

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 of Reports by Commissions and Committees, since the Report of the University Education Commission (1948) headed by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. There have been valuable and learned reports from these bodies and all of them have, by and large, met with one common fate, namely, they adorn the shelves in the libraries, are often quoted but remain largely unimplemented. It is our hope and trust that, at least, such of the recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission as are accepted will be implemented.

It may be said, even at the outset, that most of the recommendations, barring a few, have been made in one or the other of the earlier reports and it is a welcome feature.

Strangely, the NKC does not refer to any of the earlier exercises made to improve, modernise and expand Higher Education in India though it is stated that earlier reports have been consulted. Consequently, it may appear to many, as though, these recommendations are all new and are made for the first time. It does not appear to be a favourable aspect of the content of the report and it is patently against established convention in an exercise of this nature.

The objective of the Report on Higher Education, as stated, is to expand the size, increase the enrollment ratio, ensure accessibility to all sections of society, improve quality, make it relevant to the needs and opportunities of a knowledge society, change the regulatory structure to become more robust, flexible, transparent and dynamic, and make universities the hub of research.

We may, to start with, consider the major deficiencies of Higher Education System in India, compared with the prevailing trends in the modern world, which the Report aims to address itself.

- Higher Education all over the world is in the university campuses, while in India, it is predominantly in affiliated colleges, many of which are small, under equipped, and under staffed.
- India has nearly 18000 colleges, 240 Universities and Institutions of National Importance and nearly 115 Deemed Universities.
- For a country of the size of India, with more than a billion population, the number of universities is too low.
- Nearly 90% of the Undergraduate students and 66% of the Postgraduate students are in the affiliated colleges. These have no sanctioned post of Professors or even regular post of Readers, since the highest position is a Selection Grade Lecturer: Consequently, there is no appreciable research atmosphere though many of the colleges offer M.A., M.Sc., even M.Phil., and Ph.D., programmes – a situation, academically quite unacceptable.
- Among the few universities that we have, many are loaded with administrative and routine unacademic work because of the affiliating system and the number of affiliated colleges that come under them.
- The examination system is outdated.
- There are multiplicity of National institutions associated with the regulations of universities and colleges in the country with overlapping responsibilities.

We may now examine the remedies suggested by the NKC. As mentioned earlier, many of the recommendations are repetitions of the suggestions made earlier. In most of these cases, the report is a knowledgeable analysis of the inadequacies and ills of the system and not an attempt at providing implementable steps for ushering in reforms and appropriate practices. We may consider initially those recommendations that are unique to this Report.

The Commission has not made any critical reference to the predominance of student strength in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in affiliated colleges. However, in order to increase the gross enrollment ratio to 15 percent,

the Commission suggests that India must have by 2015, as many as, 1500 universities. This will, as a consequence, increase the students in university campuses. The recommendation to increase the number of universities to 1500, is likely to become highly controversial and may even meet with strong disapproval from many quarters. It is, in my opinion, a modest requirement for a country of the size of India and, if implemented, would mean rectifying a major deficiency and initiating an atmosphere of higher education that can truly be called university education. What we have today is a system, overwhelmed by affiliated colleges which are, in many cases, marginally better than good higher secondary schools. It will fulfill the urgent need to transfer higher education from the affiliated colleges to the university campuses, as is the case all over the world. The number is not too large if we look at the position in other countries.

Japan with a population of 12.7 crores has as many as 726 universities;¹ Germany with a population of 8.2 crores has 350 universities;² U.K. with a population of 5.98 crores has 125 universities and U.S.A. with a population 27.6 crores is reported to have 2466 universities³. It is strange and inexplicable that we have mindlessly and mechanically increased the number of affiliated colleges to meet the growing demand and kept the number of universities very low and, what is worse, burdened them with affiliating colleges. There has been no norm or ceiling for affiliated colleges under a university. The very first requirement for improving the quality of higher education, especially postgraduate education and research, is to establish a large number of well equipped universities in the country. We need not feel alarmed at the size of the number: China according to the NKC, is said to have authorized the creation of 1250 new universities in the last three years. When the need is recognized, a determined nation must fix the target and endeavour to achieve it, rather than, list the obstacles, raise objections and appear helpless.

Kulandai Swamy has suggested as early as May 2005, that:

"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."⁴

The Commission recommends an enrolment ratio of 15 per cent by 2015. This figure is not ambitious. If we look at the Higher Education scenario of advanced countries, it was around 20 per cent in 1970, when they were at the state of economic development that we want to reach by 2020.

Having suggested a massive increase in the number of universities, the Commission has broadly outlined the measures for achieving it. They are as follows:

1. The establishment of 50 National Universities.
2. Upgradation of deserving colleges into deemed universities.
3. Establishment of new universities by the State and Central Governments.
4. Establishment of new universities by Private Providers.

The suggestion for the establishment of 50 National Universities that are Centres of Excellence and that would, by implication, rank among the top universities in the world is quite welcome. While one would expect that these would be established by the Central Government, the expectation that private providers may also establish National Universities of the standing contemplated may not materialize; but an enabling provision is very much in order.

It is stated in the Report that the procedure for establishing a deemed to be university route is much too complex for new institutions: however, for an existing and deserving institution, obtaining deemed to be university status is easy and simple. Perhaps the establishment of such an important body as a university, could not be made too simple either for a totally new institution. The number of colleges that may deserve to be upgraded as universities may be modest. The Government may introduce a programme of assistance for upgrading some of the institutions with potential for university status so that within the next five years, an appreciable number may qualify. In so doing, both the private colleges and Government institutions must be given consideration.

Coming to private providers, it is a happy augury that the role of the private sector in the field of higher education at the university level has been recognised and recommended by the Commission in unambiguous terms.

Considering the dimensions of expansion necessary and contemplated, the limitations of funding from State and Central Governments make it inevitable for the private sector to participate in higher education at the university level. It may be stated without any hesitation that the contribution that private entrepreneurs could make is immense. There is a mindset against private participation in higher education in certain quarters. This is unfortunate and is not in tune with the prevailing trend in the world as a whole.

In Japan 553 universities out of 726 are in the private sector; in USA. 1835 out of 2466; in Philippines, in 1998 out of 1495 higher education institutions, 1118 were by private providers. According to the World Bank Report [Higher Education in Developing Countries, Perils and Promises, 2000]⁵ China has more than 800 private universities, even though the Ministry of Education officially recognizes only a handful of them. Whatever be the number, the fact remains that in China, private universities have been permitted and are operating.

Notwithstanding the hesitation of the Government and opposition from certain sections of political leadership, private participation in higher education in India is expanding quietly. As of 2006, 47.5% of the Medical Colleges; 93.7% of B.Sc, Nursing and 85.3% of Diploma in Nursing institutions in India were in the private sector. In Engineering and Technology, 86.8% of the Bachelor's Degree and 30.0% of the Diploma institutions were in private sector.

It is necessary that taking advantage of the recommendation of NKC the Govt. of India formulate a policy, for private participate in establishing colleges and universities.

Over the years Higher Education has seen a transformation from public good to private good. Advanced countries like the USA, Australia, U.K. and Singapore are looking at higher education as an industry, contributing to their GDP. In 2006-07, the number of foreign students in USA is reported to be 0.58 million and the income \$14.5 billion. The foreign student strength in UK in 2003 was 0.27 million and the income was Euro 3.0 billion. In the case of Australia, a small country, the foreign student strength was 0.16 million contributing US\$ 4.5 billion. In the year 2000 education industry: in Singapore contributed Singapore

Dollar 3.0 billion which was 1.9% of its GDP. It is estimated by IDP Education Australia that the demand for international higher education will increase from 1.8 million in 2000 to 7.2 million in 2025. Against this background the following recommendation of NKC deserves to be acted up on with a sense of urgency and seriousness:

"It is time for us to make a conscious attempt to attract foreign students to India for higher education. This would enhance quality. This would enrich our academic milieu. This would be a significant source of finance" [p.57]

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 information provided regarding the functions and powers of IRAHE indicates that most of the responsibilities of UGC, and all the functions of AICTE, MCI and the BCI will be taken over by the IRAHE.

This proposal is extraordinary to say the least. It is recognized by the academics and educationists all over the world that while the Government of the country may lay down the educational policies, in keeping with the developmental objectives of the nation, the institutions of higher learning must be as free as possible from the influence of the Government. The academics and researchers are viscerally anti-regulatory and are prone to opt for self-regulation and peer

review. However, it is realized that growing emphasis on accountability requires a balance between external and self regulation. Consistent with this requirement, there must be decentralization, autonomy and scope for responding to market forces and competition for promoting consumer choice and efficiency. It is desirable that responsibility devolves on well established intermediate institutions rather than being concentrated in a single sovereign centre.

The IRAHE will have a Chairperson and Members who will be nominated by the Prime Minister based on the recommendations of a Search Committee. The Procedure for constituting the Search Committee has not been stated. The Commission in defence of this proposal says:

"The other regulators, say in the sphere of professional education, are often inconsistent in their adherence to principles. There are several instances where an engineering college or a business school is approved, promptly, in a small house of a metropolitan suburb without the requisite teachers, infrastructure or facilities, but established universities experience difficulties in obtaining similar approvals. Such examples can be multiplied." [p.54]

One wonders whether such a thing may not happen with IRAHE in which all the powers of:

- According degree granting power to higher education institutions.
- Monitoring standards and settling disputes.
- Licensing accreditation agencies.

are 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 Government in charge 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 power is to be vested, and so absolutely.

The use of the term 'independent' as a prefix does not by itself guarantee independence. The members are appointed by the Prime minister who, besides being the Prime minister, is also the leader of the elected members of a political party. How independent this 'independent', body can be and how would one guarantee that the Prime minister could be absolutely free from the influence of a party in power in a democracy, both in terms of the powerful elements in the party and also the policies of the Government, in the choice of the Chairman and the members of IRAHE. It is almost impossible to think of a body of men and women of divinity in whose hands the fate of Higher Education can be so totally trusted. The immensity and diversity of the task involved defies 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."⁶ [para 5.34]

Kulandai Swamy in the book on Reconstruction of Higher Education, elaborates on the above and recommends as follows:

"It is an extremely important decision, but surprisingly, nothing has happened in this direction. Since senior members constituting the heads of national bodies are involved, it will be an important institution, though its function is one of ensuring co-ordination only. The national institutions mentioned earlier also come under three different ministries."

"It is suggested that the institution may be designated as **National Board of Higher Education**, chaired by the Prime Minister of India. The three ministers of the ministries concerned may be Vice – Chairpersons. The heads of the autonomous bodies will be members. A few eminent representatives of the public, associated with higher education and representing various disciplines may be nominated by the P.M. The Board may consist of not more than 15 members and meet twice a year.

The Board may have a member secretary who must be one of the heads of member institutions and not from any of the ministries."⁷

The National Policy [1986] has also recommended a coordinating body at the State level as follows:

"State level planning and coordination of higher education will be done through councils of higher education. The UGC and these councils will develop coordinative methods to keep a watch on standards" [para. 5.30]

If these bodies are established, we will have an elegant structure of regulatory intermediaries consisting of:

- i. National Board of Higher Education
- ii. National level Autonomous Bodies
- iii. State Councils of Higher Education
- iv. Accrediting Bodies
- v. Universities
- vi. Colleges

This will represent an academic hierarchy with proper decentralization and well defined functions. The working of the existing institutions may be examined for possible streamlining and improving as the case may be

The NKC, while supporting private participation, has not in any way approved the Government abdicating its responsibility for higher education and as recommended an allocation, equivalent to 1.5 to 2.00 percent of GDP assuming a provision of 6.0% of GDP for education.

The World Bank document "Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education" (2002) states as follows:

"Expenditure on tertiary education would generally represent between 15 and 20 per cent of all expenditure of public education."⁸ [p. XXIII]

While this may be in order in the normal course, the expansion contemplated in the next 10 years, represents the making up of a long lapse and may require a special policy and a Mission Mode operation to achieve the targets contemplated earlier.

The Report is worth its labour for the one single recommendation advocating the massive expansion of the universities, encouraging private providers and the allocation of 1.5 to 2.0 per cent of GDP for higher education. This will, undoubtedly, revolutionize the higher education atmosphere in India.

The state of research, especially in the fields of Science and Technology, presents a sad picture. It is stated in the Report 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 under the leadership of Nehru realized the importance of Science and Technology and created a chain of National Laboratories to meet the needs of development. The universities, by themselves, were also not in a position to step up and enlarge research activities as fast as to fulfill our expectations, at that time, and therefore these laboratories were created. They were meant to promote research in science and technology in addition to the universities and not in the place of universities. India has enough funding agencies to support worthwhile projects. In Table 1 is given the allocation made for research and it will be seen that the research expenditure increased appreciably in central and other research institutions, but shows near stagnation in Higher Education Institutions. It is not so much because of lack of availability of funds but because of the inability of the Higher Education System to submit proposals and obtain funds.

Table 1: National Allocation for Research to Different Sectors 1997-98 – 2000-01 [Rupees in Crores]					
No.	Category of Institutions	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01
i	Central Research Institutions	6885	8706	10151	11836
ii	State Research Institutions	927	1027	1178	1351
iii	Private Industries	2438	2790	3365	4059
iv	Higher Education Institutions	362	379	396	415
Source: Research and Development Statistics: Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, 200-01. Publication 2002.					

The "Task Force for Basic Scientific Research in Universities', set up by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, in its Report, May 2005 has observed as follows:

"The quality and quantum of scientific research in India have been declining over the years due to inadequate infrastructure facilities, insufficient funding of research activities and particularly lack of sufficient number of committed scientific workforce. Our universities and laboratories have thus failed to respond to the needs of time" [p.1.]

The weakness of the Higher Education System may also be seen from the fact that:

"Between 1995 and 2003, while the number of Ph.D. students in China jumped from 8139 to 48,740, India saw a meager upward movement from 3000 to 5000. In 2004 alone 57,378 scientific papers were published in China against 23,398 in India"⁹

The situation has to be remedied only through substantially strengthening the Higher Education System in terms of number of universities and their standing in research. The proposed National Universities and increase in the number of universities will certainly improve the position

The Commission while discussing the governance of Higher Education System rightly observes that it does not preserve autonomy and does not promote accountability. Autonomy is eroded by intervention from governments and intrusions from political processes. This has been the finding of committees and Commissions repeatedly in the past. The NKC also states that:

"Implicit politicization has made governance of universities exceedingly difficult and much more susceptible to entirely non academic intervention from outside." [p.51]

Having said this the NKC says that this problem needs to be recognized and addressed in a systematic manner, not only within universities but also outside, particularly government, legislators and political parties. This again is a general statement and has been made in earlier reports. The problem is one of identifying concrete steps to remedy the situation.

The affiliating system in India is an anachronism and a curse on Higher Education. It does not exist in this form anywhere in the world, except in our neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Our objective should be to ensure that this system disappears from the Indian soil at least by 2020.

The NKC does not seem to realise fully the harm done by the affiliating system and the consistent recommendation made earlier for its discontinuance. It was to liberate the colleges from the bondage and the universities from the burden of affiliation that the Education Commission in its report entitled 'Education and National Development' (1966) recommended the introduction of 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 as follows:

"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]

When the prevailing trend is the discontinuance of the affiliating system itself and transfer of higher education, to the campuses of universities and autonomous colleges, the suggestion that the new universities be burdened with affiliated colleges does not reflect a real change. It must be remembered that the community colleges recommended, do offer the three year first degree courses also.

The creation of State Boards of Undergraduate Education or a Central Board of Undergraduate Education will convert the Undergraduate Colleges into glorified Higher Secondary Schools. Creation of such Boards would mean more or less uniform syllabus for all the Undergraduate courses in the State or in the Country and full fledged Bachelors' Degrees being granted by Boards which will

just be offices conducting examinations on the basis of prescribed syllabus. Higher Education must represent diversity and be guarded from uniformity. An Undergraduate degree all over the world is a well recognised stage in higher education and downgrading it to an award by an examining body is an arrangement non-existent in any advanced country. This would mean grievous devaluation of the undergraduate degree of Indian universities, in general, in the eyes of the world which may not differentiate between undergraduate degrees awarded by the Boards and Universities in India.

The suggestion resembles the system that existed in Britain where the Council for National Academic Awards [CNAA] offered degrees for students from Polytechnics, Central Institutions and other non-university institutions such as Colleges of Higher Education. All the colleges and polytechnics were upgraded to universities and the CNAA was wound up in 1992. The suggestion that undergraduate colleges in the states and in the country be affiliated to an examining Board is strange, to say the least. This arrangement may perhaps be thought of for the two year degrees to be offered by the Community Colleges. Even in this case it is highly desirable that each institution is empowered to offer a diploma after due accreditation.

Kulandai Swamy in his article on 'Reconstruction of Higher Education in India' has offered the following suggestion for the universities that have a large number of affiliated colleges.

"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."¹⁰

The commission has suggested the introduction of semester system, internal evaluation and credits for courses. As mentioned earlier, these recommendations have been made time and again in the past. It would have been appropriate if the Commission has referred to the recommendations made earlier and discussed, at some length, the possible reasons for the non

implementation of these wholesome steps and offered suggestions for implementing them with a sense of urgency since it is pending too long.

The Commission makes a brief reference to open and distance education. It states that:

"Almost half the students enrolled in Higher Education are receiving education through the distance mode, through open Universities and through correspondence courses of traditional universities." [p.15]

The figure given above is far from correct. Students in the distance and open education sector constitute about 20% of the total according to UGC and around 23% as per DEC.

A basic mistake is committed in assessing the quantum of students in the distance education system both by the UGC and the DEC. While the students in the regular system take 3 years for the bachelor's degree, 2 years for the masters degree, and move out of the institution at the end of the period, the students in the distance education system take anywhere from 3 to 8 years for an undergraduate programme and 2 to 5 years or more for a postgraduate – programme. The students in the enrolment list and their numbers in the distance education system are not comparable to those in the conventional system. It must be pointed out that the percentage given either by the UGC or DEC is based on comparing non-comparables and cannot be directly added to the strength in the conventional programmes. However, the distance education system grows at much faster rate than the conventional system and is meant to cater to many target groups that do not come under the purview of the regular system. The Government have not paid enough attention to regulate and provide for close monitoring of, distance education institutions. Consequently, notwithstanding the significant numbers involved, distance education has not earned the acceptability as it has in advanced countries. While the Government of India have over the years appointed a number of committees and commissions for the conventional system, no effort has so far been made to review the standing of distance education in the country and regulate the course

of development on healthy lines. The NKC also has not paid enough attention to open education.

The NKC has made a series of useful and important suggestions on funding, governance of universities, promotion of quality, cluster of colleges, accountability, accreditation, access, affirmative action, faculty, incentives for good performance, standardization of fees and fellowships for students. These are mostly repetitions of recommendations in earlier reports, with some difference in emphasis. It has been stated that:

"A Nation or a society must carry out periodically mini revolutions, if that does not happen it must be prepared for major revolution."

We have failed to carry out mini revolutions periodically and allowed certain interested associations and organizations to resist successfully all attempts at reform. It is necessary now to bring about a major revolution.

It is my considered opinion that the Report on Higher Education of NKC, in so far as it is acceptable, may be implemented with a time frame and on a Mission Mode to bring about the much needed major revolution.

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