

***Quality in Higher Education and Research: Par with International Standards**

By T.P.Sreenivasan.

I am grateful to the Vice Chancellor of Cochin University and the AIU for inviting me to participate in this conference of the top educationists of India. I was delighted also to hear an inspiring address by the Chairman of the University Grants Commission.

Diplomacy, they say, is so important that it cannot be left to the diplomats alone. Similarly, education too is too important to be left to educationists alone. Perhaps, it is for this reason that I have been asked to head the Kerala State Higher education Council, which I represent at this conference. What encourages me is the fact that some good educationists have become good ambassadors and some good ambassadors have become good educationists in the past.

The theme of today's discussion on quality of higher education in India with reference to international standards will itself raise controversies. World class education and international standards have been rejected by some sections of the Indian intelligentsia. When I said at the Kannur University the other day that I was sad to know that none of our universities or IITs had figured in a list of world class universities, I was told by an economist that he was not bothered about such lists, which made odious comparisons. He would prefer to have our own system of education, focusing on our culture and traditions. My observation that my endeavor is to make our graduates competitive nationally and internationally, he said that the purpose of education was to create "organic intellectuals". I would not go into that debate now. I would merely examine whether some of the methods used in other countries can be helpful to us in improving our own standards.

If the objective of giving world class education to our students is accepted, international standards and systems of education must be studied and an effort should be made adopt the best practices, wherever they are found. I would bring some of these to your attention and discuss how we can adopt them for our own needs.

We claim that we have succeeded in enhancing quantity, if not quality, in education. but the fact of the matter is that our gross enrollment ratio is only 15% and we are planning to increase it to 30% by 2020. This would mean 30 million students more, 1000 universities more, 50,000 colleges more and one million teachers more, as pointed out by our HRD Minister at the recent Washington summit. The Foreign Education Bill, when enacted, will facilitate entry of foreign universities, but such universities will not be able to repatriate profits. They would, however, benefit from their exposure to Indian academic life, it was

stated. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointed out that there was a wide gap between India's needs and what the US can do. But we can certainly benefit from some of the reforms introduced in other countries.

Developing countries are generally resistant to western concepts for fear that they will impose cultural, political and economic priorities of imperialism. Ideological crystallization has led to reaffirmation of the sovereignty of states and the belief that quality has been colonised by consumerism and commoditisation of education.

Quality evaluation and assessment are fairly new features of education in Europe and the United States. Till 1990, it was believed that quality was implicit in university education, but gradually, the concept of external evaluation came to be accepted. As a result, external examination system was introduced in the UK, the US adopted a system of accreditation and Ministerial control of education became fashionable in much of Europe. With massification, internationalisation and marketisation of education, it became necessary to evaluate higher education despite calls for autonomy of universities. India adopted the assessment and accreditation system in recent years and NAAC has been a success in aiming at excellence and equity driven growth in higher education. Following this example, the Kerala State Higher education Council has decided to explore the possibility of setting up a state assessment machinery to continuously assess institutions and teachers, with a view to providing them incentives for better performance.

Professionalization of education is another feature that we can emulate from the western world. Students are diverted to professions early in life. The community colleges in the US provide models for training and retraining the work force and creating employment opportunities.

Academic freedom, autonomy and accountability are well defined in western education. Academic freedom is universal and absolute, while autonomy is parochial and relative. Universities are accountable to a variety of clients, in addition to the Governments. They are accountable to the students, the parents and the business community. We must remove intellectual fetters from the universities, but hold them accountable to the society. Autonomy should not be used to undermine accountability.

Emphasis on research even at the undergraduate level is another feature of western education we should emulate. Research can play a central role in promoting informed deliberations. Research remains abysmally low in India even at the graduate level and this needs to be changed in accordance with international standards.

Frequent changes in curriculum to reflect the changes in society is a feature of western education. In fact, changes in curriculum become forces for social change in certain circumstances. In the US, the

curriculum swings from tradition and conservatism to experimentation and growth as social movements become the key motivator for curricular change. In our system, curricular changes are few and far between. A dynamic curriculum should be the hallmark of any vibrant education system.

Education in many countries need to cope with increasing diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability. Higher education has a role in achieving the promise of democracy and a pluralistic society. In India, diversity is a reality that has been taken into account in educational reform. Some of the experiments in other countries to cope with diversity by prescribing different methodologies may be relevant to our own higher education.

My point is not that our quest for quality in higher education should be guided only by international practices and standards. We should suit our own genius and circumstances in fashioning a system of our own. My effort was just to point out certain features of external experiences, which may be relevant to our reform efforts.

Thank you.

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