

Tracing the current trajectory of Higher Education Policy in India: Perspectives on Social Responsibility & Community Engagement

Higher Education (HE) in India; revered since ancient times, and after witnessing tumultuous periods in between, now seems to be heading in the right direction. Increased social consciousness coupled with right policy moves has been contributing towards increased relevance of the sector. Discussions on 'social responsibility' in HE have been doing rounds in the international domain for quite some time now. More and more universities around the world are integrating social responsibility into their mission statements, including their research and teaching missions, arguing that higher education is better off when it gives back to the society that is responsible for funding it. Examples include University of Cape Town, South Africa, Queen's university, Belfast, University of Indonesia, etc. It is heartening to see that India has slowly, but surely picked up from the ideas, and HE in the country is set to establish landmarks, as potential, opportunity and enabling policy environment seem to converge just at the right time.

There is no denying the important role which the policy framework of any particular country plays in the development of a particular sector. The same goes for HE. Integration of social responsibility & community engagement in HE, in the national education policies of countries like South Africa and Indonesia respectively, has worked wonders for their HE sector, which has grown to be '*responsible, accountable, effective and efficient*'. The latest policy developments in India in the education domain seem promising. The increasing emphasis that the ministry and various higher education regulators are placing on making HE more relevant in the current context, may well see the sector transpire into an effective and efficient 'change agent' in the society in the near future.

Starting from the top boss, the Ministry of Human Resources and Development (MHRD) in the past few months has been seen making several attempts at revamping the sector. To recount some of them; the bringing in of the policy for '*establishment of world class universities*' is an appreciable attempt. Specially, if we examine the policy in details; it categorically mentions '*tangible and intangible contribution to the society*' as one of the essential characteristics of a world class institution/university. The document also emphasizes the importance of the universities striving to achieve '*social impact by engaging in applied research and innovation in issues of concern to developing societies*'. It also further urges the '*faculty of universities to engage academically with issues of concern to society*'.

Further, recently, it has decided to come up with a New Education Policy (after it 'junked' the previous one, for lack of 'innovation'), framed around these five pillars: '*accessibility, equity, quality, affordability and accountability*'. Of interest to us, in particular, is the last pillar which talks about 'accountability'. As our political think-tank makes evident it's inclination on making the sector 'accountable'; we can surely hope of some promise, and see the sector acting and behaving more 'responsibly' in the future. Fingers crossed for now!

We also take heart from various statements given by Shri Prakash Javdekar, the Hon'ble Minister for HRD in India:

'Higher education cannot remain aloof; it needs constructive engagement and innovation'. Further, he says that, *'the answer to country's sustainable transformation lies in its education system'* (collated from the minister's speeches at the 12th FICCI Higher Education Summit, Nov, 2016 & Pre-investors Gujarat Summit, Oct, 2016).

In the words of Mr Vinay Sheel Oberoi, Former secretary, Department of Higher Education, MHRD:

'it is not about what one is taking in terms of values from his family, peers, teachers and the society in general but about what one is giving back' (speaking at IIM-Udaipur campus, February, 2017)

Therefore, times seem ominous for new beginnings marking the making of 'socially responsible & accountable' HE in India. Talking about another important HE regulator in India, the University Grants Commission's (UGC) efforts for promoting 'community engagement and social responsibility' in higher education in the country has been significant. The bringing in of the policy on *'Establishment of Centres for Fostering Social Responsibility & Community Engagement'* universities across the country was a landmark development in the country's HE policy. Its emphasis on *'participatory research, community-university research partnerships' and cross cutting collaborations between universities, NGOs and other institutions*, etc. made it an impressive policy move, which was appreciated across global circles. However, turning of political tables in the country, and policy instability resulted in the scheme not really taking off. Nevertheless, it has been renewed recently, with UGC receiving a number of applications from universities; it is expected that few universities will receive the funding under the scheme in the next few months. We are optimistic about this, and do hope that this scheme delivers the 'promise' it holds.

Further, established in 1994, the National Assessment & Accreditation Council (NAAC) (an autonomous institution established by the UGC) has been placing particular importance on community engagement in HEIs, for improving overall quality of higher education. NAAC believes that there is a *'need to give a concrete shape to institution-community partnerships, since both higher education and community play important roles in modernizing a country's human resources, and their interests have a natural affinity'*. It has been involved in documenting and promoting best practices in community engagement, which validates NAAC's philosophy of leading by example. Recently, it also revised its *Quality Indicator Framework (QIF)* for assessment of universities; which as a first, talks about *'institutional ethics & social responsibilities'*. It tends to assess universities on grounds on its *'engagement with the*

communities, for addressing its locational disadvantages and making use of advantages for their betterment’.

Viewing the above developments in the light of the transition that HE is undergoing in India; we are hopeful of positive results. The two suggestions we would like to give at this point is one for the policy domain, and other for the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). While the former needs to push the agenda of ‘social responsibility & community engagement’ in HE more vigorously (which at the moment appears diffused at several points); the latter needs to re-think its role in the society and about institutionalizing ‘community engagement & socially responsible practices’ into its regular framework (without the need of having policies pushing it for doing so). If all actors reflect on their roles and responsibilities exclusively, the broad agenda we are rooting for, will not be a difficult proposition at all!