

Newspaper Clips

September 10, 2011

Economic Times ND 10/09/2011

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In the Minor League

Excellence in higher education calls for better paid teachers and more research

No Indian university made it to the top 200 list of the latest Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings. While not a big surprise, it is disappointing for a country that needs to build human capital. Action is needed on many fronts to improve the quality of our universities across disciplines. Firstly, the case for expanding the base for higher education is compelling to reap the demographic dividend. This calls for a massive increase in investment and also enhancing the efficacy of public spending in education. State universities, with shoestring budgets, need more support. Industry must give liberal grants and fund research in universities to expand access. Sure, the cost of higher education would go up when private universities bridge the gap between demand and supply. That calls for cheaper student loans. Secondly, teachers must be paid more and research-active faculty should be offered incentives to attract and retain talent. The QS survey showed poor research citations for Indian faculty. Teaching and research must be integrated. Action at the higher education level alone will not improve the quality of our graduates. The quality of secondary and, more important, primary schooling should improve. Government schools account for the bulk of primary schooling in India. But they lack trained, good quality teachers and basic infrastructure facilities. Again, a big part of the answer is making teachers accountable. The system of state-level cadre of teachers must be dispensed with so that schools or local communities can recruit teachers directly. Reforms in governance are long overdue.

Expert committees — including the National Knowledge Commission, the UGC committee on academic and administrative reforms, Yashpal committee on renovation and rejuvenation of higher education, the Kakodkar committee on restructuring of IITs — have recommended bringing research back to universities and strengthening undergraduate education. However, much of it has remained on paper. One more commission has been announced; we need action to implement reform.

Business Line ND 10/09/2011 P-18

Corporates incubate plans to make test-tube babies

Virendra Pandit

Ahmedabad, Sept. 9

Louis Joy Brown, the first test-tube baby born in July, 1978, is now a doctor in the UK. Dr Subhash Mukhopadhyaya, the creator of India's first-test baby, Durga alias Kanupriya Agrawal in Kolkata (in October 1978) was 'recognised' only in 2006. His tragic suicide after social ostracization and governmental negligence even inspired a much-acclaimed Bollywood movie, *Ek Doctor ki Maut* (Death of a Doctor) by the veteran Tapan Sinha.

Now, after many test-tube baby births, the in-vitro fertilization (IVF) technique is going the corporate way in the country. To organise the booming business, an Indian-American entrepreneur, Suresh Soni, plans to invest around Rs 700 crore on test-tube baby-making, beginning at 25 centres across 10 cities in India and the West Asia in the first phase by 2013.

Soni, Chairman of the Bangalore-based Nova Medical Centres, told *Business Line* that he has picked up 51 per cent stake in the Ahmedabad-based Pulse Women's Hospital,



a leading IVF and woman care hospital service provider, to create a chain of IVF clinics in Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi and Dubai this year.

Pulse Hospital has been treating 1,200 women every year through the IVF technique at a success rate of 35 per cent, to help couples who cannot have children and make them parents at an affordable cost. The IVF clinic chain would be collectively owned by doctors.

Nova Medical Centre, the flagship company set up two years ago, will now set up the Nova Pulse IVF Clinics chain, for setting up facilities across 20 other places in the next two years, with the aim to handle one lakh cases annually by 2013.

In the tie-up, Dr Pravin Patel and Dr Manish Banker, owners of Pulse Hospital, will also hold a 5 per cent stake in each of the

IVF clinics to be set up under the Nova Pulse brand, he said.

As against a 100-bed hospital costing Rs 200 crore, an IVF clinic would be set up with an investment of nearly Rs 10-12 crore. Compared to a minimum seven years of break-even for a hospital, a clinic would turn around only in six to eight months, he said, adding that the patient would also get the IVF clinic facility cheaper by 25 per cent. Currently, it ranges between Rs 75,000 and Rs 1.25 lakh a case.

Soni, who is also the Managing Director of the US-based GTI Capital Group LLC, said due to lack of adequate facilities in the unorganized health-care sector, only 65,000 "cycles" are reported in India annually, although the potential is 15 lakh an annum in the country where an estimated two crore men and women are reported to be turning infertile each year due to lifestyle diseases.

Dr Banker said as against Israel's 3,263 women undergoing the IVF technique each year, only nine Indian women adopted this technique to conceive a baby.

Quotas can't bridge social gaps



P.V.INDIRESAN

VISION 2020

According to the Indian constitution, India is a "socialist republic". Yet, the government never talks of UNDP's Human Development Index which describes the quality of social development in a country. It does not because India's performance is woefully poor. All our political groups swear by reservation of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the lower castes as their programme for

This is 311th in the Vision 2020 series. The last article appeared on August 27.

making India a truly socialist state. In its latest order, the Supreme Court has supported reservation for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) by making a distinction between eligibility marks and qualifying marks and has come down strongly on the side of eligibility marks.

VARYING STANDARDS

Eligibility marks are pre-fixed; nobody below that can be considered for admission. Qualifying marks vary; they depend on the competition among the General Category candidates. They also vary with the round of admissions. In the first round, they are highest. When the candidates are fewer than the seats available, the qualifying marks are lowered, and more general candidates join. When that too is not enough, the qualifying marks are lowered still further, and so on the process continues until enough general candidates join any institution.

The Supreme Court has rightly observed that this variation imposes a strain on the OBC candidates, because when qualifying marks are chosen as the guide — their qualify-

The apex court ruling on OBC admissions at university level misses the point. Instead of carrying on with quotas, the IITs and other colleges should have the autonomy to admit rich students so that they can cross-subsidise poorer ones.



What Harvard and Stanford have, and the IITs do not, is the freedom to admit whomsoever they like, to select teachers, and to teach what they like.

ing marks too vary. Incidentally, it is not at all concerned about the strain on the general candidates, whose qualifying marks too vary.

Be that as it may, going by the law of the country, as determined by the Supreme Court, OBC candidates alone are marked by the eligibility marks, while the admission of general candidates is determined by qualifying marks.

COLLEGE AUTONOMY

It is also not clear whether every college has the autonomy to determine its own qualifying marks, or whether all colleges have to accept the number set by the university to which they are affiliated. Can the abler colleges set higher eligibility marks or should they accept the standards set by their poorer colleagues? That is not clear; that may have to be checked.

The case of the IITs is peculiar — they have no second lists at all. They set qualifying marks and offer admissions once and once only — whether a course is over-filled or under-filled. Do the IITs have the right to adopt the qualifying marks or are they compelled to fix some eligibility marks? That is not clear. Perhaps that too needs to be checked with the Supreme Court. We have interesting times ahead.

Mr Kapil Sibal, Minister for Human Resources, laments as to why the IITs have not produced any Nobel Prize winners in spite of admitting the very best students (community wise) and having (by Indian standards) large budgetary contributions. I must say that he needs to rethink a little. However grand it may appear from the Indian point of view, the budget of any IIT is woefully small compared to that of

its competitors abroad. More important, foreign institutions have an autonomy which the IITs lack.

What Harvard and Stanford have and the IITs do not is freedom, freedom to admit whosoever they like, freedom to select teachers, and freedom to teach what they like. American universities have that freedom because (a) they are not dependent on government grants, and (b) particularly because the American government does not let its babus breathe down their necks.

Hence, American universities are free to admit (the way Indian institutions were) anybody they liked, particularly both rich students who make valuable monetary contributions and also abler but poorer ones.

CROSS-SUBSIDISATION

Harvard makes no secret of it; it will admit children of rich parents

whereas the IITs will not. That is how Harvard has accumulated over Rs 120,000 crore worth of endowments which it uses to subsidise brilliant but poor students, support research of fundamental nature or hire outstanding faculty at high salaries. With cross-subsidy from the wealthy, it performs social development better than the government can. The fact is that constant government interference has destroyed the quality of education in India. It is time to ask some tough questions.

Will our politicians and bureaucrats send their children to the schools which they administer rather than to private schools? (2) Do they agree that brilliant but poor children should get the same kind of education which they want for their own progeny? (3) Then, will they offer scholarships to enable them to do so? (4) Will the governments decentralise and let schools make the selection of poor but brilliant children instead of insisting on nationwide or state-wide tests?

India is a socialist state where the rich are free to spend their taxed (and untaxed) incomes in any manner they like. They can and do send their children abroad but they cannot pay even large amounts to get them admitted to Indian institutions (except under the table).

The government dictum is the rich cannot cross-subsidise the able poor. It is unable to do that itself but will not let the willing rich to do so voluntarily. Our politicians — and our Supreme Court too — should ask why our system does not promote social justice. Should the government (and hence the courts) insist on how educational institutions should run, or will the country be better off by giving institutions freedom to administer schools and colleges the way Western nations do?

After all, every institution would like to get the best students even if that needs some rich ones to cross-subsidise them. Our politicians are like the one who rides a tiger but cannot get off — but the Supreme Court need not be!

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Business Line ND 10/09/2011 P-4

Over 100 students from space varsity join ISRO

Madhumathi D.S.
Bangalore, Sept. 9

It was a small step and a sigh for the space organisation when the first batch of 117 young graduates came out of its captive nursery and joined its various centres last month. At one stroke, they filled nearly half of ISRO's annual recruitment needs. And they kept the space technology talent pool alive and thriving, according to some senior scientists at the Bangalore headquarters.

The Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology was started in September 2007 as the brain child of the then Chairman, Mr G. Madhavan Nair. That was the time ISRO's eight centres were losing over 100 people or a third of what it hires each year, during 2004-06, and it was mostly to the high-

paying Infotech sector.

The tide may not have turned fully but there is a difference. As IIST's Director, Dr K.S. Dasgupta, said, "At ISRO, our students start out with a package of Rs 40,000 (a month). They get paid better than the best in the industry, or Infosys for that matter. There are many hidden benefits such as staff quarters, loans, medical reimbursement, besides overseas trips." It is also the largesse from the Sixth Pay Commission that came into effect in 2008 to fight the private sector which was taking away staff of premier public research organisations.

According to Dr Dasgupta, youngsters now do not think twice about joining the space agency. This year, the Thiruvananthapuram-based institute received

93,000 applications for 150 seats compared to around 80,000 last year.

The four-year State-funded course is entirely free, along with free books, hostel and canteen facilities in the 55-acre campus nestling ISRO's propulsion hub, Liquid Propulsion Systems Centre (LPSC) at Valiamala. "More than meeting our own requirements, we mean to catch young minds and groom them for ISRO," said Dr Dasgupta. "IIT Bombay and a very few other institutes offer aerospace courses but our grooming is definitely different. The IIST graduates have worked at our centres, with our scientists, on projects and are familiar with the system. They are productive from Day 1 while normally we put other new recruits through

an induction programme."

Other similar organisations like HAL, NAL and DRDO also have a large need for aerospace engineers. But IIST's graduates can land only in ISRO centres and work through a five-year bond. Those who want out have to shell out Rs 10 lakh — just a couple of lakhs more than what the institution would have spent on each of them.

IIST, whose Chancellor is Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, offers aerospace, avionics and physical sciences — each stream should keep the organisation's and the nation's R&D fires burning. Rocket dynamics, strong navigational and guidance focus that is normally not covered in other institutions, besides on-board radio frequency systems for satellite

communication as well as some acquaintance with astronomy and astrophysics.

These and other newbies will be filling in the vacancies that arise from 200-250 retirements within the 16,000-plus space agency each year. "Of course we have to wait for the centres' assessments on how good our students are in their work and suitably improve the syllabus," he said.

Four years ago, just before the institute was launched, a concerned Mr Nair had lamented that the private sector's wage structure was to blame for the flight of talent from agencies like ISRO. In an interaction with *Business Line*, he had advocated self-regulation including a ceiling on the maximum salary that the industry pays, in the larger interest. Will the IIST and the new big bucks in the public sector change the story?