Transformation of Higher Education in South Asia: A Journey of 70 Years

The transformation of education from traditional religious institutions into organised and structured education systems began in the mid-19th Century in South Asia (Swarup 2000). According to Wikipedia, Western influences during the colonial period led to uniformity and similarities in education systems in this region. From the mid-20th Century, the situation of higher education institutions in South Asia remained bleak as there was only one university in western India (Pakistan) and one in eastern India (Bangladesh). The situation in the other provinces of India was better, where a reasonable number of universities existed. The situation in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives was quite similar to Bangladesh and Pakistan.

This region has the world’s major demographic time bomb with the largest youth (more than 600 million under 18) (Badat 2013). The pace of social change has created a critical challenge in order to transform this ‘youth bulge’ into trained human capital for economic growth and poverty reduction (Mahmood 2013). The dream of becoming a great nation can materialise only when there is a well-established educational framework and a knowledge-based economy. South Asia is struggling for quality education in order to compete in the developed world. The challenges of transforming its education systems continues to endure because of various factors such as weak economies, high population growth rate, political instability and religious extremism (Badat 2016). Regional governments are investing billions of dollars to promote knowledge-based economies, quality research and providing doctoral scholarships, but the desired results are not yet visible.

A significant change in the status of higher education in South Asia, including Pakistan, has been observed with the advent of the 21st Century. The University Grants Commission (UGC) in Pakistan has been transformed into the Higher Education Commission (HEC) with improved infrastructure and allocation of funds for quality education and innovation. In spite of this fiscal injection, there seems to be a missing link between the mushroom growth of higher education institutions (HEIs) and an intellectual and result-oriented outcome across this country.

The central idea of this panel revolves around the principle of transformation, i.e. the fusion of scientific and contemporary academic approaches into thought and practice. The panel will address whether higher education systems in South Asia are capable of acting as catalysts for change and will the people of this region see an era of prosperity. Through these questions, the panel will take an overview of the last 70 years and highlight the role of education in transformation of societies, livelihoods and sustainable development.

References


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