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Universal Higher Education in India: A Myth or Reality

Dr. P. Anil Kumar

Academic Officer, Commissionerate of Collegiate Education,

Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, INDIA

Abstract: *India has set targets to achieve universal primary education and with Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) it has been fulfilled. Now with Rashtriya Sarva Siksha Abhiyan(RUSA) its target is to achieve universal higher education. There are something like 700 universities in India, and 35,000 colleges, all devoted to delivering higher education. The total student enrolment of about 23 million translates into a present gross enrolment ratio (GER) of about 19.4%, and the major challenge is to increase this number to around 30% in the next decades. This increase in the GER, given the increase in population, corresponds to around 100 million students, and it is clear that the traditional university system is simply incapable of absorbing this increase. This leads to the question of whether a standard university education is essential, or can we perhaps devise different and more effective models of instruction that can help achieve the desired outcomes? One such direction is "skill development" that has been touted as the need of the day, to see that India can provide the world with a well-trained workforce. The National Vocational Education Qualification Framework (NVEQF) has been set up to ensure this, but the challenges are formidable. The required investment in the infrastructure to provide technical instruction that can lead to such a skilled workforce is largely absent. India is now established National Skill Development Corporation(NSDC). Ironically bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh state has resulted in decline in GER for both Telangana and New Andhra.In combined state AP has GER of 28 where as the newly formed state of AP with 13 districts has only GER 26.The statics for new AP is worked out based on population census, National sample survey, All India Survey on Higher Education, Economic Survey 2015, APSCHE and reports of CII on Higher Education.*

Keywords: *RUSA, GER, Universal Higher Education, NVEQF, NSDC, NMEICT, NPTEL*

I. New Missions

An important step has been the setting up of the National Mission on Education through Information Communication Technology (NMEICT) and the ambitious National Knowledge Network (NKN), that aims to connect as many of the educational establishments in India as possible. Already the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) have made a significant advance in making instruction in a variety of technical subjects widely available through the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL). The NKN is itself used in real time for the sharing of lectures among institutions that have a similar structure, like the Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research that have common courses. The UGC has the e-*Pathashala* programme whereby lectures in a wide range of subjects are being prepared for online transmission. While these are welcome developments, it should be added that there has been little research into how this form of distance instruction could be made effective so as to have the outcomes that are desired. For the most part these courses tend to be a video version of the standard classroom lectures, but as the Khan Academy has shown, even this can be very effective. Commissionerate of Collegiate Education, Andhra Pradesh has got more than 3000 GB e-Content and digitized through MANA TV is now planning to develop Mobile App collaborating with C-DAC, Hyderabad.

II. Online Landscape

The ongoing developments in the online landscape, in particular the massive open online courses (MOOCs) hold some answers for us and suggest other directions that need to be pursued. The internet is a great equaliser, and the easy availability of both information and instruction has been making inroads in the Indian educational system. When the Massachusetts Institute of Technology took the radical decision to put all their course curricula, syllabi and other handout material online in an open access mode, it made educationists everywhere sit up. As the practice has spread, this has caused a minor revolution in academic circles even in India, more among students than teachers it should be admitted, as students have an independent access to and a view of what is being taught at the best universities elsewhere. Another step was to put the entire course online, and Stanford University was one of the first to aggregate efforts in this regard. Although first mainly to serve the needs of their own students, through entities such as Coursera, Udacity or EdX, this has become much more

than that, with a massive client base. With or without the blessings of accreditation, these developments have spurred changes in some institutions like the Indian Institutes of Information Technology, and more will surely follow.

Are MOOCs (or their near relatives, SPOCs or small, private online courses) a viable model for future Indian education? Across the board, pedagogues tend to be dismissive of technology as a game-changer in education, but this may well be a limited view that somehow privileges the individual teacher. The same prejudices that colour opinions of distance education as being inferior to classroom instruction get magnified and embroiled in discussions of accreditation, validation and certification. As of now, most of the courses are free for view, but there is already a commercial model of MOOCs. This makes it possible for someone in India (or anywhere for that matter) to earn a degree from a university that she or he has never actually visited, but with which they may have interacted daily, and possibly in a more meaningful way than they do with their institutions at the present time. But free or not, the world of learning opens up to all with this model that fundamentally democratises education, and there is a great opportunity for us here. By their very format, such modes of instruction can be uniquely adapted for our social and linguistic diversity, translated into as many languages as needed, and viewed as often as necessary to ensure that the learning has been as effective as possible.

Table Showing District wise GER

New Andhra Pradesh District GER in Higher Education and CPI

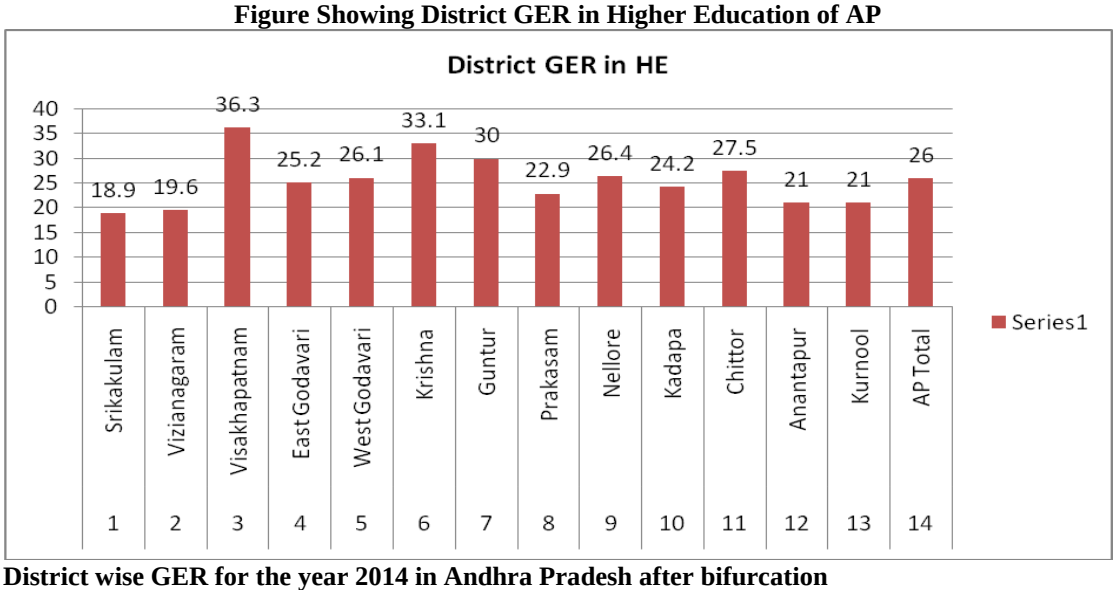
	Source	**NSS**	**2011 Census**	**AISHE & APSCHE**	**GER = 5/4*100**			
S.No	**DISTRICT**	**TOTAL POPULATION**	**18-23 AGE GROUP**	**Students Enrolled in HE**	**District GER**	**% of SC**	**% of STs**	**CPI**
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**9**	**11**
1	Srikaulam	2703114	320319	59134	18.9	9.46	6.15	38
2	Vizianagarm	2344474	277820	54462	19.6	10.57	10.05	38
3	Visakhapatnam	4290589	508434	184767	36.3	7.68	14.42	37
4	East Godavari	5154296	610784	154017	25.2	18.34	4.14	29
5	West Godavari	3936966	466530	122202	26.1	20.62	2.77	36
6	Krishna	4517398	535311	177102	33.1	19.28	2.93	36.4
7	Guntur	4887813	579205	175832	30.4	19.59	5.06	34.6
8	Prakasam	3397448	402597	92527	22.9	23.19	4.45	27.2
9	Nellore	2963557	351181	93056	26.4	22.49	9.65	31.5
10	Kadapa	2882469	377915	91650	24.2	16.16	2.63	28
11	Chittoor	4174064	494626	136183	27.5	18.82	3.81	24.4
12	Anantapur	4081148	483616	102827	21	14.29	3.78	22
13	Kurnool	4053463	480335	101204	21	18.21	2.04	19.3
14	**Total AP**	**49386799**	**5888673**	**1544963**	**26**	**16.82**	**5.52**	**30**

GER = Gross Enrolment Ratio

CPI = College Population Index

Total colleges for 1 Lac population

Figure Showing District GER in Higher Education of AP



District wise GER for the year 2014 in Andhra Pradesh after bifurcation

III. Need to Blend Modes

It would be facile to suggest that this could address all the needs of higher education in India. Different subjects have their own requirements and their own paradigms; different skills need to be assessed with separate yardsticks. Nevertheless, some attempt needs to be made to blend such modes of instruction with the more traditional methods if we are to be able to even begin to cope with the numbers being contemplated. The role of technology also has to be seen in context – there are still places in the country where internet access is slow and sporadic. And more importantly, we need to keep in mind the limited access that most of our citizens have to one of the most essential of human rights, the right to education. And therefore it is imperative that there be sufficient and intensive research in the pedagogy that the new technologies demand, keeping in mind the particulars of who is being educated, and for what.

Most of the students that India aims to educate in the coming decades will be first-generation learners. Apart from their need for instruction in a familiar language, there needs to be a nuanced mode of instruction that recognises our social and geographical realities. This is a daunting and admittedly onerous task that is difficult enough within the confines of a classroom. The pedagogic methodologies that are in place are largely developed for the small classroom with direct interaction between the teacher and the taught. When going to alternate teaching strategies, such issues are even more difficult to address effectively. For instance, the lack of resources in the vernacular poses a serious impediment to wider access, and although some of the most popular online resources are now available in several Indian languages, the bulk of information on the web tends to be in English. There is an urgent need for directed research to alleviate issues like these: it may even be necessary to reinvent some of the pedagogic process

IV. Conclusion

The state of funding of our public university system is suboptimal, and the variation in budget from one Plan to the other does appear whimsical. It is also unfortunate that higher education has hitherto been a low priority sector for both public and private funding. At the present time, it is not enough to merely require, as the Twelfth Plan does, that each central university should have a department of education so as to train more teachers: this does not address the basic issues. We need, in a sense, to create the kind of teaching methodology that is essential for these times. There also needs to be a significant investment in education technology, to learn what can be done, and to determine the most effective ways of achieving these goals. Any solutions that we choose to follow will need money and imagination, and will also demand careful planning. It is in this context that our entire university system needs to pay more attention to the evolving global trends in order to give Indian the higher education system it requires in the digital age to be a digital India.

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