**Education – time for a futuristic policy?**

Education, an item in the concurrent list of the Indian constitution, has several fathers – the central government, state governments and an activist judiciary – apart from various extra-constitutional agencies that have their own agenda. Consequently, *a sector where India has competitive strength is rudderless, directionless, and set to disintegrate* post-2005, under the force of international competition inspired by General Agreements on Trade & Services (GATS).

**Education systems** can be run by Governments, academics or managers. Globally, the education sector has seen a paradigm shift in recent years. Different countries have developed home-grown models that are suited to their unique socio-political environment. The broad direction appears to be to let "managers" run education systems, with appropriate mechanisms to ensure academic freedom and fulfillment of social objectives.

The Indian education sector unfortunately has got caught in a time warp. Institutions such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) and All-India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) were formed decades ago with the noblest of intentions. Unfortunately, the UGC has nothing to grant because the government coffers are empty! AICTE has not been able to ensure the contemporariness of education. The indictment of the current education system is evidenced by *students enrolling in formal education for the certificate, and falling back on informal education for learning and practical orientation.*

Governments' finances have been under pressure for a while. So they have not been able to invest in growing existing institutions or creating new ones. Even sustaining the existing education institutions has become an issue. But demand for education is increasing. *The supply-demand mismatch in education is socially and politically sensitive.*

Governments would like the private sector to step in to create / fund the education institutions, but without the latitude to run them professionally and earn a profit to sustain the institution and cover the cost of capital. It is clearly unrealistic to expect egalitarian private sector participation on a large scale. It has to be recognised that entrepreneurs need to cover their cost of capital and institutions need to earn a profit to survive, grow and maintain their independence.

*Recognising these realities in a field like education requires a change of mindset in the governments.* The flow of large scale private money in the education sector is contingent upon such a mindset change. Else the country will get caught in a **vicious circle** of poor funding – poor infrastructure and fewer seats – greater supply-demand mismatches – more pressure to get existing private sector players to carry a greater burden of social justice requirements – poor funding.

Some states are seeking to break-out of this vicious circle. A number of private universities are coming up, particularly in the newer states. Unfortunately, on the one hand internal mechanisms to define and adhere to quality standards are undefined or poor; on the other hand, well-entrenched regulatory organizations at the center are seeking to protect their fiefdoms. This tug of war between the center and states could lead to students holding costly, but worthless degree certificates.

We do not need to look far to identify possible alternative structures. It is widely accepted that India's success in the software sector was a result of the government letting it alone. The same reasoning can be extended to **software-education**. Freedom from any government-mandated syllabi or interference, gave companies like NIIT and Aptech the leeway to offer contemporary content and skills to thousands of technology professionals who were lapped up by companies in India and abroad. The employers were not bothered whether the candidates had a degree or diploma. What was material was that the candidates could be readily put on the job. Thus, the Indian software story was born. Over time, these Indian education service providers were able to go global.

In the context of the Indian polity, the governments at the center and in the states may like to focus their scarce financial resources on primary education and secondary school education. For higher learning, the government role could be facilitative. The following responsibility structure could be worth considering for education at all levels:

1. **Central Government**
   a. Specify the limits, if any, on foreign investment and lay the broad guidelines on management structure e.g. Vice Chancellor would be an Indian.
   b. Prescribe the syllabi guidelines, with a view to protect national interest.
   c. Mandatory quality certification and ranking of universities across the country.
   d. Set standards regarding disclosures, advertisement etc. with a view to ensure that students take informed decisions.
   e. Outline a decentralized mechanism to ensure that grievances against education service providers are redressed quickly and at minimal cost.

2. **State Governments**
   a. Support the creation and growth of government education institutions.
   b. Incentivise the private sector to perform an active role in the sector.
   c. Prescribe guidelines to ensure that all institutions work towards the needs of social justice. The responsibilities of the institutions in this regard would vary with the level of support availed from the government.

3. **Universities**
    a. They would operate within the framework set above. Poor performance on any parameter - for instance, no faculty member has published a paper in reputed international journals - would be reflected in the quality grade.
    b. Universities would thus have an incentive to develop themselves into institutions of eminence / excellence. Competition would ensure that the position is not misused.
    c. While the University itself would be a "knowledge body", the knowledge would be disseminated directly, or through "study centers". The University would be responsible for ensuring that the study centers adhere to set standards.

Such a responsibility structure may well hold the key to *ensure adequate and affordable education services for all.* It would help our institutions grow strong enough to *fight international competition and thrive globally.* Else, *the regulatory hand that seeks to protect the social sector will throttle the education sector and destroy India's future.*