The quest for excellence in higher education is long on words but short on substance

The spread of education in society provides the foundation of success in countries that are latecomers to development. Primary education creates the base. Equal opportunities in school education are critical. Higher education, then, imparts the cutting edge. In every sphere, India is now a laggard in Asia.

There is a quiet crisis in higher education in India that only deepens. The educational opportunities for school-leavers are simply not enough and what exists is not good enough. The pockets of excellence are outcomes of the enormous untapped potential of talent and Darwinian selection processes. Institutions and individuals possibly excel despite the system, which is just not conducive to learning and does little for those with average abilities or without social opportunities.

The challenges confronting higher education in India are clear. It needs a massive expansion to educate larger numbers, but without diluting academic standards. Indeed, it is just as important to raise the average quality and inclusion, by providing access to people, is an imperative. It is also essential to create some institutions that are examples of excellence at par with the best in the world.

Such excellence is missing. Indeed, in terms of world university rankings for 2015–16 compiled by Times Higher Education, our performance is dismal. There are none in the top 200. There are only two—Indian Institute of Science, Bangaore, and Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay—in the top 400. There are five more IITs in the 401-600 rankings. And there are these just six universities in the ranks 601-800.

It must be said that these rankings have all the limitations of composite index numbers, since it is difficult to measure qualitative attributes while weights assigned to different components shape results. Even so, it is obvious that our universities have miles to go before reaching world standards. Indices of excellence in IITs are no consolation because it is universities providing educational opportunities for people at large that are the lifeblood of higher education.

Also, the comparative advantage that India had, at least in a few of its universities, has been slowly, yet squarely, eroded over time. It was much worse than it was three decades ago. Universities have deteriorated in India but improved elsewhere, particularly in Asia. And real estate has become political.

There is intense competition among students for admissions to public universities which are simply not enough and what exists is not good enough. The pockets of excellence are outcomes of the enormous untapped potential of talent and Darwinian selection processes. Institutions and individuals possibly excel despite the system, which is just not conducive to learning and does little for those with average abilities or without social opportunities.

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