

With over 650 universities and 33,000 colleges, and a planned expenditure of ₹267.5 billion for 2013-14, the stage is set for those entering the higher education scene. While a vast variety of courses and streams are on offer, it is choice of the right institution that holds the key to a bright future

# Take the Firm First Step...

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THE educational and employment scene in our country has undergone a sea change over the past two decades. Using globalisation as a pretext, the government has retreated from the education sector. At the same time most of the new employment that has been generated is either in the private sector (or in the informal sector). In the decades immediately following the Independence the government was the educator as well as employer and there was an implicit connect between these two areas. With all its faults higher education under government auspices still remains very good value for money, but the government presence in employment has become minimal leading to a serious disconnect.

## Sustained growth

The total number of colleges and universities in India has been on the rise. The number of colleges was 7,346 in 1990-91 and 12,806 in 2000-01. It almost tripled in the next decade to reach 33,023 in 2011-12. There were only 193 universities in 1990-91. The number went up to 256 in 2001-01 and crossed 659 in 2012-13. The percentage share of private sector in higher education has steadily increased: from 33 per cent in 2001 to 54 per cent in 2007 to 59 per cent in 2012. While the student enrolment doubled in a decade, the number of colleges increased by around three times. We thus have an ironical situation — the overall enrolment of students remains low but at the same time there is excess capacity in colleges.

State governments have gone overboard while sanctioning private universities. Punjab has eight state universities and as many private universities. Haryana has 10 universities in the government sector and 14 in the private sector. Himachal Pradesh has been welcoming private universities with open arms. Against four state universities it has as many as 16 private universities.

The private universities offer courses only in selected lucrative areas. Taking the latest overall undergraduate enrolment in all institutions under consideration we note that arts subjects attracted 37 per cent students, science 19 per cent, commerce and management 18 per cent and engineering 16 per cent. (Annual Status of Higher Education of States and UTs 2013 prepared by Government of India Ministry of Human Resource Development and Confederation of Indian Industry.) In other words science and engineering attract about 35 per cent of undergraduate students while arts, commerce and management together are the choice of some 55 per cent of the candidates. Many of the students who opt for the latter stream make their choice at the Plus II level itself by opting out of science after Class X. There are others who study science for another two years but decide not to pursue it any further.

In recent times science has been largely out of favour throughout the world. But thanks to the economic downturn, fascination for financial services and the like is coming to an end and the focus is back on the basics.

## Changing focus

Recent years have seen economic downturn in the world calling for a rethink by Indian parents and students on their educational priorities. Continuously for many years till recent past Indian economy enjoyed a robust growth by servicing the world economy. Since the services sector is 'science-less', decline in science education went hand in hand with the economic boom. Such was the demand for off-shore cheap Indian labour that even poorly trained young men and women could hope to get a pay packet which though low in dollar value looked very attractive in rupee terms.

That phase is now over. Job opportunities in IT sector have gone down and the employers have set higher standards than before



RARING TO GO: A LOT OF GROUND IS YET TO BE COVERED TO MAKE HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA GLOBALLY COMPETITIVE

## Enrolments

Total enrolment (2013-14 est.):

30.5 million

Regular brick and mortar

84%

Distance education

16%

## ENROLMENT BY TYPE OF CERTIFICATION (2011-12)

Degree

84.9%

Diploma

15.1%

## ENROLMENT BY LEVEL OF STUDY (2011-12)

Undergraduate

87.4%

Postgraduate

12.1%

## ENROLMENT BY LEVEL OF STUDY (2011-12)

Arts 31%

Science 15%

Commerce/Management 15%

Engineering/Technology 24%

Education 6%

Medicine 5%

Law 2%

Agriculture/Veterinary science 1%

Others 1%

## Institutions

Number of institutions (2011-12)

Colleges 33,023

Diploma-granting institutions 12,748

Universities 659

Central universities

7%

Institutions of national importance

10%

State universities

47%

Private universities

16%

Deemed universities

20%

when it comes to selecting the candidates for various jobs. In recent years there has also been an increasing realisation by students and their parents that money spent on education in many private engineering colleges is nothing but a waste, and that it is better to do BSc from a good old college than BTech from a bad engineering college. This awareness about the importance of right instruction rather than a degree is a welcome development which will increase the employability quotient of lakhs of students passing out of colleges each year.

At present the situation is grim on this front as like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous bemoan 'Water, water, every where/Nor any drop to drink', we have an ocean of young jobseekers who are largely unemployable because of the low-quality education they have received.

It is a common complaint from the industry that our university and college products have no lab experience. I do not know how this defect can be remedied because it calls for action at the level of college managements. In recent years the central government has opened a number of Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (IISERs), one of which is located in Mohali. Their long name notwithstanding, IISERs are in effect central science universities. These are very well funded and have high class faculty and well equipped library and labs. In addition all admitted students get a substantial amount of money as scholar-

ship so that they do not have to depend on their parents for support. If they wish they can leave after the integrated master's degree or stay back for Ph.D.

However, there is another serious defect which students can remove themselves. Our education system has long been distorted by CET-type of selection process for admission to professional courses. The end-all of the school education system is just ticking the right answer from among the multiple choices listed in the question paper. Consequently, the students fail to comprehend the basic principles, especially of science, and once they go to higher classes they are severely handicapped because of this lack of conceptual clarity. I am not suggesting that they should not aim to get good score in CET. But they should preserve their Plus II books and study them seriously even though they are now in higher classes.

## Make an informed choice

Unfortunately our universities and educational authorities are prone to be influenced by certain buzzwords. New courses sound very impressive and may appear to be employment oriented but very often these are not taught rigorously and are no more than a waste of valuable time and money. While choosing your course of study you should be guided by the reputation of the college in that area so that you can receive a good grounding.

While some of the students will be lucky to be ranked sufficiently high and have a degree of freedom in the choice of their future course of action, several others whose rank is not very high need to carefully examine their options. Just as the years following the IIInd World War saw tremendous world-wide investment and progress in physics it is now the turn of biology and related sciences such as pharmacy, chemistry, environmental studies, etc. It should be noted that while IT-sector opportunities are related to the financial health of USA and European countries, India has an intrinsic strength in pharmaceutical sector.

Very often colleges offer a fixed menu so students should aim at getting into courses providing broad-based knowledge. Remember that this is an era of multi-disciplinary fields. Breakthroughs come when concepts and techniques already in use in an area are applied in a new domain. A geneticist who knows social anthropology may be able to identify and solve a cutting-edge research problem. A lawyer who can interpret forensic evidence will be able to impress the judge. An IPR attorney will be able to provide excellent service to their client if they are aware of recent scientific developments.

## Value addition and skill development

The present employment system is heavily weighted against students from underprivileged backgrounds and those whose parents have not had the advantage of

higher education themselves. This is so because of the importance private sector attaches to communication and soft skills. There is such a great emphasis on science and mathematics in our school system that languages and social sciences are totally neglected. To be able to understand classroom lectures and read textbooks one must know English sufficiently well. Further, being able to express yourself clearly and socially interact with your colleagues as well as seniors is very essential at entry level as also for rising up the hierarchical ladder.

In recent years we have become obsessed with rankings, of individuals as well as institutions. It is of course good to get good grades, but there is an important point to be kept in mind. Success in later life is determined by a combination of factors — knowledge base, hardwork, clear thinking, the ability to follow instructions and take informed decisions. Most of these factors are not measured by the examination and testing systems.

There is a positive side to the plethora of colleges and universities around you; they give you a second chance. Life is like a game of snakes and ladders with one difference. In real life the snake and the ladder are not distinct but the same. If you lose hope failure is like a snake. But if failure strengthens your resolve it serves as a ladder.

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