Higher Education: Creating a Inclusive Design[*]

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It is a privilege for me to be here today and to speak to you on a topic which is personally very close to my heart. In fact, I am doubly pleased to be here today. Firstly, because the first Global Conference under the aegis of FICCI was initiated by me as Chairperson of the Education Committee of FICCI, where we had the privilege of having Dr John L Hennessy, President, Stanford University, USA attending. Secondly, since I am delighted to see that this Higher Education Summit has taken a momentum of its own and now attracts the interest and involvement of stakeholders across the spectra both from India and abroad.

I think this is an important reflection of the great focus that is coming to play on education in general and higher education in particular, especially in the areas of skill development and professional growth. This is a matter of concern from the point of view of fulfilling the aspirations of large sections of the society, who would like to see themselves equipped with higher skills and education, so that their earning capacity as well as their academic curiosity as applicable is satisfied.

It is also becoming critical in today's knowledge era, where the only constant is change, since higher education, particularly the kind of higher education, which not only builds skills, but an ability to learn for life and adapt and analyze according to the situation, lays the foundation for the individual to adapt to this new world. This becomes even more critical when we realize that today, industry all over the world, including India, is crying out for trained manpower. In spite of the fact that there exists swathes of population put together around the world, despite there being whole amounts of unemployment and underemployment, there is still a shortage of these kinds of skills.

To quote Amartya Sen, though I think, this is a fact which should be known and accepted in any case all over, the two main pillars of economic growth are education and health. Health, not only because it is necessary to fulfill the aspirations - the minimum level of

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aspirations of our people - but also because it has an impact on productivity and economic growth. And education of course is the underlining foundation.

Supply & Demand Mismatch

Humongous population: Now having said this, we need to move closer to home to my address on creating an inclusive design. Although these observations would be applicable to higher education across the world, they would certainly find more focus in the situations in India. The whole issue facing us in India today is both of 'opportunity' and 'alarm'. The opportunity is that it is remarkable and almost miraculous to find that our humongous population, that used to be considered a liability on the balance sheet of India and in the path of growth of India, is suddenly today coming to be seen as the most important item on the asset side of that balance sheet.

Demographic dividends: The population is not only important in terms of fueling India's economic growth by the availability of India's skilled manpower but also in the very growth of the population. We are able to see a situation in the near future where we have a large percentage of the population in the working age group (A third of India's population below 15 years of age, and 20 per cent of the population in the 15-24 age groups"). Now keeping this in view, what becomes important is how we reap the benefit of the demographic dividends.

Low Access: The current situation we see is unfortunately that only 7-8% of eligible students in the age group of 18-23 years have access to higher education. We need to contrast this with the rates in other countries, like 10.5% in China, 12% in Brazil, and of course, the US, which is 89%. What is even worse is that in our schooling system, by the time the children come into class XI, only 27% of our students stay within the system.

High Drop-out rates: Thus, the cause for 'alarm' is the drop-out rates- from 90% plus enrolment at the primary level to only 27% enrolment at class XI & XII. This means that we are having almost twenty-one million children every year who are out of the education system and there is no vocational education to take care of that, because currently formal vocational education system has only 5% capacity of admitting children.

Vocational Education: This is not the point of our discussion, although it is an equally critical area that needs to be addressed in order to make these dropouts employable.

However, it is certainly important that the dropouts that takes place after Class XII, who do not necessarily go to higher education which is academic in nature, certainly should be given access to a higher education which is purely skill- based. This is very important if we see and contrast this 5 percent rate of participation in vocational education in India with that of 28 per cent in Mexico, 60 - 80 per cent in most industrialised nations, and as much as 96 per cent in Korea.

Now, you might be wondering why am I going into school education, dropouts and vocational education, but the fact of the matter remains that when we are talking about higher education with inclusive design, we need to recollect that there is a whole number of aspiring members of our students population who are not even able to get to a point where they are in a position to access higher education. And again out of those who would like to access higher education, there is 7-8% availability in terms of supply. There is no doubt that there are a large number of students (1.50 lakhs) who manage to go abroad every year. However, this number is in no way sufficient to deal with the issue of the whole lot of aspirants who are left without any alternative at all.

Vision: At the present rate of expansion in higher education, the Government has projected participation of about 14-15 % by 2020. As per Government estimates, 8-10 million seats are to be created in the coming 8-10 years with the projected participation as above. The need is to work for 20-25% participation level by 2020. To attain this, we should move in a progressive phase of achievement i.e. 10-12% by 2010, 16-17% by 2015 and   20-25% by 2020.

Inclusiveness

While talking about inclusiveness, we have to take into consideration the population who have dropped out at Class VIII level, Class X level and most importantly at the Class XII level, and we need to devise ways and means (particularly when it comes to backward and marginalized sections of the society, whether socially and economically disadvantaged), to bring them up to a point of higher education where they can even be eligible or are in a position to take advantage of whatever availability of higher education is there for them. This has to be done side-by-side, because merely by increasing the supply of higher,

professional and technical educational institutions, we are not going to be able to make it inclusive.

Groups who are traditionally being left out: Now let us discuss, first of all, as to what we mean by inclusiveness. When we are talking about inclusiveness, we are talking about the *groups who are traditionally being left out*, which means the **scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes**. Even within these castes, there are particular sub-groups, for example the **dalits** who are even more disadvantaged when it comes to access to higher education. There has also been some kind of study, although I think it needs to be done in a better way, about the participation of different **minorities** in higher education. We are also talking about the **economically weaker section** of the society - irrespective of caste, creed, race, colour or any other criteria - who could benefit from higher education, namely those who aspire towards higher education, but are not in a position to even complete-school education, or even if they have done so, have not been able to gain access to higher education. But along with this, there is a major group, which often overlaps with these groups, – comprising **people living in the rural areas**. In fact in a recent survey, by NIT, Jalandhar, of which I also happen to be their Chairperson of the Board of Governors, we have found that in this year's admission, only 4% of the students have come from rural areas. This means that the rest of the aspiring students of the rural areas have not been able to make it through the AIEEE Examination ranking.

An important area which is somehow not in anybody's radar at this moment are the **physically challenged**, and the problem with the physically challenged is also critically connected with the kind of infrastructure that is available both for them to be able to complete school education and also higher education. It is a matter of great surprise to me that even in enlightened and accessible universities like Delhi University, physically challenged students have many problems, both in terms of physically accessing their colleges as well as being able to get the type of help that they need. And in many universities and colleges, there is no thought even to provide these facilities for them.

The other area of concern is the **inclusion of women** which arises right from school education itself because if enough girls do not have access to school education, then the higher education participation becomes much less (at present there are only 68 girls per

100 boys at the higher education level). And unfortunately if the family is constrained of funds, it is inevitably always the male child who gets the first priority.

I thought it was important to outline these problems because we need to realize that interventions cannot be made at higher education level alone, in order to design a higher education system which is inclusive.

Interventions

Several socio-economic reasons seem to act as constraints to access and equity in higher education in India. Lack of institutions, lack of implementation of existing programmes, inadequate utilization of resources, lack of easy access for marginalized sections of the society, lower status of women, and inadequacies in coordinated actions across all equity fronts within institutions seem to be the other reason. Financial constrains also often form a significant factor in advancing equity. These and related issues in *Equity and Access of Higher Education* forms the subject of our discussion. The challenge is to tackle each one and provide solutions at various levels.

Number of higher education institutions need to be increased: One problem is of the supply itself, which means the *number of higher education institutions need to be increased.* For that, certainly the Government need to put into place as many institutions which they are able to afford not only in terms of capital investment but in terms of being able to put in all the necessary resources and have them up and going, whether it is IITs, IIMs, or ITIs which look into vocational education, universities and colleges. But while doing this, the central government, apart from setting up this institutions of excellence, also needs to realize the sheer mass of institutions needed, because in any case, the alternative for somebody who does not have access to an institution of quality, is no education at all, unless he or she can go abroad (affordable only for a miniscule minority). This is 'disastrous'. Ultimately, a student should be able to go to some institution of higher education, and or that of vocational education, and become an employable person. Therefore, it cannot be said that we will build institutions of the highest quality only. What needs to be done is to ensure that all institutions definitely conform to some minimum quality so that they are not churning out students who are unemployable.

Relevant & Flexible education: So certainly along with access, *education needs to be relevant.* Education also needs to be flexible, which means people should be able to move in and out of the academic system. Now this could happen at different levels; for example if a student dropped out at the school level, and later on wanted to go back and complete his school board certification, he should be able to do it. If he wants to move into vocational education streams, he should be able to do it. From vocational education, if a student wants to cross over to higher education, he should be able to do it with some kind

of credit system in place. Similarly, from higher education, if a student wants to move to vocational training college, then that too should be allowed. This type of cross functionality with vertical as well as horizontal mobility should be allowed. This kind of flexibility is very important.

Multidisciplinary approach: *Multidisciplinary approach* is very - very important because it prevents people from becoming obsolete, especially in today's times when the level of obsolescence is very high. In a multidisciplinary approach, education makes one creative, develops analytical power, makes one able to think, able to learn and then one is in a position to keep on going back and reworking on his skills and continue to be employable. This also means that you need to throw open for various people a lot of short-term certification courses.

Private Participation: Therefore when we are talking about the sheer gigantic task of supply, then whatever the government intends to do, it must do. But in addition to this, it is critically important that *private sector be involved,* because there is no other way in which millions of students needed to reach <u>15% to 20% access </u>(8-10 million seats are to be created in the coming 8-10 years with the projected participation) can be put into the education system that quickly.

Motivation and favourable Regulations: If the Government seriously wants to attract private sector into education, it would have to look very critically as to what kind of motivation it would like to provide them to do so. In the current system, unfortunately for those who are playing above board, there is no motivation at all - either they are doing this as a social service, or a social contribution, or a cause - in which case the sheer plethora of rules, regulations, licenses and multifarious authorities are enough to put off anybody from going ahead with it. If they are doing it because they want to make money, then there is no way that you can officially make money since it is supposed to be a not-for-profit venture, and the ways and means that have come to be adopted therefore to make money are certainly ruining the whole education system with corruption as a whole. It is better in that case to allow commercialization, which is in any case taking place, or rather to recognize that commercialization is already taking place and let it be done gracefully, properly, with proper taxes being paid with proper accountability - to the shareholders, to the Government and to the regulations. And let that accountability come not from an

inspector raj system, let it come from as much as possible *self-regulation and autonomous accreditation bodies*.

If India can do it in the IT sector, in the telecom sector, I see absolutely no reason why we should not be able to do it in the knowledge sector. Regarding the concerns that exists about maintaining universities of repute, centers of excellence, particularly those which focus on tie ups with research and which are linked effectively between industry and research, I see no reasons why some private sectors initiatives would not make sure that these things come up.

On the other hand, the government is free to see, that good institutions and, centers of excellence come up. But merely by having these institutions of excellence, they will not be able to fulfill the aspirations of having a higher education system that can provide inclusiveness that can provide the kind of environment where there is access. We must remember that not every aspirant to higher education desires to go in for medicine or for engineering and not every aspirant to these higher education bodies has the ability or the desire to perform at the level which these institutions of excellence would demand. But it does not mean that they should not have access to higher education.

Maintaining Quality-Autonomous Accreditation Bodies: *Quality* can be maintained and should be maintained by ensuring *effective Accreditation systems,* whether by independent autonomous accreditation bodies or by relevant industry bodies, Chambers of Commerce, and ultimately competition itself would ensure that these institutions maintain a minimum quality of standard. If people are made aware of the accreditation of the certifications, it will ensure that they are not taken for a ride. And if we look back again at what happened to IT – there were small teaching shops for the IT sector across India, and there were also big training companies such as NIIT, APTECH. These companies had branches in remote places too and all of them were filled with students, and each one of those students who passed out were able to get jobs at various levels. This is what we need in India at this stage.

Making Higher Education Accessible: Now, let us consider what can be done for people who cannot *afford education*. I have already mentioned earlier that first of all, we need to bring them up to the level of higher education platform. We need to ensure that

each and every child not only has access to education, (we may be looking with pride at our enrolment rates) but to quality education too, and then most importantly, to be able to stay throughout the system up to class XII. If these students do not reach class XII, there is little point of making higher education available to them. I think this is the greatest missing factor that we have.

Adopting Schools: *One innovative method* can be tried out is that higher education institutions can be allowed to adopt certain schools for their classes XI & XII, and have interventions programmes to bring them up. Although it is an idea which can be very useful, and has been tried out in Haryana with some degree of success, it should be taken up on a larger scale. However, the fact of the matter remains that this is a huge task in terms of bringing them up to these standards.

Optimum utilization of available resources*: In higher education itself, there is an urgent need to strengthen both our universities and colleges* in terms of physical, academic and administrative infrastructure. We are also not making *effective or optimum utilization of all our available resources*. Just a few days back, I was chairing a meeting of the Committee of the 'Task Force on Skill Development for Northern India', where stakeholders from industry and academia along with senior state government nominees (principal secretaries, secretaries, directors, etc.) were present. A common concern area that came out was the under-utilization of existing resources in higher education institutions. Today, the kind of exceptional infrastructure that we have in some of our premier institutions and the limited number of students that we have within them seems mismatched.

We should be able to ***run many more courses*** - diploma courses as well as short term certificate courses - within these institutions in two shifts. I strongly feel that regulations in this area need to be critically re-looked at. Optimum utilization of the available resources is very critical because we are constrained not only by financial capital, but also by our human and knowledge capital. We just do ***not have enough teaching faculty*** and that is again an irony, as these are the people who are going to produce the sustainers of our economic growth and development in times to come.

Quality Faculty: There has to be an effort on war-footing to see that *quality faculty comes* up. To achieve these objective, different kinds of ***motivations*** has to be built into the

system*. **Salary is one of the biggest constraints*** in hiring quality faculty. As far as the public / government institutions are concerned, the teachers are paid according to the government pay scales, which unfortunately can't be compared with the remuneration levels they can get in the private sector. Even the passed out students from those institutions get higher starting salaries than many of the senior teachers. On the other hand, private sector is free to pay much more, but because of some constraints (for example, the stifling role of fee committees which has come into place), the focus has now shifted to providing minimum quality at minimum cost. This is not helping anyone and the worst sufferer in this process is the teaching quality, because at these low salaries, we just cannot afford to have talented people to come in and teach even if you attract them into the teaching profession in the first place.

Not only in the higher education, the situation is really bad in **school education** as well. To improve the situation, **the training programmes** for those who are aspiring to be teachers should be united under one approach by the central government, and again thrown open to as many people who can set up educational institutions for teaching and training, so that more and more teachers are made available. But given the **shortage of teachers** that we have, we will have to **resort to distance education, education through e-learning, interactive education, interaction over satellite, through virtual class rooms** and other medium with the help of technology, so that we can also bring education into the rural areas and to far flung villages.

This can only happen when we have more and more people who can teach. Also, so far, we have not **targeted women**, who live in rural areas, especially those who are married and have children, but possess some level of higher education and which can be trained to teach. This needs to change because they are the ones who can, in fact, contribute greatly to the teaching process as it would do away with the need to send in people from outside. It is also not difficult to motivate the community around to allow their women folk to go and teach, because, fortunately, teaching is considered a respectable profession. And, let me say that I am not making this suggestion without proof - **we have done this very successfully in our college at Charkhi Dadri, Haryana**. At least we have initiated this, we have been able to motivate village-folk to send their daughters for higher education, and to persuade some of the students who have passed out to come back and teach. But

this can be done at a much bigger level. For that, I strongly suggest the introduction of **mass B.Ed. programmes**, particularly in rural areas, to fill this gap.

It is also important to increase the women participation in higher education and for that emphasis should be on opening of **women universities** in each state and more and more **women only colleges** in each district especially in rural areas.

Distance education: In addition to this to enlarge the domain of higher education among the lot who could not have the benefit of formal education in far flung rural and tribal areas, distance education is an alternative to extend opportunity to them. A little flexibility in institutional arrangements will permit students to move easily from conventional to open institutions and vice-versa. The Distance Education System would also enable the manpower which is already engaged in the gainful employment to improve their academic degree and compete for better prospects, vertically.

Special Programmes for the Marginalized: The other important intervention for the marginalized and disadvantaged section of the society could be **evening classes**, **remedial classes**, for those who are aspiring to be admitted to higher education institutions, colleges and universities. These special classes can be organized to prepare them for higher education, as these would certainly be less expensive than going to coaching classes. This could be done at the campus of the university or college, or this could be done as suggested earlier, by adopting certain schools in this process.

Preparatory classes: Again, probably universities and colleges could think of having *one year as a preparatory class*, prior to going in for a bachelor's degree and again people from disadvantaged section of the society (who have not been able to make it for the entry into the first year of that particular programme) could be put through that preparatory class so at least some of them are able to enter the mainstream system.

Vocational courses in universities itself: This is not going to be useful unless universities, side by side, are asked to and allowed to run vocational or skill development kind of courses as well. Because if these people are not able to make it to degree courses, at least they would be able to take up some other type of skill development courses in similar/other areas of discipline, whereby they can come out with some worthwhile skills and thus become employable.

Affirmative Actions: Similarly, there needs to be a *policy of positive affirmation*. I am more in favour of positive affirmation rather than reservation, since I believe that reservations, even currently as they are made, are not effective. I still think it's a pity that we have not gone ahead with an in-depth study into the impact of reservations in the best of our colleges, to see how many students have actually been able to avail the benefits of the reservations made to them. If we were to look into it, we may find that many of the seats go vacant because the students have not been able to make it so far, which is even worse, because vacant seats being around is a national waste of resources.

I think more importantly, every institution should aim at admitting a certain percentage of students from the disadvantaged backgrounds, may be 20%- 25%, and for those people some further ***relaxatation in marks*** can be given and should be given. But at the same time, it is very important that we don't admit students just for the sake of filling up this quota, because then we are not helping them, we are in fact destroying their lives because if you are trying to admit a student who has passed out will 33% marks (say at class 12^(th)) to a higher level engineering course, he may not be able to cope with it. Here another study needs to be made as to how many students have actually managed to cope in that situation.

Provide skill based education: On the contrary, if they are given access to a higher education which is more skill based and industry relevant, they can perform wonders. I can give you a personal example. A child, someone who would have been totally unsuitable for engineering, and was from a disadvantaged background, was put by us through a computer hardware maintenance diploma course, and one have to see to believe that today, that boy is commanding a good salary in a reputed organisation. What is needed is that suppose such a student wanted to go back to higher education after this expertise, he should be able to get a lateral entry and then be able to go on and get a degree.

Improve Communication Skills: The other crucial factor is, of course, *communication skills*. One of the major hindrances that stand in the way of even those who manage to come out of the higher education institutions is their lack of effective communication skills. This is, of course, true in general but more so of people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and obviously have not been exposed much to English. As a consequence, they are not able to express themselves either in speech or in writing, not just in English

but also their own language. So improving communication skills of students needs to be an integrated part of higher education, so that our students can be more employable.

Making Higher Education Affordable: One of the most important concerns is the *affordability of higher education*. The *funding pattern needs to be analysed* from a different angle. In my opinion, first and foremost, **those who can afford to pay should be made to pay the actual cost of their education**. Let them pay the market price for education. On the other hand, the funds which will be saved in this manner (along with some additional funds) should go towards **subsidizing the education** of other financially-challenged candidates, through the provision of either **scholarships or loans**. Industry can also be encouraged to **sponsor individual** students in different educational institutions, may be on getting a commitment from the students to join them for a particular period after the completion of their studies.

The other measure can be **loans through banks**, or through a special bank which may be formed for this very purpose (i.e. Educational Development Bank of India). The banks should give loans at very nominal interest rates so that the students can go to the institution of their choice and these loans can be repaid when the student start earning. The scheme of students' loans needs to be extended at Polytechnic and ITI levels as well. Presently there is no such provision and is applicable only at degree level.

The **HSCS Scheme of Australia** is an innovative thought where loans are taken back through the income tax stream when the students start earning and start paying income tax.

Partial subsidy/scholarship along with loan: Apart from this, subsidies/ scholarships may be given to the needy students. I strongly believe that as far as possible, the entire fees should not be subsidized, nor the student be given the full scholarship, because any education which is totally free is never appreciated. The remaining amount can be given on loan, and linked to some kind of minimum **contribution to the society**, or the country, by way of community service/social service, teaching at some rural centers for a specific period, after the completion of education. These measures will ensure maximization of funds available for supporting needy students and would also ensure the value of education that is imparted to them.

This can further be substantiated by *'earn while you learn'* schemes to financially help students, especially from disadvantaged sections. Also encouraging the provision of *'Earn, where you learn'* is a trend quite popular abroad, which is the concept of 'jobs on campus', wherein students can work and add to their finances. This will also equip them with the necessary experience of handling work pressure in future.

At the end I would like to say the government has to reinvent its role. Apart from being facilitators for the social change, governments in developing countries like India have to strengthen their social infrastructure to ensure equitable development. In the emerging knowledge economy, building a strong human capital base to complement the available resource endowment and to exploit the human resource is critical to India. The 'inclusive' approach to socio-economic development in India has been receiving the attention it deserves. It aims at distributing the fruits of the socio-economic growth to a wider population instead of perpetuating cesspools of prosperity. A key element of the strategy for inclusive growth needs to "provide the mass of our people access to such facilities as education and health etc; that they need and government at different levels need to ensure the provisions of these services.