Emerging Role of Higher Education for Human and Social Development

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Abstract

As centers of production and dissemination of knowledge and training, higher education institutions are well positioned to link the local and the global. This gives them considerable access to and influence over change processes in many societies; this enhances their potential to contribute to human and social development. They are therefore, called upon to play a fundamental role in building the society.The paper throws light on the emerging role of Higher Education for human and social development. It has tried to highlight some strategies, actions and plans for reforms in university curriculum, teaching methodology and consideration of new approaches to education and social involvement. This is a crucial moment to revisit the role of higher education, starting with the present and the past, to project visions for the future. University-society interface can help in tackling social problems that lead to overall social development.

Nature of Indian Higher Education

Education is the most critical input in shaping human destinies. The social opportunity for developing human capability is the key towards a more equitable and efficient society. The natural potential of any person requires educational inputs to provide a framework for individual development. The goal of education is to make human beings improve the quality of life in the society. While basic education provides a framework for skill development, it is higher education that provides the edge towards the ability of individuals and nations to compete and survive in the global world. Higher education is also a form of social development as ultimately it is the improvement in the lives of the people that determines the success of such efforts. Education, in order to be meaningful to society, has to promote a culture of participation, sharing and brotherhood. Education based on narrow selfish interests and pursuits often become self-defeating as it deprives the

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human beings of the value system. It is in this larger context of higher education as a factor for social development that we need to look at the Indian system.

Universities are the key institutions in generation and dissemination of knowledge. These institutions work in the public interest and constitute the backbone of economic and social development. Many commissions headed by eminent educationists of post-independence era have reviewed the growth and development of education in India. The Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-50) visualised a system of higher education, whose objective was to produce good human beings.

The Kothari Commission's (1964-66) five-point charter of higher education aimed at generation of new knowledge, leadership, competence building, equality and social justice, still remains as a beacon of guiding principles of our educational policies. Higher education is responsible for training future professionals to occupy strategic positions in the society and the work force. Consequently, the universities play a fundamental and decisive role in enhancing knowledge, values and skills in the students. Despite this, the government and the public often view a university as mere generator of knowledge and training center for leaders and elite workers of the future. This attitude is detrimental to the role of universities in nurturing desirable culture in the society. Education and the culture developed through education have not met the challenges for sustained national and human development. Professor Kothari rightly

pointed out *"In a science based world, education and research are crucial to the entire development process of a country, its welfare, progress and security."*

The role of higher education in today's world is immense, complex, and vital. A wide range of challenges and possibilities are emerging, with political, economic and social implications. Perhaps the most significant challenges are associated with shifting perspectives on knowledge itself, which strongly influence the role and the responsibility of the university in the context of the society. The role of higher education institutions has changed over time from preservers of culturally revered forms of knowledge, through producers of skilled labour associated with a manpower planning approach, to the more recent perception as the agent of social change and development.

The most explicit role, allocated to higher education is the production of highly skilled labour and research workers to meet perceived economic needs. However, during periods of social transformation, associated with far-reaching changes in the economy, universities can play an important role in helping to build new institutions of civil society, in encouraging and facilitating new cultural values, and in training and socialising members of the new social elites. In a general sense education may be viewed as a life long process of growth and as an activity, which brings about changes in the social environment. The process of human development too, invariably means a change for the betterment of society. Hence, continuous efforts for human resource welfare

characterise both education and development at the conceptual level.

Impact of Higher Education on Society and Culture

Two major considerations in planning higher education at the national level are the development of human resource for the economy and the impact on social stratification. The most easily recognised impact of higher education on society is connected with the graduation of students, at various levels and their subsequent participation in productive work. This is usually assessed in terms of the number of graduates and the corresponding acquisition to the knowledge pool. Indeed, this work force expects to enter as an important element in the planning of higher education. The reciprocal nature of the impact of higher education is evident. "Does the outflow of graduates correspond to the demands of the society in quantity and quality?" is a key question. The demand is usually determined by the number and job descriptions of the available positions; it does not take into account the impact of the employers.

There is no perfect fit between the knowledge, gained by the graduates, their career preferences, and the employment needs of the society. Over supply, shortage and mismatches in the educational content may be partly overcome by suitable planning, adaptation or emphasis on empowerment for learning. However, the extent to which the qualifications and knowledge of the graduates from educational institutions should conform to the expectations of the society is a central issue. Education should not only be commensurate with the demands of presently available positions but should develop a learning ability, which makes a person adapt to changing needs and technology. Higher education can be an independent force in the society, bringing branches of knowledge into action other than those foreseen by the planners, businesses or political bodies in the past and present.

An explicit or implicit philosophy, concerning the fit between the outflow of graduates and the expressed needs of employers, is an important element in the planning of higher education. The political decisions of higher education planning are related to potential student numbers, to the location of educational opportunities, to buildings and equipment, and to financial frames rather than to the content and the organisation of studies. However, the institutional framework created by political decisions, such as the principles for governance of the institutions, the planning of resources for research, the connection between higher education and working life, and so on, also affects the quality of the education.

The impact of higher education on the social fabric and culture is in general indirect long term one rather than immediate and extends over long period of time. The specialisation of knowledge is often regarded as an important contribution of higher education to modern society. Indeed, the continuing specialisation of research in virtually all fields of science is fundamental to the structure of higher education. A graduate is trained only to look at the world from a specialised viewpoint for example of a computer scientist,

an economist or an orthopaedic surgeon. But behind the division of labor-horizontally into an increasing number of specialties, and vertically into the separation of planning and leadership from implementation and routine are the social forces that enhance concentration of power and the formation of large scale organisations. Such trends in the society influence the formation of higher education institutions; large universities may function as models for the organisation of knowledge in industry, hospitals etc.

Social responsibility of higher education

As centers of production and dissemination of knowledge and training, higher education institutions are well positioned to link the local and the global. This gives them considerable access to and influence over change processes in many societies; this enhances their potential to contribute to human and social development. They are therefore called upon to play a fundamental role in building the society.

Higher education is responsible for training the professionals, who in the course of their careers attain positions of great responsibility and power in the society and the labour market. Throughout the world the decisions of professionals, trained in the universities, can make an important contribution to the way that life develops on this planet. This decision-making can take place through approaches that are either positive or negative for the global progress of humankind and societies, in both developed and developing countries. Higher education, therefore, plays a

decisive and fundamental role in terms of the teaching content, values and skills for prospective leaders and the elite.

The implications of the main trends in information and knowledge for education are enormous. From a *knowledge society* perspective, education will play a vital role in the sharing, application and creation of knowledge in a globalising world. Higher education and universities in particular will, it is claimed, "fuel the driving forces of the transformation towards a global knowledge society" and have "a certain capacity to steer and eventually to correct the direction of trends within globalisation".

Globalisation offers many major opportunities to the universities but also raises serious problems for the future by questioning the feasibility of the guiding values of higher education. The changes brought about by globalisation are so pronounced that we now need to reconsider the relationship between higher education and society. Resources are being channeled into education and knowledge creation like never before, so much so, that we are *defacto* embarking on the creation of the knowledge society. There is a general appreciation of the fact that higher education provides the competencies that are required in different spheres of human activity, ranging from management, agriculture, business, industry, health, communications, arts and culture. As higher education institutions are the institutions responsible for creating and spreading knowledge, and thus contributing to solutions to global problems, the relationship between

scientific research and political decision-making needs to be explored and analysed. The role of science and technology to serve political decision-making for the collective well-being is a neglected subject that higher education should also address.

The World Bank document *Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience* (World Bank, 1994) allocates a low priority to higher education in its scheme of funding, yet admits: "*Higher education is of paramount importance for economic and social development. Institutions for higher education have the main responsibility for equipping individuals with the advanced knowledge and skills required for positions of responsibility in government, business and the professions.*" Thus, there is a need to arrive at some basics, which should be incorporated in our educational programs for ushering a desirable change in human and social development during the current millennium.

Where is development heading?

An overarching trend of present times is globalisation, associated with the move towards a global economy, and political transition from national to international organisations. These changes have resulted in an increasing debate on the notion of development. Hotly debated over decades, and with origins in the field of biology, development has been equated by many with global economic growth, which would result in all the peoples of the world achieving economic parity with those living in the "developed" nations. Over time, "human development" has, however, acquired more complex meanings. The UNDP states:

Human development is about much more than the rise or fall of national incomes. It is about creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests. People are the real wealth of nations. Development is thus, about expanding the choices people have to lead lives that they value. And it is thus about much more than economic growth, which is only a means - if a very important one - of enlarging people's choices… Fundamental to enlarging these choices is building human capabilities – the range of things that people can do or be in life. The most basic capabilities for human development are to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Without these, many choices are simply not available, and many opportunities in life remain inaccessible (UNDP website, accessed 2006).

Voices are now being raised, some from within the universities themselves, warning that the models that have guided development on earth over the last century are by now obsolete. The need to rethink the current development paradigm and collective social values is getting more and more acute. The incorporation of new contents that can equip people with new tools more suited to the context in which they carry out their professions is unavoidable. Individual

and collective responsibility in professional decision-making within the new global ethical paradigms will be a subject of serious thought in the immediate future. Higher education policies can no longer ignore such an urgent demand.

If universities and higher education institutions are to support processes of human development and positive social change, in addition to continuing their role as generators of knowledge, there is a need to go beyond the narrow concepts of knowledge. There is a need for a sincere engagement between universities and society, which should extend far beyond national boundaries. The nature of such an engagement demands debates and intensive deliberations, based on real examples, practices and experiences. There is also a need to understand the role that the universities will play in this engagement, particularly in the ways that they engage with citizens–both individuals and collectives. This may be achieved in part by the forging of new relationships by universities and the emergence of networks that ensure continued relevance of higher education "for the promotion of a healthy social and political climate within a country along with economic and cultural development".

Universities can therefore, play an active role in debate and public and private action by generating responses to the transformations in societies from an innovative perspective. This is a crucial moment to revisit the role of higher education, starting with the present and the past, to project visions for the future.

Higher Education: Emerging Role for Human and Social Development

Higher education is neither solely for pumping knowledge into young heads nor is it just a place for secluded scholars in monk-like solitude. Higher education is a meeting place of generations, of cultures and of social classes. This is one of the rare societal institutions where rich and poor, adolescent and mature, knowledgeable (professor) and naive (student) and old and young meet and pursue an intellectual life together. This is where a culture of knowledge and intellect gets germinated, formulated and shared; this is where one learns first hand, of other cultures, social classes, and new perspectives.

Higher education can play a key role in human and social development on the international scale; this role has specific characteristics and different approaches in different regions. If higher education is channeled appropriately, it can address major world issues such as poverty, abuse and denial of human rights, strengthening of democracy, conflict resolution, peace building, environmental concerns, and the preservation and extension of human rights. Universities and other higher education institutions are in a position to examine these complex problems and to arrive at innovative solutions. Working in collaboration with international networks the universities must develop a prospective vision of the different scenarios, of alternative solutions to ongoing problems, of the political dimensions of these problems, and of the capacity to move forward in an uncertain future.

It is important that the university system consciously enhance its relevance. Certainly, the university system should be relevant to the society in which it functions. This relevance can be judged by its sensitivity to and concern for the society and its capability to respond to its needs, resulting in a better insight into the problems and significant contribution to the search for solutions. One of the major goals of the university system is to multiply knowledge, skills and other aspects of human potential in the country. The university system is unique in performing this function. While other systems use knowledge and skills, the university system multiplies and generates these for the sake of various institutions and organisations. Multiplication of talents through excellent education contributes to all the three aspects viz. research, teaching and application.

Whereas an individual is trained to acquire skills and arts of writing and reading at basic levels in higher educational institutions, skills are refined to groom professionals. The need is to produce young men and women as job givers rather than job seekers. This requires a thrust in diverting actions and skills of humans towards entrepreneurship and leadership not only politically but also economically and socially. This should be possible by matching our resources to our needs. Therefore, we have to make our students acquire skills and knowledge, which shall enable them to be active partners in our social system and bring about corresponding development of mind. There is a need to incorporate partnership in higher education, where parents, teachers, students, administrators and the political system enter into face-to-face interaction to develop the capacities of our students.

The university need not be a mere degree or diploma giving factory but has to integrate knowledge and work to produce degree and diploma holders who are able to address the real problems faced by the masses. They have to be trained in appropriate skills to utilise waste by-products and untapped resources. This would bring an economic revolution. These institutions in the distance mode could disseminate awareness among women on house keeping, food preservation etc and vocational courses. Utilising university teachers, a system of workshops and seminars, training and awareness programs could be launched by the universities, as is the case with Directorate of Extension Education in agricultural universities. Future educational policies have to incorporate a mechanism for spiritual training, so that spiritual power is invoked by our students to pursue peace, justice, brotherhood, equality and dignity.

Social Problems and the role of Higher Education

In a developing society like India, there is no doubt that universities and institutions imparting higher education can play a significant role in anticipating and solving social problems. Despite the prestigious and privileged place assigned to institutions of higher education, few initiatives in tackling social and political problems have been undertaken. Although, access to higher education has

rapidly increased in the last fifty years, its benefit is limited to only specific social classes or groups. Evidence shows that some communities and groups are under represented in higher education. It is due to this fact that higher education is viewed as elitist and as a vehicle to perpetuate social inequities. University-society interface can help in tackling social problems and lead to social development.

• *Creating new knowledge*

Universities are in fact a microcosm of the society; the elements of diversity and democracy are common to both. In view of this reality, universities can no longer be content only with imparting knowledge. Universities have the potential to draw from the stock of knowledge and pave the way to provide solutions for social, cultural and economic development. Considering their vast resources the universities are in an excellent position to adapt knowledge to solve specific problems and challenges.

Related to this aspect is the knowledge construction process which relates to the extent to which teachers help students to understand, investigate and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives and biases within a discipline influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed. It is important for students to understand how knowledge is constructed in all disciplines. Students need to understand even in Sciences how cultural assumptions, perspectives and frames of reference influence the questions that researchers ask and formulate (Banks, 1998 : 92).

• *Content integration*

The teachers can use examples and content from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalisations and theories in their subject area or discipline. This fusion, however, should be logical and not contrived. More opportunities exist for the integration of ethnic and cultural content in some subject areas than in others. In the social sciences, the Languages, Arts, Music and Home Economics there are frequent and ample opportunities for teachers to use a variety of ethnic and cultural content to illustrate concepts, themes and principles.

• *Equity pedagogy*

Equity pedagogy exists when the teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse cultural, ethnic and gender groups. Research indicates that low income students as a group, tend to differ from middle class students in some important characteristics related to motivation. Low-income students tend to be external in their motivational orientations, which mean that they tend to attribute their success or failure to outside forces or individuals and not to their own efforts. Middle-income students tend to be internal in their orientations. These characteristics of low income and middle class students is just one example of how teaching can be modified to increase the academic achievement of students from diverse social class, cultural and gender groups. Other strategies include the use of cooperative teaching strategies.

• *Civilising the human mind*

Education has a fundamental significance in development and progress of human society. It is the channel for creating awareness and appreciation of diversity, widening the understanding of varying groups of people, intensifying sensibilities of cultures and beliefs and inculcating the spirit of enquiry and questioning of accepted truths. In other words, education has the capacity to free the human mind from ignorance and false sense of self - preservation.

• *An empowering institutional culture*

Another important aspect involves restructuring the culture and organisation of the institutes so that students from diverse ethnic, language, religion and gender groups will experience equality. This variable must be examined and addressed by the teachers, Head/V.C./Principal and support staff. It involves an examination of the latent and manifest culture and organisation to determine the extent to which it fosters or hinders educational equity.

• *Creating opportunities for livelihood and growth*

An important condition of democratisation in higher education is the provision for equal opportunities of access for all classes and groups. University education has found popularity as the ladder to achieve status and career satisfaction. Inspite of massive expansion, higher education has failed to equalise educational opportunities and increase employability after completion of studies. There is a need to expand the capacity of institutions in the fields related to natural sciences, social development and technology.

• **National development**

The concept of democratisation should extend to include a commitment by universities in regard to their own responsibilities towards nation development. This role would include national and social integration with emphasis on needs of low income and marginalised groups.

• *Research and interdisciplinary approach for problem solving*

It is apparent that the research potential of higher education in various aspects of integrated development can be used to help provide solutions for development. The capability of higher education institutions to undertake the process of analysis and reflection and to promote a spirit of critical inquiry needs to be utilised to the maximum.

Future Strategies: Actions and Plans

Effectiveness of the university system can be defined in terms of four main aspects of the functioning of the university system viz. autonomy, creativity, collaboration and self-renewal. The autonomy of both the individuals and the university itself can facilitate the achievement of its goals. Although providing autonomy does not ensure effectiveness, it is a necessary condition, particularly for a competent faculty. Similarly, creativity characterises effectiveness. Creativity is the use of innovative ways of moving towards the goal rather than sticking to ways, which

were decided some time. Collaboration amongst the various persons and constituents in the system is equally important. Finally, self-renewal, the ability for dynamical change with experience for the better is also an important characteristic. All the four characteristics put together can be called 'organisational health'.

There is agreement that future strategies and actions should focus on the design of pathways and methods that will guide higher education towards achieving organisational health and a balance between economic development, on the one hand, and human and social development, on the other. There is consensus that sustainable development cannot be achieved without human and social development. Such development can be achieved:

- by creating a meritocratic system of admission to higher education programs for individuals from all regions and backgrounds;
- by reinforcing the critical function of higher education and corresponding academic freedom;
- by developing higher education systems that are adapted to the needs of society;
- by strengthening the contribution of higher education to other levels of the education system; through diversification of higher education models; based on research on sustainable development;
- by ensuring gender equality in higher education system and by strengthening the profile of higher education as a public service and a public good ;

- by harnessing the growing globalisation of higher education as a tool for consolidating international cooperation; and
- by maintaining a culture of peace.

Universities should become more innovative and responsive "to the needs of a globally competitive knowledge economy and to the changing labour market requirements for advanced human capital" (World Bank, 2002). Curriculum has to be understood as both process and outcome and should be oriented towards providing well-equipped workforce for a globalising economic world. Policy goals of efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness and competition may work against the potential of higher education to contribute to human and social development Curriculum has to be derived through a process of dialogue around the ideologies, philosophies and epistemologies of knowledge and learning. Two key directions for curriculum that support learning for human and social development are bridging between existing disciplines and moving towards a transversal, inter-disciplinary curriculum. Curriculum change has to be inclusive, just, democratic, oriented towards citizenship, and based on transformative and participatory processes.

The quest of higher education for human development would require a focused attention on the needs of the poor students who make it to the university system. While revision of fees in the university system has become necessary on account of the growing

demand and reduced financial grants for education, such measures have necessarily to be accompanied by an efficient, timely and appropriate system of scholarships, freeships and loans for the needy students.

The three-point program

In the context of higher education, an important event at international level took place in the form of world conference on higher education held at Paris from 5 to 9 October, 1998. As a result of world conference, UNESCO (1998) issued a set of recommendations, *World Declaration on Higher Education*, which has two distinct parts. In the first part, the UNESCO has envisioned higher education in terms of roles and functions that it should play in socio-cultural and economic development of nations *"as a fundamental pillar of human rights, democracy, sustainable development and peace."* In the second part, recommendations are made for concrete and specific steps that need to be taken at national and international levels for change and development of higher education and overall enhancement of its quality and relevance. Therefore, all the four pillars of the system of education i.e., students, faculty, infrastructure and policies, need to be taken in consideration.

According to Philip G. Altbach, director of the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, universities throughout the world are increasingly being asked to maintain their key functions in the face of budget restrictions, which leads to a deterioration in the level of service offered. It seems that there is neither the time nor the money that would enable universities to consider new approaches to education or social involvement. In this climate, universities with extensive research programs have been adversely affected by the need to find new sources of funding, and have found themselves forced to modify their operational structures considerably.

The government and the public often view universities simply as generators of wealth and training centers for key professionals of the future, but can this attitude produce tangible benefits for higher education and for society as a whole? Universities have been forced to sacrifice aspects of their essential role as centers that foment intellectual and cultural development, social analysis and comment. At the same time, they have become increasingly tied to the practical needs of society, dictated by governments and markets (this is particularly true in the case of private institutions). Altbach warns that "societies which ignore the multiple purposes and functions of universities will be very weak, since universities are driving forces behind the creation of wealth and knowledge but must also work towards humanistic and cultural objectives and individual needs".

For this purpose, a three-point program of qualitative improvement with a focus on manpower development, quantitative expansion for the removal of barriers to equitable access in higher education and promoting research and development activities is the need of the hour. Experts believe that universities have the following functions:

• Universities are responsible for the education of a sizable proportion of the workforce.

- University curricula across the world have traditionally been based on specialised knowledge in specific disciplines and have not included general type of learning. The role of this type of education is currently being debated; it has already been incorporated into university curricula in some disciplines.
- Preserving and disseminating knowledge.
- Intellectual centers for knowledge creation.
- Universities are now national and international institutions due to the increasing number of partnerships and the general trend towards globalisation.
- Driving forces behind economic development.
- Instrument of social mobility.

Looking back on the developments in the higher education sector over the last five decades, it is heartening to note that a number of institutions have obtained global excellence. The challenge is to make the number of such institutions grow, as ultimately the challenge of excellence and the challenge of equity have to go hand in hand. Human development is always universal and not individual; to this extent, the pursuit of knowledge has to become much more a social rather than an individual goal. In making human development a reality, partnership with the non-governmental sector has to be built in order that all the resources available to the country viz. human, financial and material are fully put to use for promoting excellence and equity. The modern times require greater focus on quality in higher education institutions in order to meet the challenges of the global economy. Change in attitude and a strengthening of higher education systems, are vital for achieving sustained human development. While the challenges may appear daunting, the results can be achieved provided the entire society is involved in this process and shows commitment.

Conclusion

Change in attitude and a strengthening of higher education systems, are vital for achieving sustained human development. While the challenges may appear daunting, we can achieve the results provided we involve the entire society in this process and infuse commitment. At the present moment the universities seem to be utopian, but they do provide ideals to strive for. Higher education in the 21st century promises to be not only demanding but also refreshingly different. Imparted under the all-pervading influence of the communication technology revolution it has to be student-centered, committed to the concept of lifelong learning, responsive to the needs of society, increasingly privately financed, and influenced by the market forces. It has to be international in character placing emphasis on quality, with partnerships and networks being important.

In the early part of the 21st century life will be influenced not only by the 'knowledge society' but also by the 'stakeholder society' and the 'market society'. The universities, while creating and disseminating knowledge, also need to cater to the interests of its various stakeholders (students, parents, faculty, government, society-at-large), and to

market demands. The pursuit of higher education has to be need-based rather than greed-based and for doing so, we need to evoke the philosophical framework that has been available in this great country. The pursuit of knowledge is a pursuit of self-realisation. When looked at in this framework, higher education indeed becomes an instrument for human development.

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