

Speech by The President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee at the conference on "The Future of Indian Universities : Comparative Perspectives on Higher Education Reforms for a Knowledge Society" at O.P. Jindal Global University

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It is indeed a privilege for me to be present on the inauguration of the conference on "The Future of Indian Universities: Comparative Perspectives on Higher Education Reforms for a Knowledge Society" being hosted by O.P. Jindal Global University. I am thankful to O.P. Jindal Global University for organising this conference. This Conference, I believe, could not have been organised at a more appropriate time.

The need to make critical reforms in our educational system is more compelling now, in many ways, than at any time before. There is an urgent need to raise the quality of teaching, faculty and research in our universities.

There could be no second opinion on the critical role that education plays in the development of a nation. It is the most powerful tool that can spawn societal changes and transform the economic fortunes of a country. In the words of Benjamin Franklin, "an investment in knowledge pays the best interest". I compliment O.P. Jindal Global University for choosing a subject of such topical relevance and importance for the country for this conference that is being held today. I take this opportunity also of paying homage to Late Shri O.P. Jindal, a leading industrialist of this country in whose fond memory this university is established.

There are several important reasons why we need to focus our attention on the educational sector. I hardly need to emphasize that we have a young population and the demographic profile of our country can be a boon. It would be a boon if we are able to harness their potential. But our failure to do so and channelize their productive energies may visit us with terrible negative consequences.

These challenges can be daunting. By the year 2020, the average age of an India will be 29 years, which will be much lower than average age of 40 years in the US, 46 years in Japan and 47 years in Europe. Over two-third Indians will be of working age by 2025.

These statistics make it imperative for us to focus on the educational needs of our young population. We must recognize that the demographic dividend can only be reaped if the young population is provided higher education and training in vocational skills.

At the end of the Eleventh Five Year Plan period, India had 659 degree awarding institutions and 33,023 colleges. These numbers are indeed impressive but many more would have to be established. They are required to meet the growing demands for higher education, especially in the rural areas in the country.

There are several areas in the country far removed from any college or university. This has led to the low rate of enrolment in higher education. Only around 7 per cent of those aged between 18-24 years join higher education in India, while it is 21 per cent in Germany and 34 per cent in the US.

Increased access would not only help expand the base of the educational pyramid, but also promote inclusiveness. It can also be promoted by making education affordable to the marginalized sections of the society. Student aid programmes like scholarships, education loans and self-help schemes should therefore be liberalized for deserving students.

We lack universities that can provide quality education that meet global benchmarks. It is a matter of concern that there is not a single Indian university in the top 200 universities in the world as per an international survey of universities. This position is not at all acceptable. This calls for serious introspection. With educational standards that fall short of international benchmarks, India would be grievously handicapped in this competitive world.

The National Knowledge Commission in its Report in 2006 described the falling standards of higher education in the country as a 'quiet crisis that runs deep'. We cannot wait any longer before we take remedial action. We do not have the luxury of time.

We must promote a culture of excellence in our educational system. I can suggest a concrete step in this direction which would be to identify one department in every university and transform into a Centre of Excellence. To achieve this, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the University Grants Commission and the Universities would have to work together in close collaboration.

Amongst the academic challenges that we face, is the large number of vacancies in the Universities. In Central Universities alone, the vacancy of teachers is around an unacceptable level of 38 per cent. This has to change. We cannot expect to impart quality education without qualified teachers who are most equipped to provide guidance to students and encourage research.

There are several steps that we may need to take to achieve qualitative improvement in our educational system, to make it as good as the best in the world. For this, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the University Grants Commission and Universities and all stakeholders should work out a common approach. The focus should be on quality, affordability and accessibility, the three cornerstones of higher education.

The private sector should be encouraged to play a larger role in our educational system. Some of the top universities of the world have been built on the initiative of the private sector. In India, the private sector has left its mark in several key sectors like health, transport and financial services. I see no reason why the Indian private sector cannot replicate its efforts in the higher education sector as well. But, care should be taken to ensure that there is no dilution in educational standards. Here again I take this opportunity of congratulating the O.P. Jindal Global University to take the lead.

Affiliated colleges enroll about 87 per cent of all students and are at the core of our higher education system. The affiliating universities should, however, exercise due diligence to ensure that adequate curricula and evaluation systems are adopted by such colleges.

We should also be able to harness the power of technology to promote education. Classroom teaching in one university could be transmitted for the benefit of a wider student population in other universities using modern technology. For instance, lectures of eminent professors could be transmitted to educational institutions situated away from the main towns and cities using the facilities offered by the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology.

National Knowledge Network, which aims at the connection of knowledge generating institutions through high speed broad band network has made substantial progress. We have been able to link 955 out of the 1,500 institutions to this Network. The balance one-third institutions should be connected on priority basis to bring its benefits to remote areas.

Our universities would also benefit immensely by fully utilizing the services of ‘inspired teachers’. About 10 to 20 such teachers who can spark the student minds to seek knowledge beyond the text book could be identified. When such teachers interact with their peers and with students, it will result in the qualitative improvement in the capacity to impart and absorb knowledge.

The progress of nations will be determined in large measure by their capacity to innovate. India’s performance indicators in this segment are discouraging in comparison to her major competitors. Though Indians represent about 17 per cent of the global population, only 2 per cent of the patent applications in the world in 2011 were filed in India. In the same year, the number of patent applications filed in India was around 42,000. In comparison, 5 lakh plus patent applications were each filed in China and the US.

Universities and Research Centres should become fertile grounds for innovation. Setting up industry incubation parks, enhancing the coverage of research students by fellowships, promoting inter-disciplinary research through inter-university and intra-university collaboration, and empowering our centres of excellence would be important steps in this direction.

We should erect innovative structures to encourage and retain intellectual resources in our academic and research centres. Indian scholars working overseas in important research and teaching positions should also be encouraged to take up short-term assignments in Indian Universities. This would facilitate dissemination of knowledge and cross-fertilization of ideas.

In our country, there are many innovations that take place at the grass-root levels. But for the nation to derive benefit from them, we need to make them commercially marketable. Our universities should be equipped to encourage grass-root innovators and play the role of a mentor.

With a view to evolving a time-bound action plan and make innovative changes in the higher education sector, a conference of the Vice Chancellors of the Central Universities was organized in the Rashtrapati Bhavan in February of this year. The Conference identified certain immediate,

short-term and medium-term measures that would need to be taken to reform the education system. The changes are being worked upon by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. I hope to see substantial progress in the implementation of the measures by the time we hold the next conference in February 2014.

I had stated in my Address to the Nation on the eve of the last Republic Day that it is high time for us, for the nation as a whole, to reset its moral compass. Our universities and other institutes of higher learning should aid in this process. A beginning may be made by introducing value education that would supplement the academic curricula, thereby preparing students to face the test of career and life with equanimity.

I once again congratulate the O.P. Jindal Global University for taking the initiative and providing a platform to facilitate a greater understanding of the challenges of the higher education sector by all stakeholders. I am confident that this Conference would throw up new ideas and thoughts.

I wish the organizers every success in the conduct of this Conference.