone report from 1823, and Thomas Macaulay was instrumental in this change. The first modern higher education institutions were ones like Fort William College in Calcutta, founded in 1800, which was followed by Presidency colleges in Madras and Mumbai. Secondary and higher education rapidly expanded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly with the founding of Punjab University and Allahabad University. Following the uprising in 1857, the British passed the Indian Universities Act in 1904, mostly to restrict access to higher education and quell nationalist sentiment. Following independence, a number of committees and commissions were created to reform and enhance higher education, including the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948–49) and the Calcutta University Commission (1917–19). A significant effect was the creation of the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 1953, an independent organisation tasked with coordinating and maintaining the standards of higher education. The UGC continues to supervise and provide funding for many institutions through its regional offices spread out over India, maintaining the quality and accessibility of higher education.

Higher Education in India

After the United States, India has the second-largest higher education system in the world. The University Grants Commission, which upholds its standards, counsels the government, and aids in coordination between the centre and the state, is the primary governing body at the tertiary level. The University Grants Commission created 12 independent entities to manage higher education accreditation. In the ten years between 2000-01 and 2010-11, the number of colleges in India increased by about 20,000, enrolling more than 8 million students.

Highlight some historical point of higher education of India

Ancient India

1500–500 BCE Vedic Education

Gurukul System: In order to learn, students (shishyas) resided with their teachers (gurus). This was a topic that included a wide range of topics, including the sciences, and wasn't merely religious or philosophical.

Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda were fundamental works in scriptural studies.

Ancient Universities: Takshashila, in what is now Pakistan, is sometimes regarded as the earliest university in history. It dates back to the sixth century BCE. Vedas to military tactics were among the topics covered in class.

Nalanda (5th century CE): Located in present-day Bihar, it was a well-known Buddhist academic hub that also offered courses in mathematics, astronomy, and medicine.

Other Centres: Important institutions of higher learning were located in Vikramashila, Pushpagiri, and Valabhi.

Mediaeval India

Islamic Education: Madrasahs emerged with the arrival and expansion of Islam. Along with sciences, literature, and maths, these centres were crucial in the study of Islamic law and religion.

Kingdoms in the region: Numerous local dynasties financed and founded educational institutions, such as the Cholas in the south.

Colonial Periods (17th-20th centuries)

Initial colonial interventions: The British focused their initial efforts primarily on comprehending the educational system that already existed in India. The study conducted in 1822 by Sir Thomas Munro uncovered thousands of old pathshalas and madrasahs.

The Macaulay's Minute (1835) proposed using English as the primary language of instruction in schools and colleges with the goal of creating an Anglicised Indian class to aid in management.

The Universities of Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay were founded in 1857 and modelled after the University of London. Universities of the 19th century. Instead of instruction, these institutes mostly administered exams.

Regarding Colonial Education: To resist British dominance, nationalist leaders and social reformers established institutions. Aligarh Muslim University, Banaras Hindu University, and Jamia Millia Islamia are a few examples.

Post-Independence Era (After 1947)
Expansion of the University System: After India's 1947 declaration of independence, a large number of universities and colleges were established all throughout the country.
Institutes of National Importance: To provide specialised training in engineering, management, and medical, institutions such as the IITs, IIMs, NITs, and AIIMS were established.
Regulatory Bodie: University Grants Commission (UGC) was established in 1956 to uphold standards for higher education.

Modern times (20th to 21st century)
Globalisation and Privatisation: Private colleges and universities have grown significantly during the 1990s. Additionally, partnerships with colleges abroad started to spread.
Online courses, virtual classrooms, and MOOC platforms like NPTEL all came into existence throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries as a result of the digital revolution.
2020 will see the implementation of the New Education Policy, a historic initiative that intends to transform the field by fostering transdisciplinary learning, research, holistic education, and internationalisation.

Quality reforms in Higher Education of India
Over the past few decades, quality improvements have been a constant process in Indian institutions and colleges. Here is a summary of the key developments and changes that have affected the quality of higher education in India:

University Grants Commission (UGC) - 1956:
Establishment: The University Grants Commission Act of 1956, which was passed by the Indian government, established the UGC. It serves as India's main higher education regulating organisation.
Role: Its primary responsibilities include allocating funding to colleges and universities, establishing academic standards, and maintaining the coordination and upkeep of norms and standards in higher education institutions.

National Policy on Education (NPE)—1986 and revised in 1992:

The NPE placed a strong focus on raising the standard of instruction at all levels. To uphold academic standards, the policy mandated a thorough evaluation of colleges and universities.

National Board of Accreditation (NBA) – 1994:

NBA was created by the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and focuses on assessing technical programmes on a regular basis in accordance with predetermined criteria and rules.

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) - 1994:

NAAC was established by the UGC to evaluate and accredit the nation's higher education institutions.
Function: It assesses colleges and universities based on criteria like governance, infrastructure, learning resources, research, and student services.

Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) - 2013:
A programme run by the federal government with the goal of strategically subsidising and supporting state higher education institutions.
In colleges and universities, the plan places a strong emphasis on the value of research, innovation, and quality improvement.

National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) - 2015:
The Ministry of Human Resource Development (now the Ministry of Education) introduced the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), which assigns scores to Indian institutions based on criteria including Teaching, Learning, and Resources; Research and Professional Practise; Graduation Outcomes; Outreach and Inclusivity; and Perception.
The framework was created to encourage institutions in India to flourish in a competitive environment.

New Education Policy (NEP) 2020
The quality of higher education in India is a key component of the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which superseded the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, which had been in operation for 34 years. Here is a thorough description of how NEP 2020's quality improvements for higher education work:

Interdisciplinary strategy: By 2040, all institutions should transform into multidisciplinary organisations, according to the policy, which supports interdisciplinary institutions. The goal of this strategy is to provide a holistic education by bridging the strict boundaries of disciplines.
Holistic Undergraduate Education: It is suggested to create a new undergraduate programme with several ways to leave. After one year, a certificate, two years, a diploma, three years, a bachelor's degree, and four years, a bachelor's with research, are all included.
Establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF): To promote a research culture in higher education, the NRF will be created. This organisation will support competitive, peer-reviewed grant applications from a range of areas.
Increase in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER): By 2035, the programme is to raise the GER in higher education to 50%. This would be accomplished by tackling the dropout issue and offering high-quality education and opportunity to everyone.
National Mission on Mentoring: The policy suggests a National Mission on Mentoring, where professors and students will have the chance to learn from veteran teachers and business leaders, with the goal of improving the quality of mentoring offered to students.
Single Regulatory Body: The National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC), a single, all-encompassing organisation for higher education that excludes the fields of medicine and law, is suggested by the policy. This prevents overlaps and repetition by ensuring that the separate roles of regulation, certification, and academic norm setting are fulfilled in a discrete yet coordinated manner.
Accreditation: The NEP emphasises a transition towards accrediting procedures that are outcome-based, open, and technology-driven, assuring educational quality and relevance. The National Accreditation Council (NAC), an impartial organisation, will accredit institutions.
Integration of Technology: The use of technology is emphasised in the policy across a number of domains, including faculty development, content production, and digital education. To foster this integration, it suggests establishing the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF).
Faculty Reforms: The policy places a strong emphasis on career growth, ongoing professional development, attractive working conditions, and robust faculty recruiting procedures. This guarantees that teachers have the tools they need to deliver high-quality instruction.
Globalization of Education: The policy promotes the international expansion of Indian institutions while simultaneously encouraging top-ranked international universities to establish campuses in India. By ensuring a two-way exchange of knowledge, this will raise the standard of education.
Universal Education: The emphasis of the strategy is on ensuring that everyone, particularly socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, has equitable access to high-quality education. Some of the suggested methods include faculty reservations, financial assistance, and special scholarships.
As a result, the road towards quality improvements in Indian higher education has been ongoing and varied, developing to meet the sector's changing requirements. Enhancing academic standards, guaranteeing operational openness, and encouraging a culture of excellence and research have all continuously been the focus.

Higher education in India faces several challenges, some of which are:
Access and Equity: Ensuring access and equity in higher education is one of the main problems. The accessibility of excellent higher education is significantly hampered for marginalised groups like SC, ST, OBC, and women in rural and urban regions, respectively.
Quality of Education: The quality of education offered by Indian higher education institutions is a major problem. A skill gap among graduates is sometimes caused by the emphasis on memorization, out-of-date curricula, and a lack of possibilities for practical training and research.
Funding: Higher education institutions in India confront severe financial difficulties, and many of them struggle to offer the essential resources and facilities because of a lack of financing. This frequently results in infrastructure and educational quality being compromised, which eventually affects graduates' employability.
Faculty Shortage: The quality of education and research suffers in India due to a lack of skilled faculty at higher education institutions. Additionally, the competition for faculty across schools causes an uneven distribution of professors among them.
Employability: Another important issue in India is the employability of graduates. The mismatch between demand and supply is frequently caused by the skills gap between what the market needs and what graduates have to offer.
Research & Innovation: India's higher education institutions frequently lack the necessary financing, facilities, and resources for research and innovation. As a result, the nation struggles to produce innovative ideas and cutting-edge research.
In conclusion, higher education in India has a number of difficulties, such as access and fairness, educational quality, financial constraints, a lack of qualified faculty, employability, and research and innovation. To solve these difficulties, a coordinated effort by the government, educational institutions, business community, and other stakeholders is needed.

The Quality and Employability Gap in India's Higher Education System

After completing their undergraduate and graduate degrees, students have extremely few work options. The disparity between supply and demand, which suggests that young people are not qualified for the labour market, is another important problem. The result is widespread unemployment among graduates with higher education.

We must uphold standards for high-quality education if we want to increase the standard of higher education in India. The indicators of a high-quality higher education include, among other things:

A sufficient number of qualified faculty members, the type of students who enrol in it, the facilities of the educational institutions, the curriculum, the choice of teaching strategies, the design of the exams, the availability of learning resources, national organisations, governmental regulations, and institutional leadership. One of the largest education systems in the world is found in India. Therefore, in order to sustain and raise the standard of higher education in India, many stakeholders must work on these aspects at their respective levels.

Factors Influencing Quality in Higher Education:

Education quality is influenced by a number of variables. Some of them are as follows:

Politicization: The quality of higher education has been seriously threatened by the politicisation of higher education. Vice-chancellor appointments are frequently perceived politically. De-politicization is not a condition that the country's political parties would accept in the near future, according to the challenge of education paper.

Poor quality of intake: The institutions continue to give deserving individuals high grades and marks in an effort to draw in applicants. Colleges and university departments that admit students based on career marks frequently receive low-quality applicants as a result.

Managerial Inefficiency: Principals are typically chosen based only on seniority, with little consideration given to managerial effectiveness. For newly appointed principals, there is no ongoing orientation programme. As a result of their lack of powerful managerial abilities, the quality of schooling is impacted.

Overcrowded Classrooms: Many institutions are forced to minimise the number of groups they have and combine them into bigger groups in order for professors to conduct successful classroom interactions due to a lack of teachers and classrooms.

Inadequate Student Services: The majority of institutions of higher learning nowadays lack the capacity to offer students services like organising orientation events, health services, dormitory facilities, guidance and counselling services, etc.

Inadequate material resources: The majority of higher education institutions do not currently have adequate physical resources such buildings, play areas, a sufficient number of classrooms, infrastructure, laboratories with adequate equipment, restrooms, and staff rooms.

Non- accountability of institutions: Non-accountability of the institutions leads to the poor quality in higher education.

Inefficiency in Teaching: An excellent teacher must be a lifelong student who actively advances his knowledge. The teachers of an institution determine its quality. The institution should have access to a decent library and a variety of periodicals, which will enhance the lecturers' expertise.

Examination Reforms: The most frequent phenomena in recent years has been changes to the examination system. The majority of academics and researchers are unhappy with the current examination system. Because of the evaluation system's flaws, this may continue to be the case for years. The analysis is unreliable. By using the new grading system and other cutting-edge techniques, this may be changed.

Teaching Methods: The structure of the curriculum should be such that it offers chances for employment as well as new information that is beneficial to society. The teachers should employ top-notch instructional materials and be knowledgeable about the usage of multimedia, IT, and OHP.

In order to improve the quality of higher education in India, other factors that are affecting it, such as teacher and student motivation, an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning, curriculum relevance that leads to low employability, etc., need to be improved.

Current Challenges in Quality Reforms of Higher education

Educators Quality and Training: Many academic institutions are lacking in highly qualified, research-focused professors. The need of ongoing faculty training and development isn't usually stressed.

Resources: Many institutions, particularly those in rural regions, lack the labs, libraries, and digital resources required to provide high-quality higher education.

Quality assurance and Accreditation: Although organisations like the NAAC and NBA exist, many universities do not have the required certification. Additionally, accreditation procedures must be more thorough and regular.

Over-centralization: When authority and decision-making are concentrated in a small number of central organisations, universities and colleges lack the freedom to create new programmes or alter those that already exist.

Lack of Standardisation: There is a great diversity in educational standards among institutions, from prestigious universities to small community colleges, which results in unequal quality.

Research and Innovation: Despite having a significant number of educational institutions, India trails behind other developed nations in terms of research output, innovative initiatives, and worldwide publications.

Outdated Curriculum: Many universities' curriculum are no longer in accordance with industry standards or contemporary global norms, which results in graduates who are not industry- or job-ready.

Rote Learning: Critical thinking, problem-solving, and practical experience are frequently neglected in favour of rote memorising.
Cultural and linguistic barriers: Regional languages and cultural settings run the risk of being ignored in education as internationalisation and global standards are pushed.
Unfair Resource Distribution: While state universities and colleges, which serve a bigger student body, sometimes operate with limited resources, premier schools like IITs and IIMs receive a sizeable portion of resources.
Resistance to Change: The adoption of novel approaches, curriculum, and technology may run into resistance from the academic community and traditional mindsets.
Access vs. Quality: Sometimes efforts to improve accessibility and the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) result in concessions regarding educational quality.
Participation of the Private Sector: As the private sector plays a larger part in higher education, there are issues related to high costs, equity, and occasionally quality when profit becomes the primary goal.
Incompatibility with Employment Market: Despite the fact that universities produce a large number of graduates, many of them are still unemployed or working at low wages because the skills they teach students don't match the demands of the market.
Regulatory Difficulties: The administration of reforms may be slowed down and complicated by the existence of many regulatory organisations with conflicting mandates.

Strategies to overcome challenges of higher educations

A country's economy may flourish if the education sector is expanding quickly; education is always seen as a key factor in advancing national development. The higher education system should be revitalised using the following recommendations to support state growth.

- Create a State Higher Education Council to develop, roll out, and promote a mission-driven higher education campaign throughout the State.
- Upgrade government institutions with 15000 or more students enrolled, independent colleges, colleges with the potential for greatness, and A-rated colleges with NAAC accreditation to the status of universities.
- Create two women's institutions, one as a model institution in each area, and support evening colleges.
- Introduce integrated undergraduate or postgraduate (UG/PG) curricula for undergraduate study at universities.
- Encourage the private sector to participate in vocational, skill-based, and higher education.
- Support UGC's package of affiliation changes and academic curriculum reforms.
- Students from socially disadvantaged groups, minorities, members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, OBCs, and women should receive financial assistance.
- Establishing a State Skill Council and launching PPP-style programmes with market-driven admissions in the fields of production and manufacturing, hospitality and tourism, testing and diagnostics for health care and hospitals, media and communication, and ICT.
- Launch the Faculty Talent Promotion Scheme through Academic Staff Colleges to increase instructors' skill and capabilities.

Conclusion

The rich tapestry of historical, cultural, and intellectual influences that date back to the renowned Vedic era are evident in India's higher education scene. The history of universities like Takshashila and Nalanda provides a window into a time when India was a centre of learning and scholarship. However, there have been many difficulties along the way, particularly with regard to quality, from these historic centres of learning to the contemporary institutions of today. The Ministry of Education has worked tirelessly to improve the country's higher education quality through a variety of programmes and actions. There is a clear recognition of the quality gaps and the need to close them with the creation of organisations like the UGC, the focus on accreditation procedures, and the drive towards research and innovation. The facts and trends do, however, point to a variety of difficulties. The road to meeting international standards is difficult, with obstacles including out-of-date curriculum and rote learning techniques as well as the struggle between quality and accessibility. Further highlighting the multifaceted character of the quality reform problem are the complexity of legislation, the necessity for faculty growth, and the adaptability to quickly changing technology landscapes. However, it's crucial to acknowledge the progress India has achieved, particularly in recent years. With its focus on multidisciplinarity, research, and holistic education, the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a step in the right direction. India's objectives in the higher education industry are further highlighted by the emphasis on leveraging technology, encouraging internationalisation, and the effort to achieve a greater Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) while retaining quality.
In conclusion, even if India's road towards quality reforms in higher education has been difficult, the future is hopeful. The key will be a coordinated strategy that strikes a balance between heritage and modernity, accessibility and quality,

and national interests and international standards. To attain success, the nation must look to its rich educational history, learn from its mistakes, and adjust to the changing global higher education paradigm.

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