

Accountability of Higher Education

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1. What is the Problem ?

1.1. A society develops the educational system it needs. This seems to be the natural way of evolution of an educational system. Whatever be the nature of the society (under developed, developing or developed) one can always determine the minimal need of the society leading to, what we call in our set up, elementary or primary education compulsory for all children of a definite age-group. One can also visualise an optimal need leading to what we have termed secondary education and special needs of the society get reflected in higher education. This appears to me to be the natural way of defining and distinguishing between primary, secondary and higher education. In the following I shall try to draw some conclusions based on the above definitions.

1.2. In the developed countries of the west the educational system has evolved more or less in consonance with the needs of the society. As the society developed, its special cultural, economic and scientific needs increased and to meet these needs, a matching development of higher education was called for. This process continued over the years leading to an overall balance between the needs of the society and the output of higher education. As a matter of fact in this natural process a socially inbuilt mechanism develops whereby higher education adjusts itself to the needs of the society and vice versa. In such a situation (which prevails to a large extent in developed countries) the problem of accountability of higher education does not assume a proportion that would warrant specific discussion.

1.3. Now the above mentioned process of evolving higher education in step with the development of the society is a slow process. In case of reawakened nations (in the sense of education we may not use the adjective developing !) however, one cannot wait for the operation of this slow process of nature. As a matter of fact specific efforts are made (in terms of 5-year plans, for example), to accelerate the economic development of the society. Similarly specific efforts are made to accelerate the development of higher education. Since both the processes of accelerated development are artificially simulated, the socially inbuilt mechanism present in natural evolution is absent and no conscious countrywide effort seems to have been made to evolve such a balancing mechanism. The result is that the society develops at one rate and the higher education seems to be developing at a different rate in a different direction. Hence this problem of accountability in higher education.

1.4. Coming to the specific conditions prevailing in our country, there is an additional factor which adds to the above effect. The entire system of formal education was imposed on the society from above with a purpose which had, of course, nothing to do with its accountability to the society. Though, over the years efforts have been made to effect changes and adjustments in the externally imposed educational structure to the needs of a reawakened nation, in case of higher education these changes have not been very marked and development of higher education essentially means increase in the number of institutions of higher learning all fitting

into the pattern superimposed on the society long back! This circumstance makes the problem of accountability, all the more acute.

2. How to solve it.

2.1. The superimposed pattern of institutions of higher learning is essentially the pattern of affiliating universities. Teaching is done in colleges and the students get degrees from universities. With proleferation of colleges, the effective control of the university through the process of affiliating has almost vanished! Since the students ultimately get the stamp (degree) from the university the society holds the university responsible for the standards whereas the actual teaching is done in the colleges. Thus each college does not feel itself accountable for the education it imparts. As a sense of accountability would lead to continuous effort to improve the working of an institution this lack of sense of accountability has contributed to a large extent to the noticable fall in standards of colleges these days.

A way out would be to create a situation in which a student will be placed before the society as the end product, not only of a particular university but mainly as a student of a particular college. This would ultimately imply autonomy for colleges. A way to make colleges accountable to society would therefore lie in evolving an affiliating university as a federation of autonomous colleges.

2.2. But mere confirmation of autonomy would not be of much help, because one can always argue that our

universities are supposed to be autonomous and yet the problem of accountability is very much there! As a matter of fact a direct application of our earlier analysis would imply that the solution would lie in the autonomous university or the autonomous college giving some thought to matching of the education imparted to some specific special needs of the society.

One peculiar feature of the superimposed pattern of higher education that we have inherited is its intense conservatism. In our country educational innovations have been tried out (successfully or unsuccessfully) to a large extent in the field of primary education, to some extent in the field of secondary education, but to a negligible extent in higher education. We may have 120 or more universities in the country but most of them can be described as repetitive models of the 3 universities imposed on the society from above about 125 years ago!

In order to induce a sense of accountability in higher education, it is necessary that our autonomy is used to evolve educational innovations based on special needs of the society. An atmosphere of creativity in the field of higher education should be generated. The teachers and educationists of the universities and colleges should, for a while, step out of their ivory-tower institutions of higher learning and look upon higher education as a part of social work, as a branch of social science.

Since most of 'higher education' is being imparted in colleges, the autonomy to colleges with this sense of reorientation of goals and priorities of higher education

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in terms of fulfilling special needs of the society
would be one way of providing a solution to the problem
of accountability.

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