

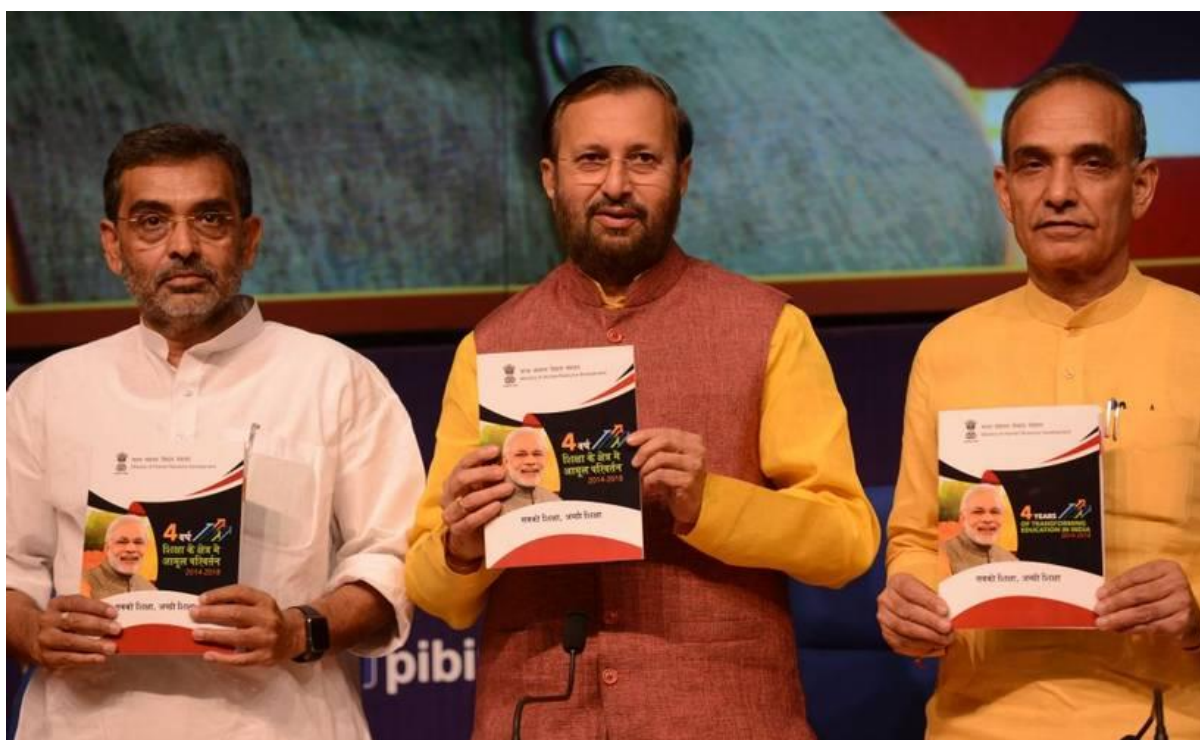
Interview

Higher education in India is not mature; disbanding UGC is welcome: M.R. Doreswamy



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Union Minister for Human Resource Development Prakash Javadekar releasing a booklet on four years' achievements of his Ministry, flanked by Satya Pal Singh, MoS, HRD, Higher Education (right) and Upendra Kushwaha, MoS, HRD, School Education and Literacy, in New Delhi on June 18, 2018. Photo: V.V. Krishnan

Even after 70 years of Independence, India has not stabilised in the sphere of higher education. It continues to grapple with problems of unemployment, and the education system has not been successful in addressing the problems of graduate-unemployment. Many reports indicate that our graduates are not employable in industries owing to the prevailing poor educational standards. In this interview to S. Rajendran, Resident Representative, Karnataka, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, M.R. Doreswamy, Chancellor, PES University, which runs a large chain of educational institutions in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, says the quality of higher education in the country is a cause for worry. Seventy-nine year old Doreswamy is an advocate of quality education to the Indian masses and is a facilitator, whose faith is in founding, promoting, and articulating core values such as perseverance, excellence, and service for a better education. Excerpts:

The private sector has a notable presence in higher education in India. As an educationist, how would you describe the role played by the private sector in higher education?

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to higher education has remained around 24 per cent of our total population (121 crores). There has been a surge in GER in higher education that has more than doubled over last decade, going up from 9 per cent in 2002-03 to 24 per cent in 2013-14. The expected increase in demand for higher education will obviously be more since GER for secondary education is over 50 per cent.

India has the largest number of higher education institutions in the world with over 31,000 colleges and universities. The U.S. and China have only 21 per cent and 14 per cent of those in India.



**Dr. M.R. Doreswamy, Chancellor,
PES University**

As per available data, the private sector is playing a significant role in addressing access to higher education especially in disciplines such as engineering, medicine and management. There are compelling reasons to enhance investment and quality, as a result of increased competition, in the higher education sector.

Private investment in higher education has augmented public investment and aided considerable expansion of student enrolments and consequent employment opportunities, and the private universities are growing at a faster pace than those

run by the Government. Yet, at the top end of the spectrum, the students' preferred choice has been government institutions (IIT, IIM, NIT, AIIMS, etc.); which cater to a limited number of meritorious students. The rest of them choose reputed, well established private institutions.

About 35 per cent of the total number of universities are in the private sector. (According to an all India survey of Higher Education, of the 799 Universities in India, 277 are private universities) Do you think the Indian private higher education sector is now a mature market?

Not really. Higher education in India itself is not mature. Consider the following facts:

- a. Distribution of colleges in the country is highly skewed. There are more than 140 districts (out of a total of 656 districts) which have less than 10 colleges, while only two districts have more than 500 colleges (Bangalore has the highest, with more than 1,000 colleges).
- b. Most of the Colleges run only undergraduate (UG) level programmes. One-third offer postgraduate studies and a miniscule 1.7 per cent offer PhD level programmes.
- c. 40per cent Colleges run only a single programme, out of which 75 per cent are privately managed. Among these, 30 per cent colleges run B. Ed courses only.
- d. Nearly two-thirds of colleges in India have less than 500 students.

With a strong UG flavour, private universities are still at the low-end of the education chain. Many private universities currently function as assembly-lines churning out

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undergraduates in large numbers. An abysmal research track record, mediocre faculty and inadequate infrastructure also show private universities have many miles to cover. As primary and secondary education enrolments are being stepped up by the government, there will be greater stress on the capacity of higher education, which can largely be filled by expansion of the private sector component.

The underlying fact is employment facilitation that is possible only by quality mantra. Quality is possible by pre-requisites like enabling curriculum content, resilient syllabi that has capability of imbibing more learning competence and facilitating employability in industries and corporate; holistic development to meet stiff competition that exist in job market and so on.

Do students prefer private educational institutions over Government-run institutions at all levels, or is there a specific bracket that the private institutions are catering to?

There can be no straight forward answer to this one. Education at a private college may cost more, but there is no guarantee that it will have the best academic structure. Similarly, a public university can cost less comparatively, yet it may not have the best placement record.

Added to this the infrastructure, brand-value, success rankings and word of mouth do have their role in student-parent preference to private sector. We cannot undermine the affordability factor too. It is simple in that urban areas would tend a private sector as their counterpart in a town or a rural setting. It is also true that not all private urban colleges or universities cater to all that is expected in terms of quality as well as making students job-ready.

The other salient feature is the ease of effecting change in curriculum and content that is often leaning on industry. This change is swift in private institutions rather than public institutions; the teachers in private colleges will have to be competitive and pragmatic since research is an underlying necessity for them to perform.

The obvious truth is that quality comes with a cost and high quality naturally demands high cost and it is in this area that private universities

are better. Good infrastructure, good laboratories with sound equipments, competent

What are your views on the Government's move to disband the University Grants Commission?

The move to disband the University Grants Commission is welcome and an Higher Education Council of India (HECI) can promote, facilitate and swiftly shift to the mode of encouraging excellence in higher education. The following steps could complement the process of disbanding the UGC:

- implementation and its surveillance aspects of education in India.
- The Sub-committees established under state level HECI could deal different levels of education at state level. They could monitor quality of education, certifying, recruiting vice-chancellors, monitoring the recruitment of the academic faculty. The subcommittees could also include monitoring of recruitment of non-technical, staff members including infrastructural requirements.
- Further an independent Union Public Service Commission-like body comprising academicians should be set up for recruitment of Vice-chancellors so that these positions at top are apolitical. All educational institutes of India shall follow the model act that is prescribed by HECI in letter and spirit. The central theme and the core of HECI should be functional autonomy and also provide autonomy to the educational universities and institutes under its ambit.

teachers and vibrant curriculum and a robust quality process could yield results desired that are reasonably well catered in a timely manner in private sector compared with the government sector. The private universities therefore become the central driving force for professional employment generation in the country.

How are the placement opportunities for the students who graduate from the private universities in comparison with the government run universities?

India's frosty job market finally seems to be warming up. Campus placements signal green shoots. Private universities are often more prestigious, although this is highly dependent on the management-faculty-student quality and accountability at each level. This can be an advantage for students when seeking jobs after graduation.

The fact is that the private sector industries are not only more in number but also pay relatively more salaries, although they insist on quality graduates. Government sector jobs are rather less but since the career-development is slower the students who are average and below average in merit tend to prefer government service. So the placement opportunities for students who graduate are more in private compared to government.

Privately managed industries cannot afford to under-perform since they will be in stiff competition among themselves and in few circumstances with public sector companies as well. Since they have to perform private sector recruitment would be more rigorous in recruiting quality students. As of now, with respect to engineering domain most of placements are taking place only in private sector.

Will private sector education in the country help in preventing brain drain particularly that of students who obtain admissions in foreign universities and choose to remain in that country?

It may not be right to point a finger at private sector education in the country for the brain drain of our youth. The fact is that irrespective of whether it is private or public sector, good and merited students tend to build their careers by seeking higher education and strive for achieving it. Government also indirectly provides bank-financial schemes to promote higher education seekers abroad.

Instead of this blame game that private sector aids brain drain it would do good to build a welcome environment in our country to receive our own highly accomplished graduates after their education. The fact is that even the developed world now-a-days are conservative and will not retain postgraduates if they are unnecessary; the visas are becoming hard to obtain. So there is a move to send-back our postgraduates unless they are staying for further academic activities.

Contrary to popular belief, research studies have shown that there are significant economic benefits of human capital flight both for the migrants themselves and for the country of origin. India receives the highest foreign remittances from migrants (\$86 billion every year). Many such emigrants have started back-end operations in the country and even have come back to start companies in their own backyard. At the end of the day, the country simply lacks a strong job market and an ecosystem to sustain the highly talented engineering students to stay back in the country.

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There are just a few, in single digit number university ranked among the best (under the top 150) in the world including the Indian Institute of Science and the IIT's which are viewed as prestigious universities. How do you think this could be corrected?

The criteria adopted for international rankings do not entirely suit the mandates of Indian prestigious universities. They ignore any institution that does not have enough undergraduates. That means institutions such as IIMs, and IISc are out of contention. Given various impediments, our universities do not admit a lot of overseas students. India emphasises more on the specialised institutions built around a single theme such as technology, management, sciences, or medicine. That means the volume of research will be small, given that each of our institutions are way smaller in terms of staff and students. For instance, IIT Kanpur has about 5,000 students, compared with Iowa State University's 32,000. When it comes to faculty, the ratio could be close to 1:10. Indian Universities do not get financial support from industry as is the case abroad.

Additionally but not just limited to the following, we could compete:

1. Create enabling conditions to make the higher education system robust and useful to attract investments.
2. Improve the quality of higher education by focusing on research and faculty development, with corporate sector participation.
3. Engage the corporate sector to invest in existing institutions, set up new institutions, and develop new knowledge clusters.

The Union government has now come out with a plan to enhance the stipend paid to Ph.D. students. Will it be of any help in enhancing the international stature of Indian universities?

It is definitely a welcome move of our government considering enhancement of stipend to Ph.D. students. Also another good move is that of allocating Rs. 1 lakh crore over next 4 years to IITs and NITs. Government should not discriminate that this financial support would do good only to public sector institutions; deserving and competent private institutions also should be considered. The fact is that our spending on education is very small compared to any developed world. We need to recognise this and correct soon.

Undoubtedly, this is a step in the right direction, in increasing the pool of Ph.D scholars in the country, although it currently impacts only a small number. Most private universities, run well-oiled UG programs and must now seriously look at building strong research engines within their campuses. Having an accomplished faculty member with a full-time responsibility as Dean Research, vigorous efforts to build a strong cohort of Ph.D. scholars, financially attractive stipends for full-time scholars and a clear roadmap of investments will help.

What is your view on removing the system of reservations in education and introducing a merit based education system – at least in higher learning?

The reservation system was founded for making education accessible to the deprived class of our society. The context was different and it was more a socialistic activity to bring the cross-section of society to mainstream. It had good relevance and was an essential move. Now after 70 years of independence the situation is very different.

I am of the strong opinion that reservation system in education be removed especially in higher education sector and merit should be the only criterion to prioritise quality and to be on par with world institutes. Yes, for employment we could have it for some more time but in educational sector the reservation system must go. Instead, the basis could be on economic factors as affordability is still a concern for even forward communities. While accessibility to education is improving in primary and secondary school education, when it comes to higher education merit should play a prime role over all other factors. Merit has to be honoured for rapid progress in higher educational sector.

What are your views on entrance exams to universities? Haven't aspiring students already successfully completed their schooling, which is meant to prepare young minds of life – either at workplaces or higher education?

This is a very important question. Yes, secondary education system has good breadth of courses that our students learn. But, the question is how they learn. Our secondary education system trains students and a majority of the courses mostly are theoretical in nature and lot of spoon-feeding to excel in scoring marks has been the practice. Students also sincerely put in lots of efforts to memorise concepts and reproduce the answers to the questions appearing in exams.

Notwithstanding the limitations of entrance exams, screening helps in various ways, apart from being a basis for enrolments. Primary and secondary education in the country, as many studies have pointed out, have inherent limitations and passing out may not necessarily mean that students are ready for higher education. An inflow of students who come from different States, different streams with varying evaluation norms needs a filtering mechanism, especially if there are severe supply constraints.

Preparing for exams and marks are not big-priority in higher education sector. Problem solving, hands-on learning, laboratory practice and employability factors

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are prime drivers in higher technical education. So to bridge the big-gap between secondary and higher education system entrance tests become essential to screen students who are capable

to take-up and sustain higher education. Entrance examinations, therefore, are essential to the enrolment in higher education sector.

It is also a fact not to take students who cannot be successful, nor find it very difficult to cope up higher education for students really suffer to succeed. The reality is that about 20 per cent of student drop out after admissions in technical education for reasons just not being able to cope up. So entrance exams help students to choose streams in which they could succeed and fare better. Therefore in the interest of students also, the entrance exams become essential.

Have not schools/universities been reduced to the role played by tutorial colleges – preparing students to pass exams - by making them focus on such entrance examinations – be it for undergraduate course, or at more advanced levels, for research and teaching?

Intense focus on grades will continue to cloud outcome-based education. The next link in the education system is the industry which focuses heavily on the grade sheet of the students. The demand-supply equation skews the recruitment model heavily. If bagging jobs is heavily grade-dependent, the focus of learning institutes will remain on grades. Several companies insist on students having an impeccable record of first-class in SSC, PU, UG and PG, before being admitted to the selection process. Even foreign universities depend on GMAT/GRE scores and grades. With so much dependent on scores and grades, it is difficult to shake-off their presence in the scheme of things. They are not extensions of tutorials, wherein notes are available to prepare and crack the exams. They are of very high standards and students who succeed accomplish well in their higher education career.

Therefore entrance exams and UG and higher levels are doing good and hence essential. However, the agencies conducting them should have a mandate of screening quality and not just another ordinary testing for formality-sake.

What are your views on the accreditation systems followed in India?

The accreditation system evaluates three interrelated components: structure, process and outcome. Accreditation as a tool to improve Quality Control (QC) touches multiple aspects. Accreditation has been recognized as one of the most successful

interventions to improve QC globally and it offers both tangible and non-tangible benefits. The concept of accreditation, and ensuing recognition of having achieved a level, can motivate a facility to do better, validate a University's QC process in place. Standards can enhance the training and capacity building of staff, thereby increasing the motivation of staff. Accreditation can also encourage the intrinsic motivation for facilities and personnel towards doing better. In summary, the accreditation philosophy is good and welcome move.

In India, accreditation process and inspections although have been normalised the manner they are conducted depends more on the visiting team members integrity and mind-set. There is a lot of variability in this area since a big portion, even now has been subjective impressions. Lot depends on the personnel (expert member); they largely go by rule-book than the spirit in many issues. Accreditation visits have become more a fault-finding missions rather intents. So, many institutions try to cover-up and comply for compliance sake rather than well-laid out meaning and spirit with which the rules are framed. The experts also tend to become vulnerable to the mechanizations of institutes. So the overall experience of an accreditation process in an institute stands on uncertainties – who are experts? What are their expectations? How they make-up their minds in writing reports etc., which is detrimental. In many organisations it could be scary, humiliating and unwanted since full justice may not be dispensed. There is scope for corruption, malpractice that go against the philosophy of accreditation.

However, despite all the uncertainties, accreditation systems and processes are welcome since the accreditation bodies also constantly reform, modify and make the process transparent and better year on year.

How do they stand when compared internationally?

Firstly, the international accreditations are prohibitively costly. Secondly they are more based on advising, mentoring and then take up accreditation after thoroughly preparing the institutes and therefore is a long-drawn procedure. But, they are robust, unbiased and do lot of good to achieve set goals of standards. International accreditation happens particularly in phases that can provide the framework, the know-how and the motivation. They ensure processes are in place, working to the

desired level and then move forward unlike Indian accreditation system that is done by visiting and ranking and not involving in the real sense of meeting accrediting philosophy.

It should also kept in mind, the number of institutes registering for accreditation in India are phenomenally more. The number of inspectors, experts is not just enough

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to complete the process of accreditation and therefore full-justice in terms of quality check may not be possible by any

Indian accrediting agency. By and large, Indian accreditation system can do better and gear up to enhance the quality of education and certify institutes.

The important issue of availability, quality and remunerations for teachers appears to be a serious issue in India. What is the magnitude of this difficulty? How would you explain the popularity held paradox that teachers in the private sector are remunerated less and worked more than their counterparts in the government sectors?

Teaching, except for the committed, has rarely been the first choice of profession. The best do not enter academia.

Running a quality educational system in higher educational sector has been a challenging task. Quality infrastructure, quality laboratory practice and several other inputs both curricular and extracurricular nature of expenses add on to costs with the fact that private institutes will have to survive on tuition fee and virtually no financial support from the government. And all these costs do increase year on year and so there is always an escalation of costs and has a bearing on revenue generation to run the organisation.

Yes, the private institutes try to save the costs in terms of lesser pay-packages compared to aided and government institutes. But the fact is it is variable; that all private organisations give less salary to faculty members is not true.

Payment of salaries commensurate with experience and capabilities, particularly in higher education sector will have to be comparable to respective position in

government sector. Sometimes, in deserving cases for efficient teachers, salaries could be more in private than in public sector. Institutes of quality will have to hire quality teachers and shall have to pay on par [with government scales] or more to them to retain them and run the organisation. A good balance has to be prudently exercised to meet success as a quality higher educational university.

The issue of low quality or research in India. Do you think the private education sector can play an effective role in overcoming this glaring lacuna?

Yes, research quality in India is wanting and is not to the level of foreign universities. This is based on the facts that allocation of funds for research happens to be very limited both in public and private sector of higher education in India. Secondly, in our country which is transiting from developing to developed status, the priority has been more on employment than on promotion of research and consequently the quality and quantity of research has been. But, we should realise that in terms of talent, India is never backward. All Indians who seek admissions to premier and reputed and famous universities abroad have fared well and are well-received and respected. India has the requisite talent. In fact many academicians abroad appreciate the mathematics knowledge of our young graduates. Their hard-working nature, sincerity and integrity are very well appreciated.

We have to create a conducive environment for research in India; all the institutes which have become universities from affiliating and autonomous status will have to prioritise research and promote it in letter and spirit. The trend of the government also will have to embrace this paradigm shift from conventional teaching to research oriented education. I am sure, it is happening in an aggressive mode in private organisations and so there is a big hope that we could be better in research sector too. Government will have to treat private higher educational sector on par with public and governmental sectors with respect to fund allocation to research and this will give a big push to quality research in our country.

Related Link: Resources: [Draft Bill: Government Plans to Dissolve UGC, Create Higher Education Commission of India](#) **Source:** [Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India](#)

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In a journalistic career of nearly 40 years with The Hindu in Karnataka, he has extensively reported on and analysed various facets of life in the State. He holds a Master's degree from the Bangalore University. The Government of Karnataka, in recognition of his services, presented him the Rajyotsava Award - the highest honour in the State - in 2010.)