

CHANGING GLOBAL DEMOGRAPHICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ITS IMPLICATIONS

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The world today is undergoing profound economic, social, and political transformations based on the 'Knowledge Economy', that depends upon the creation and application of new knowledge. Such an economy demands highly educated people with innovative ideas and skills of application. To produce such personnel is the responsibility of higher education system of a country. Subsequently, a worldwide boom in the demand of higher education is observed, which has resulted in massification of higher education. This has significantly changed the demographics of the student Population worldwide. Such a demographic change in the student population has far and wide impact not only on the structure and types of Universities, patterns of funding higher education and curricula but international relations as well. The present paper attempts to discuss the changing demographic patterns of the global student population, its implications and suggest future directions to adapt to this transformation.

KEYWORDS: Global Demographics, Knowledge Economy, International Standards and Relations

INTRODUCTION

The world today is going through rapid and profound economic, social, and political transformations based on the emerging 'Knowledge Economy.' The 'Knowledge Economy' is a system of creating wealth that depends upon the creation and application of new knowledge. It goes without saying that new knowledge can only be created by educated people with innovative ideas and

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skills. Producing such manpower with advanced and innovative knowledge and efficient skills depends upon the education system, especially the system of higher education in any country. The UNESCO Report, 2009, states 'An academic revolution has taken place in higher education in the past half century marked by transformations unprecedented in scope and diversity.' The transformation mentioned here is observed in all the aspects of Higher Education, i.e. aims/goals of higher education, composition of the student population, structures and types of universities, patterns of funding higher education and so on. There is worldwide boom in the demand of higher education. The major reasons for this boom is strong growth in the primary and secondary education which is being made compulsory by law and even a fundamental right in several countries as well as interventions made by several NGO's world-wide in spreading awareness about free and compulsory education for all children and their implementation of literacy campaigns. It has become obvious that the strength, prosperity, and welfare of a nation in a global knowledge economy depend on highly educated citizens prepared by a strong system of higher education. In this context, it becomes significant to understand in what ways this transformation has resulted in changing the demographics of the student population globally and what are its implications on the other aspects of higher education as well as understanding the probable directions to move ahead.

CHANGE IN THE COMPOSITION OF STUDENT POPULATION

Enormous Increase in the Number of Students

Higher education is no longer a privilege of the few belonging to the elite groups. It has percolated downward and is now accessible to all the social classes. Knowledge economy has made the 'once disadvantaged and marginalized' social groups aware of the importance of higher education as a key to upward mobility in the social hierarchy. On account of the increased awareness about the Human rights, many countries, including India have given additional privileges to such disadvantaged groups for education and employment so that they can be mainstreamed and come up to the level of the advantaged groups. This has given a strong impetus to people of these groups to pursue higher education, leading to 'massification' of higher education.

Increased Number of Female Students

With gender equality being promoted as an important value worldwide, women have acquired equal constitutional rights. If not all over, at least in developed and developing countries, they are utilizing these rights by pursuing higher education as a key to employment and thereby economic

independence. There is another important reason why women, more than men pursue higher education. From the perspectives of personal safety and security, women prefer white collar jobs or jobs in organized sector. These jobs usually require formal university degrees. This has led women in large numbers to pursue higher education, in comparison to men, who do not have much fear of personal safety or sexual harassment and so may also opt for blue-collar jobs in unorganized sectors of employment. Moreover, a growing realization has come that an educated womenfolk leads to educated families. This is because women's contribution is still higher than men in the upbringing of children therefore the societies are also emphasizing women's education.

Increased Number of Adult Learners

Education is no more considered a pursuit during the early age of 20s or 30s. The notion of Life-long learning has become widespread; therefore presently we can find a large number of adult learners in institutions of higher learning. Many of them take breaks from their work to pursue higher education with a view to moving upwards in the professional hierarchy. In many cases, at an advanced age people realize that the education they had received some years ago has become obsolete so they experience a need to update their professional knowledge and skills and after a gap of few years re-enter in higher education. There are also those middle aged or old men and women who were deprived of higher education in their early lives due to various reasons. They also enrol for university degrees and make up for their loss. In Indian context, women, after the first graduation or post-graduation degree leave education for getting married and have children. After some years, when they are relatively free from child-rearing responsibilities, they resume their studies. Thus, we find an increasing number of adult learners in universities and institutions of higher learning.

Learners with Special Aims for Education

Gone are the days when higher education led to fixed career goals. Also, no longer a university degree is looked upon from social prestige point of view. In Indian context, earlier, for many women, a university degree was supposed to enhance their marriage prospects but it is no longer the same as most of the women, at least in the urban areas enter into universities with clear ideas about how their education will be helping them to find employment. But currently, many students pursue education for their specific needs. Adult professionals, decide to acquire additional qualifications, if they realize constraints in their professional functioning with the type of education they had received years ago. Women, decide to pursue higher studies, when they are relatively free from their family responsibilities, or at times to enable themselves to guide

their children in studies. There are also adults who wish to pursue study of specific disciplines because they are contemplating on embarking upon new careers. In short in the era of knowledge economy, people pursue education for various purposes, professional and personal because knowledge empowers them to generate income and move upward in the professional and social ladder.

Mobile and Migrant Student Population

In the 21st century, the knowledge economy has generated a great demand for knowledge consumption. To fulfil such an increased need, a large number of universities have emerged all over the world. Aspirants for higher education are very intelligent in choice of their courses and the institutions wherein they want to study. They are also clear about the type of careers they wish to enter into so they don't want to commit mistakes. Their choices are not only confined to nearby institutions of higher learning or within the country but outside their own countries of origin, especially in developing countries. In India a good number of young men and women, enrol in the institutions of higher learning in developed countries such as USA, UK, and Australia. The degrees from these countries also help them to have employment opportunities globally and thereby also get residency rights of the countries of their choice. Thus, there are an increasing number of mobile students who acquire education not from one nation other than their own but in some cases, more than one country. On the whole one may say that the current major global trend in higher education is massification. The student population is heterogeneous, diverse in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and religion and with multiple educational and career goals. Such a massification and diversity apart from putting a lot of financial pressure on the global higher education, has far and wide implications.

Privatization of Education

Due to massification in higher education in many countries, demands have exceeded the supplies. Therefore there is a growing demand for institutions of higher Education, within and outside countries. Public funds are no longer sufficient to bear the expanses of such a large number of universities and institutions of higher Education hence there has been a steady rise in the number of private higher institutions, stepping in to provide higher education. As a result, higher education has become a profitable market place for the private enterprises, nationally and globally. The student is more of a customer or a consumer now. The privatization and commercialization of higher education has led to a growing competition among the universities at national and international level to attract more and more number of students. With a view to helping students make right choices, an international system of

assessment has emerged, which gives rankings to universities of the world. How authentic this ranking system is surely an issue of debate. Nevertheless, one can see that such a competition has affected the quality of higher education both positively as well as adversely. As a measure of quality control and enhancement, a national and international system of accreditation and assessment has emerged.

Global Curricula for Global Needs

So far, curriculum of school education has remained more local specific in nature except in objective branches like Science and Mathematics. This is no longer sufficient because many students and their parents aspire to pursue higher education in countries other than countries of their origin, especially in developing countries like India. Even at higher education level, many students aspire to pursue post graduation studies in developed countries such as US, UK or Australia. As a result, a strong need for preparing students at undergraduate level for higher studies in developed countries is felt. This sometimes creates conflict and controversies. The recent examples of controversy over Sanskrit vs German language in Kendriya Vidyalayas or four years vs. three years graduate courses in Delhi Universities are examples of this. Some students also aspire for employment in foreign countries. Keeping in mind these global needs, higher education sector have started designing courses in such a way that more and more young men and women are absorbed in global employment market. Balancing between national and global needs is a challenging task.

Need for Diversification

In this era of globalization, no country can afford to remain complacent with a uniform system of higher education. Keeping in mind the global needs of the global market, higher education has moved towards greater diversification in terms patterns and contents of the courses. New technologies, evolving at an exponential pace, obliterating both historical constraints such as distance and political boundaries have introduced new paradigms for learning such as open educational resources, virtual organizations, and peer-to-peer learning networks that compete with the traditional approaches to learning. New academic disciplines are emerging keeping in mind the global employment market. The institutions of higher Learning are adapting to such new demands. However, such demands keep fluctuating leading the institutions also to adapt to such fluctuations. These fluctuations are resulting in closing down of some departments or even entire institutions.

Need for Increased Safety and Security of Students

Massification of higher education has also resulted in the issue of safety and security of students on the national and international campuses. The horrific instances of harassment of the students of North-East regions of India, on Delhi University campus are recent examples. Students of developing countries have been robbed of fortunes by fraud universities of developed countries. Many a times students studying in countries other than countries of their origin, face strong of opposition on campuses as the students of the host countries feel threatened that their own opportunities are being grabbed by the students of other countries. There are several examples of Indian students being harassed or even killed in Australian Universities. In developed countries such as USA, UK and Australia, there seems to be kind of intolerance and hatred towards students who come from developing countries with different ethnic backgrounds (different dress code, language, behaviour patterns, religious/cultural beliefs). They are ridiculed or even harassed and forced to give up their dress codes, religious/cultural beliefs. Time and again we read about the furore in France over girls of Islamic countries wearing 'Burquas.'

International Relations

As globalization has resulted in a high mobility of student population all over the world, it is no longer an issue for the institutions of higher education but a matter of political relations between the host and guest countries. The framing and implementing of immigration Laws, student Visas have become matters of great concern. The governments of both the countries have to be vigilant about it. There is a need to formulate international policies regarding this. The students with outbound mobility need to be taught how to behave in guest countries so as not to create problems for them and not to tarnish the image of their own country. On the other hand, the students and the people of the host countries have to be taught to be more accommodative with the students coming from foreign countries.

Emphasis on Teaching of English and Other Foreign Languages

- English, being an international language, its key role in education and employment at global level cannot be underestimated. Therefore the study of English is being emphasized all over the world. The parochialism or false national pride leading to de-emphasize English may put the students at disadvantage. Besides English, knowledge of other foreign languages, such as German, Spanish, French and now even Mandarin are gaining importance at global level. Knowing one or more of these languages is going to definitely benefit the young men and women in future

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In Indian context, we can think of the following measures that can lead us in the right direction from futuristic point of view:

- Keeping in mind the massification of higher education, more number of universities should be set up in order to fulfil the growing demand of higher education.
- More and more private enterprise should be encouraged to finance the higher education. However, there should be vigilance that higher education must not become fully commercialized. Even if students are treated as consumers, their consumer rights must be protected. They must get worth of what high prices they are paying. There is a possibility that the teachers and other staff working in such privately funded institutions of higher education may get exploited. Quality has become an issue of great concern because of commercialization of higher education.
- There needs to be more diversification in the courses offered in the institutions of higher education. These institutions should not be similar in structure in order to respond to the need for diversifications. There is scope for special universities for women, tribal and other ethnic groups, even in developed countries.
- The current system of ranking the institutions of higher education internationally seems to be unfair. When the institutions of higher education function in different geo-political environments and serve the needs of diverse groups of people, how can there be uniform, monolithic criteria for evaluating them? Moreover, such criteria should be evolved collectively wherein concerned persons of several countries participate.
- Since education has become a globally marketable product, the curricula of schools as well as tertiary institutions must be geared to global content and methodology.
- Higher education now should be treated as a matter of international relations. The host and guest countries providing and seeking education should carefully frame laws, which are mutually beneficial.
- In Indian context, young men and women, more especially their parents are becoming over ambitious about studying and subsequently settling in developed countries such as USA, UK, and Australia and so on. They must be made aware of the reality for the immigrants in those countries. They should be oriented adequately about how to adjust to the new environments in foreign countries.

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