Reforming higher education

Concrete actions by the new government on this seven-point higher education agenda could jump-start reforms in the sector and help build momentum for the long-term transformation of higher education.

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As the country becomes more dependent on higher education to fuel economic growth and social transformation, it is imperative that improving the sector is one of the new government’s immediate priorities. The problems of the sector are well known and the solutions have been widely discussed. Many of them require long-term systemic changes, but here are seven key actions that the new government can undertake in the near-term, which will have a significant impact on improving the current and future state of the sector.

**Faculty development initiative**
Launch a concerted faculty development initiative. Shortage of faculty, particularly well-trained faculty, is one of the biggest problems in Indian higher education space today. We need to double the number of faculty from the current 8 lakh to 16 lakh by 2017 so as to fill the current gap and meet the future demand for college education. A multi-pronged effort to increase the number of faculty and improve their research and teaching skills must be launched immediately. This would involve national and international training for current and potential faculty members, the revamping of the Academic Staff Colleges, setting up of faculty development centres at all universities (including some with international collaborations), removing constraints on hiring international faculty and fast-tracking of promising undergraduates into doctoral programmes.

**Nationwide accrediting system**
Implement a nationwide accrediting system and make accreditation mandatory for all institutions of higher education, public and private. This will require expanding the capacity of the existing accreditors, NAAC and NBA, as well as establishing additional independent accreditors. Accreditation and evaluation should be based on a new institutional classification system that classifies institutions based on their organisational form and academic mission.

**Reform in the financial support system**
Begin the process of moving government financial support of higher education from an institution-based to a student-based regime. This will require establishing a comprehensive student financial aid structure, including need- and merit-based scholarships, and a commercially provided but government underwritten student loan programme. In tandem, institutions should be allowed to raise tuition and fees to better approximate the real cost of the education they provide.

**Focus on state institutions**
There is a great need to expand the focus on state institutions as key to the problem of providing widespread access to higher education and improving quality across the system. With the launch of the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), the government has already recognised the important role played by the states in meeting the growing demand for higher education and the need to improve the quality of the education they provide. But RUSA currently covers only state public institutions, while nearly half of the students in the country are enrolled in state private institutions. The scope of RUSA must be expanded to include private institutions as well.

**Put India on the global higher education map**
Identify 25-30 existing institutions (both public and private) with the potential to be top-research institutions, and give them special funding to develop world-class research infrastructure, hire top faculty and support their research programmes. No Indian institution is ranked in the top 200 universities of the world and a targeted effort is needed to vault India’s best institutions into the ranks of the world’s best universities.

**Actively promote research**
In addition to the creation of top research institutions, an effort is needed to promote research in all institutions with PG and doctoral programmes. A national research fund should be established and administered by an agency chartered to promote research and scholarly activity. A critical component of this reform must be the elimination of the distinction between public and private universities with respect to research funding.

**Strengthen industry-academia interface**
Initiate a process for building closer ties between industry and academia by setting up a Council for Industry and Higher Education Collaboration (CIHEC). Close ties between industry and higher education are essential for supporting research, transforming research into innovation and innovation into economic growth. It is also vital for keeping curricula and pedagogy current and relevant to the needs of the economy. I served on a Planning Commission task force that developed a blueprint for CIHEC nearly two years ago. The new government should target the establishment of CIHEC in its first year in office.

There are, of course, several other important changes that must be introduced into the sector, including reform of the governance system, promotion of institutional autonomy, restructuring the system of faculty appointments and promotions, reviewing student admissions criteria, curricular and pedagogical reform, the smart use of technology and boosting private investment (both commercial and philanthropic) in the sector. But concrete and immediate actions by the new government on this seven-point agenda could jump-start reforms in the sector and help build momentum for the long-term systemic transformation of higher education in India.

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