



Challenges And Prospects Of Higher Education In Achieving Quality Education And Lifelong Learning In Northeast India: A Comprehensive Analysis

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Abstract

Education forms an important marker of human development. It is associated with the enrollment at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Since independence, Government of India has implemented number of programmes at all levels of education including Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, Mid-Day Meal, National Literacy Mission, Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Right to Education) Act 2010 etc., for achievement of educational goals. Along with these, higher education has also gained remarkable attention. Reform initiative such as National Education Policy (NEP) is the milestone in the higher education. The higher education system of India plays a pivotal role in the nation's development. Higher education institutions need to integrate lifelong learning skills into their education to help students gain competencies to cope with real life problems and work in business world. However, in spite of many initiatives taken by the Government, higher education is not able to make the students employable in India. There has always been a dilemma of quality versus quantity resulting into either Gross Enrolled Ratio (GER) or Quality Education (QE). Indian economy is constantly growing up. It is a challenge for higher education Institutes to mould its human resources according to the requirements of the nation. The present paper discusses the importance of higher education for economic development, resource utilization and cultural preservation. The paper also aims to study current status and importance of higher education in North East India, understand the role or place of life skills in lifelong learning and achieving quality education and to study the problems and challenges in front of higher education in Northeast India.

Key Words: Higher Education, Northeast India, Quality education, Life Skills, Challenges.

Introduction

Higher education plays an extremely important role in promoting human as well as societal well-being and in developing India as envisioned in its Constitution- a democratic, just, socially conscious, cultured and humane nation upholding liberty, equality, fraternity and justice for all. Higher education significantly contributes towards sustainable livelihoods and economic development of the nation. A quality higher education must enable personal accomplishment and enlightenment, constructive public engagement and productive contribution to the society. It must prepare students for more meaningful and satisfying lives and work roles and enable economic independence (National Education Policy, 2020). The global education development agenda reflected in the Goal 4 of 2030 of the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by India in 2015 – seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030 (SDGs). Higher education is defined as the education, which is obtained after completing 12 years of schooling or equivalent and is of the duration of at least nine months (full time) or after completing 10 years of schooling and is of the duration of at least 3 years. The education may be of the nature of general, vocational, professional or technical education (AISHE).

Higher education in India has acquired special significance since independence. In the broader context of India's higher education system North Eastern region has also undergone tremendous changes. Some of the institutions are even venturing towards introduction of professional and skill based programmes in their curricula and several institutions are upgrading their technological environment. Thus, the present paper attempts to study the current status and importance of higher education and highlight the key issues and challenges faced in pursuing higher education in North East India.

Review of Literature

A study by Konwar and Chakraborty, (2013) highlighted that the lack of attention in systematic educational planning has demeaned the value in quality higher education. The author states that Paucity of financial allocation and poor administration in higher educational institutions in North East region drives the colleges and universities into disappointing condition.

Borkakoty, (2020) in his study reveals that Teacher education and higher educational institutions play a vital role in the qualitative educational advancement of the North East region. The number of institutions imparting general education has been increasing rapidly but less emphasis is given on technical and scientific institutions. Therefore, due to lack of such institution, the general degree holder educated unemployment has been rising day by day.

A paper by Taba, (2023) explores that despite many opportunities, Higher education in North East region faces many challenges such as linguistic diversity, a shortage of vocational courses, inadequate research infrastructure and privatization concerns.

Objectives of the Study

The present paper is designed to fulfill the following objectives:

- i. To study the current status and importance of higher education for economic development, resource utilization and cultural preservation.
- ii. To understand the role or place of life skills in lifelong learning and achieving quality education.
- iii. To study the problems and challenges faced in pursuing higher education in Northeast India.

Methodology

The present paper is primarily based on secondary data collected from various articles of research journals, books, prominent websites relevant to higher education, published reports from AISHE, UGC. The study employed Descriptive Analytic method to provide a comprehensive overview analysis of the subject matter by using existing data and literature.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Current Status of Higher Education in North-East India

In pursuit to understand the present status of higher education in North East India it is fundamental to delve into historical perspective and contemporary statistics. Higher education scenario in India has undergone a remarkable transformation since independence. Before independence of India there were only 16 colleges in North East India, most of which were located in Assam. The establishment of the first university in Guwahati in January 1948 bestowed a real boost to the expansion of higher education from pre-university to post-graduate and doctoral level in the whole region of North East India. Despite late start higher education in North East India had a very rapid growth in post independent era.

The number of universities registered with AISHE has increased to 1168 in 2021-22 from 903 universities registered in 2017-18. During the period from 2017-18 to 2021-22, 265 new universities have been registered on AISHE portal accounting for increase of 29.35 %. There are 53 Central Universities, 423 State Public Universities, 391 State Private Universities, 6 Institutions established under the State Legislature Act and 91 Deemed to be Universities, 153 Institutions of National Importance, 16 State Open Universities, 1 State Private Open Universities and 1 Central Open Universities listed under section 2(f) and 12B of the UGC Act, 1956. Among these 83 universities are located in North East India. Along with this the college scenario has also experienced exponential growth with a current number of 45, 473 colleges in 2021-22 from 39,050 colleges in 2017-18. During 2021-22, 1,677 new colleges have been registered. During the 5-year period, i.e. 2017-18 to 2021-22, 6423 (an increase of 16.45 %) have been recorded in all India level.

The state-wise number of universities and number of colleges in the North- East included under section 2(f) and 12B of the UGC Act, 1956 as on 31st March, 2023 is as under:

Table: Number of Universities and Colleges in North East Region by State

State	No. of Universities					No. of Colleges			
	Central	State Public	State Pvt.	Deemed	Total	2(f) 12B	and 2(f) only	Total	
Arunachal Pradesh	1	1	8	1	11	12	3	15	
Assam	2	18	8	1	29	311	26	337	
Manipur	3	3	5	-	11	66	5	71	
Meghalaya	1	-	9	-	10	30	12	42	
Mizoram	1	-	1	-	2	27	2	29	
Nagaland	1	-	4	-	5	36	14	50	
Sikkim	1	2	8	-	11	4	7	11	
Tripura	1	2	1	-	4	31	-	31	

Source: UGC Annual Report, 2022-2023

However, the most remarkable indicator of growth in the Indian higher education system is visible in the students' enrolment figure. The enrolment in higher educations in India has grown considerably over the past years. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) 2020-21 in Higher Education in India calculated for 18-23 years of age Group is 27.30%. GER for the male population is 26.7% and for females, it is 27.9% (UGC, 2022-2023). The estimated students enrolment has increased to 4,32,68,181 in 2021-22 from 4,13,80,713 in 2020-21 showing an increase of 4.56%. The overall growth in enrolment from 2017-18 to 2021-22 is 18.1%. The total Student Enrolment in Northeast States is 12.02 lakh in 2021-22 as compared to 9.36 lakh in 2014-15. The female enrolment (6.07 lakh) in Northeast states is found to be higher than the male enrolment (5.95 lakh) in 2021-22 (AISHE).

Importance of Higher Education in Northeast India

India, the land of "Unity in Diversity" reflects its astonishing tapestry of cultures, languages and traditions. Within this broad subcontinent the Northeast, located in the easternmost part of India extend a pivotal geographical and aesthetic entity. The Northeast region encompasses a unique blend of ethnicities and landscape. The region is endowed with rich biodiversity and natural resources. The region is rich in many local resources such as tea, timber, tourism, oil, coal and bio-resources. However, the region's development is impeded by certain inherent difficulties such as inadequate infrastructure, adverse climatic conditions and mountainous landslides. The region's peace and social harmony is often disturbed by border clashes and ethnic tensions. Higher education plays a vital role in the socio-economic development of the Northeast region addressing its challenges and harnessing opportunities leading to better employment opportunities, higher income, to preserve and promote cultural heritage, to promote peace and stability, and improved socio-economic status which is crucial for the region's development. Skilled human resources are required to exploit such resources which will offer immense potential for the economic progress of the region. It is dispensable to mention that quality higher education is pre-requisite for creation and development of skilled human resources, entrepreneurship and innovation; enhancing employability, income and social status; promoting regional languages, traditions and heritage; bridging the gap between education and industry requirements and finally for fostering scientific temperament, technology and problem-solving. Thus, higher education can contribute to the development of the region by producing skilled professionals, entrepreneurs and leaders.

Role of Life Skills in Lifelong Learning:

Life skills education differs in its objectives and contents from country to country and from one locality to another. Life skills is a term used to describe a set of basic skills acquired through learning and direct life experience that enable individuals and groups to effectively address the issues, problems, demands and challenges of everyday life. The term "life skills" has been defined by various organizations with special reference to the contexts in which it is applicable and their own programmatic focus and strategies. The World Health Organization (WTO) defines life skills as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (WHO, 1993). The International Bureau of Education (IBE) understand life skills in context of Delors four pillars of learning-learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together and defines life skills as "personal management and social skills which are necessary for adequate functioning on an independent basis". UNICEF has defined life skills as "a group of psychological competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner. Life skills may be directed toward personal actions or actions toward others, as well as toward actions to change the surrounding environment to make it conducive to health."

Life skills support the development of foundational skills such as literacy, numeracy, digital skills and can also be utilized in several areas such as gender equality in education, environmental education, and education for development, livelihood and income generation and for promotion of positive health among others. It empower young people to take positive action to participate in their communities, engage in continuous learning, protect and promote health, and improve social relationships. All educational institutions, governmental or non-governmental have to play their roles if life skills are to be effectively integrated and promoted in true perspective of lifelong learning. In order to introduce the Life Skills curriculum in non-technical undergraduate education UGC had developed a curriculum for Life Skills “Jeevan Kaushal” in 2018 which has been revised as per the recommendations of NEP 2020.

Challenges and Problems of Higher Education in North East India

Despite undeniable importance, higher education in North east India suffers from a series of challenges. The main challenges are:

- 1) **Inadequate Physical Infrastructure:** For imparting quality education physical infrastructural facilities, resources and technologies must be available in upgraded form. However, most of the higher educational institutions face the problems of inadequate buildings, libraries and equipment etc.
- 2) **Faculty Shortages:** Perhaps the higher educational institutions in North East India face the most serious problem of insufficient qualified and efficient faculty members. It is due to lack of efficient faculty member, higher education in North east India is not reaching its apogee even after having all the infrastructural amenities. Moreover, most of the faculties are on contractual basis with lump sum pay which sometimes creates negative feelings towards full dedication of the faculties towards their service.
- 3) **Funding Constraints:** Most of the higher educational institutions in North East India suffer from limited funding. As a consequence they are unable to bring improvement in technology and research based activities.
- 4) **Quality and Accreditation:** In order to solve problems faced by higher educational institutions in North East India, huge funds are required. To receive funds it is mandatory for higher educational institutions to be accredited by NAAC. However, most of the higher educational institutions in North East region have not been accredited by NAAC. Even though accredited, most of the institutions get woefully low grade due to low quality inputs, inadequate teacher-students ratio, poor communication etc. which in turn becomes a challenge in improvement of physical infrastructure and academic standard of the institutions.
- 5) **Lack of Job Guaranteed Courses:** Education is a medium to guarantee livelihood prospects in future. But where the whole world is running after professional courses, in North Eastern region higher educational institutions still offer traditional academic programmes neglecting the demand for professional courses. Although in recent years most of the institutions are offering professional courses but they failed to provide the infrastructure required for campus recruitment or somehow they have failed to fulfill the guarantee to provide jobs.
- 6) **Economic Crisis:** Because of Economic crises which have grown due to rising prices, increasing population shortage of food supply, corruption, etc. students opt for part time jobs to pay for their educational expenses. Nearly about seventy five per cent of total student communities face the financial problems. Because of this reason they have to divide their attention between job and education.
- 7) **Lack of Moral Values:** Rapid growth of Science and Technology has brought about a great and danger changes in our old moral values. Moreover, reduced emphasis on moral values in curriculum of higher education is a major cause of limited growth and self-awareness among the young generation. It has a serious impact on society by decreasing social cohesion and community trust as well as on institutions

by decreasing reputation and credibility of the institution which indirectly help in increasing insurgency and social unrest and lower the economic growth and development of the region.

- 8) **Political Interference:** Now-a-days political leaders also play a key role in governing bodies of the Colleges and Universities through which they form their own youth cell and encourage students' organizations on political basis. This Political interference in higher educational institutions also diverts most of the students' attention from their objectives.
- 9) **Problem of Language:** Language has been considered as a major vehicle for conveying thoughts and feelings. North Eastern states have a predominance of many languages. Some states even have over 300 dialects. However, in most of the higher educational institutions English language has been opted as the medium of instruction which sometimes is unacceptable in the multilingual milieu of globalized world. This makes it challenging for students to access educational resources in their native languages.
- 10) **Traditional Curriculum:** Another core problem in India's higher educational system is the out dated curriculum based on theoretical learning rather than practical applications. In North East India, the course structure often lack relevance to real world challenges. The knowledge imparted through curricula frequently fails to equip students with practical life skills necessary for their career.

Conclusion:

The role of higher education in the North East region is not only about academic excellence but also about preserving and celebrating the unique cultural heritage of the region. From the above study it is inferred that North East India has a unique set of opportunities and challenges within the realm of higher education. The challenges persist including the need for infrastructural development, relevance of curricula, preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity. The region was found to be lagging behind in quality education and lack constructive higher educational system. Despite number of colleges and universities in the region, the quality of education imparted is unable to meet the level required. As a result, some students are bound to migrate to other states to pursue higher education like research and even for graduation and post- graduation. Although the higher educational institutions in the region have done excellent in recent past as is evident from the census record of 2011 that literacy rate of six states of NER is higher than the national average i.e., 74.04 % but still the region has scope for improvement in bestowing quality education. Therefore, some positive efforts are needed to be made by the government to minimize the weaknesses of higher education in North East region.

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