

# HIGHER EDUCATION IN UTTARAKHAND: LEADERSHIP, PERSPECTIVE AND RESTRUCTURING FOR GLOBAL QUALITY STANDARDS

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## ABSTRACT

*Knowledge is power. A developed nation is inevitably an educated nation. The emergence of India as a knowledge-based service driven economy has made its human capital its major strength and opportunity for growth. The State of Uttarakhand took a big leap in Higher Education Sector since its inception as a new state in 2000. From an initial 64 higher educational institutions at the time of formation of the state, the number has gone up to over 450 institutes (Government and Private) inclusive of 36 Universities with 1 Central University and 5 Institutes of National Importance, Postgraduate and Graduate Colleges, Engineering, Professional, Education, Medical, Dental, Ayurvedic Colleges. The magnitude of expansion in the last two decades has been massive, a proud achievement for the State, with a literacy rate of 79.63% (Census 2011). This paper addresses the key question of Quality vs. Quantity. It also reviews the imperatives and challenges of this hilly state to meet global quality standards in higher education.*

**Key Words:** *Economy, global standards, higher education, literacy rate.*

## INTRODUCTION

Unlike China, Japan or other economic giants, India's growth has not been led by manufacturing but instead by the nation's enormous pool of skilled workers has allowed the country to rise quickly up the economic value chain in several knowledge based industries. With over 12 lakh of the higher education age group students living in Uttarakhand, the State has an important responsibility to prepare its youth for the future and embrace the opportunity for sustainable economic growth and prosperity.

The region, now known as the hill state of Uttarakhand, has a rich and inspiring centuries old history as a center of higher education and learning.

According to the Indian mythology it is believed that the Kauravas and Pandavas were trained by the revered Guru Dronacharya in the foothills of Himalayas, the reason why Dehradun, the capital city of Uttarakhand, is also known as Drona Nagri.

The State of Uttarakhand (initially called Uttaranchal) was carved out of Uttar Pradesh in the year 2000, and since then several new colleges, universities and professional institutions have mushroomed across the region. The steep rise in the number of these institutions, both private and government, is seen by many as big strides towards growth and development of educational facilities in the Hill State, however, the parallel reality is that we have an ever increasing number of educated yet

unemployed youth who the industries claims to be inadequately trained and qualified (Sharma, 2018).

With the literacy rate of 79.63% the State of Uttarakhand (Census India, 2011) ranks 17th among the 35 Indian States and Union Territories. This is 8% higher than the literacy rate of 71.62% according to the census in 2001 when the state actually ranked higher at 14th at the time. A near 650% increase in the number of higher education institutions over the last two decades does not justify this low increase in the literacy rate nor does it explain the 7.6% unemployment compared to the all India unemployment rate of 6.1% (PRS Legislative Research, 2020). There is a clear indication that the quantity of institutions has not adequately addressed the quality issues and an analysis of important factors and challenges for the establishment or development of these centres of learning should justify the investment and the public benefits to the Government. Important criteria and feasibility studies are therefore imperative to the decision making process viz., the necessity for the institution, geographic location to be served and the target population, the likely or targeted gross enrolment ratio (GER), faculty requirements, infrastructure and financial needs to ensure fundamental facilities like buildings, libraries, hostels, research facilities etc. are not only sustainable but with scope of further expansion.

The criteria or planning behind the State Government's decisions to sanction new colleges

and universities or grant of permission/licensing to private institutions is not clear. Commercial viability often appears to be the rationale behind the licensing of the private institutions, all of which cater to professional education, without any real analysis of the need or sustainability (Joshi, 2009) at the same time, the regulatory framework, accreditation mechanisms and the processes of quality assurances remain obscure (Venkatesh and Dutta, 2007).

It has also been observed that the establishment of government colleges, primarily imparting general education i.e. arts and sciences, across the State is being guided by political considerations but whether the new policies are in line with the actual long standing problems is not clear (Joshi, 2009).

The growth, so far, has been centered in the three main plain district of the State while the ten hill districts remain far behind. This has led to the failure to create remunerative employment opportunities in these hill regions causing the demographic changes in the hill and plain regions of the State and the dynamics of out migration (Mamgain and Reddy, 2016).

Below is a Country to State comparison of some of the key elements in the higher education sector according to All India Survey on Higher Education, AISHE, (2018-19).

S.No.	Element	India	Uttarakhand
1	Number of Universities	993	36
2	Number of Central Universities	46	1
3	Number of State Public Universities	371	10
4	Number of State Private Universities	304	17
5	Number of Deemed Universities	124	3
6	Number of Colleges	39931	438
7	Number of Colleges per Lakh Population (18-23 Years)	28	37
8	Total Enrolment at various levels	3.74 crore	4.68 lakh
9	Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)	26.3	39.1
10	Gender Parity Index	1.00	1.00

**Source:** All India Survey on Higher Education, AISHE, (2018-19).

**Table 1** – Comparison of various key elements between India and Uttarakhand

In various global ranking systems for higher education, such as the Top Universities ranking or the Times Higher Education World University ranking, Indian universities perform rather poorly not making it even in the top 300, no institution from Uttarakhand is even cited on these rankings. The quantitative expansion in higher education that we have witnessed in the state over the last two decades clearly does not match with the qualitative improvements.

This brings us to the question as to what benchmark have been established for higher education in the State and what metrics are being used to measure their performance.

## GLOBAL QUALITY STANDARDS

Global quality standards have been established in higher education and the universities/ institutions are often ranked using carefully calibrated performance indicators to provide the most comprehensive and balanced comparisons which are trusted by students, academics, industries and governments. According to “Top Universities” (2020), the university performance is effectively captured by primarily using the following six metrics

or core missions which are weighted in accordance to their importance:

i) **Academic Reputation** (40%) – This has the highest weight and is based on an academic survey collating expert opinions of 100,000 individuals in the higher education regarding the teaching and research quality at the institutions.

ii) **Employer Reputation** (10%) – This is an important metric from the student point of view as they perceive a good university education as a means by which they can receive valuable preparation for the employment market. Therefore the success of the institutions in providing that preparation is essential. An employer survey helps to identify the institutions from which they source the most innovative, competent and progressive graduates.

iii) **Faculty/Student Ratio** (20%) – Teaching quality is of highest importance to the student community and is difficult to measure. The teacher-student ratio is an effective proxy measure to this effect as it indicates the extent to which the institutions are able to provide their students with meaningful access to their tutors.

iv) **Citations per faculty** (20%) – This metric measures the institutional research output and

quality. This indicator of research influence looks at the universities' role in spreading new knowledge and ideas. The total number of citations received by all papers produced by an institution across a five-year period by the number of faculty members at that institution. Further consideration is given to the fact that different fields of study have different publishing cultures and all citations data is sourced using Elsevier's *Scopus* database which is the world's largest repository of academic journal data.

v) **International Faculty Ratio** (5%) – This is a strong indicative of the institution brand as it indicates its ability to attract faculty from other regions and implies a more global outlook providing a multinational/multicultural environment to facilitate exchange of best practices. This also leads to international collaboration in further research and advancement of new knowledge.

vi) **International Student Ratio** (5%) – Building on the preceding metric, this ratio indicates the reputation of the institution and the wider interest of the student community to pursue their education goals from there. It further provides the students with multicultural environment to develop global awareness, leadership, team work and other soft skills deemed increasingly valuable by the global/multinational employers.

The above metrics are not only critical in the development of higher education strategy but should also serve as objectives in the development of state and university policies and as mandatory performance measurements. In the current scenario, however, there is no evidence that these metrics are being adopted in the regulatory framework or policy development by the State Government. The main agencies in India which accredits general, technical and agricultural education such as National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) established by the UGC in 1994, National Board of Accreditation (NBA) set up by AICTE in 1994, and the Accreditation Board (AB) set up by ICAR in 1996 propose India Education Index (IEI) for ranking institutes based on academic, research performance and other parameters (Gupta and Gupta, 2012) however, for the student and the academic

community this has yet to translate into any meaningful reference. Even the AISHE, 2019 report, though provides some data on one or two of the above mentioned metrics but falls short to have any objective usage as a measurement or comparative tool on quality of education or performance of the institutions.

## CHALLENGES

As Sharma (2018) comprehensively sums up 'the higher education ails from a plethora of factors ranging from accreditation problems, finances, quality and quantity of institutions and faculty, teaching methodology and skewed admission process, growing mismatch in the ratio of available educational institutions and student population, lack of private sector participation, politicization, malpractices, commercialization, system not being in synchronization with the socio-economic realities and last but not the least, a complete disconnect with the requirement of our industries'.

All of the above mentioned factors apply to higher education in the State in varying degrees, however the following are distinctive to the Hill State and require a more in depth analysis:

1. Joshi (2009) argues that, 'There is a clear mountain plain divide in the location of institutions. Of the 67 government colleges of general education in the state as many as 52 (78%) were located in the mountainous districts or mountainous parts of composite (mountain-plain) districts and most of these colleges lack basic minimum facilities and staff'.

Further geographical distribution of self-financing private technical and professional institutions, indicates that less than 10% of them are located in the hill region of the state. According to Joshi (2008) of the 89 such colleges for which information could be obtained only 6 were in the mountainous part of the state (2 each in Mussoorie, Bhimtal and Almora); the

remaining 83 being located in the plains in places like Dehradun (50), Roorkee and Haldwani (7 each), Rudrapur (6), Hardwar (4) Rishikesh (3), Kashipur (2), Kotdwar, Jaspur, Sitarganj and Gadarpur (1 each).

2. Though the growth of financially independent, for profit sectors in higher education along with the increase in open and distance learning programs have been noteworthy developments in the Country, however, there is a lack of infrastructure especially in the hill and rural region of the State where essential facilities such as electricity and internet are still scarce or sporadic. The situation is further exacerbated for the students in these regions by the lack of technological proficiency and comprehension of the English language which is elementary for technical learning as well as exploring the internet and its applications. The students from the region are often adept in their vernacular language but face a huge challenge in their pursuit of higher education due to lack of English language skills. This in many cases not only leads to socio-psychological issues such as inferiority complex and lack of confidence in front of peers with the more privileged middle and high school education in the plain districts but is also a serious setback in the overall quality of higher education gained with detrimental impact on academic and vocational decisions by these students.

As Gumport (2000) pointed out, 'A perennial challenge for universities and colleges is to keep pace with knowledge change by reconsidering their structural and resource commitments to various knowledge areas'. The intrinsically political system makes it difficult for central and state governments to implement new or improvement programs in any systematic or coordinated manner (Rizvi and Gorur, 2011). Four different departments within

the Uttarakhand State Government are responsible for the policy development, oversight and regulating the functioning of the various institutions. While the general education colleges and universities are run by the Higher Education Department the professional education such as technical, medical and agriculture institution fall within the scope of responsibility of each of these education departments which leads to the too familiar ills of excessive departmentalism, lack of inter-departmental coordination and subsequent absence of an integrated approach to policy in higher education (Joshi, 2009).

3. In addition, the University Grants Commission (UGC) is responsible for promoting reforms and distributing resources along with coordination, accreditation and quality control but it is the state governments that establish and oversee the work of the universities (Rizvi and Gorur, 2011).
4. The Indian higher education has been characterized by inadequate infrastructure, poor operating conditions and ineffective teaching and learning programs which produces large cohorts of graduates which are barely employable in the professions for which they have allegedly been trained (Reddy and Andrade, 2010), the situation is all the more compelling in Uttarakhand with the unemployment rate of 7.6% which is higher than the all India employment rate of 6.1%. The other important indication is the accelerated outmigration from the hill regions due to eminent inequality in the economic opportunities and education resources between the hills and the plains districts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Yashpal Committee Report (2009) on renovation and rejuvenation of higher education lays some lofty

ideals and important proposals such as establishment of an autonomous overarching National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER) for prescribed standards of academic quality and defining policies for advancement of knowledge in higher educational institutions. The National Knowledge Commission (NKC), established in 2005, further recommends reforms to be structured around five key dimensions of knowledge: Access to Knowledge; Knowledge Concepts; Creation of Knowledge; Knowledge Applications; and Delivery of Services (Rizvi and Gorur, 2011) but many of the dilemmas of reform in Indian and State higher education are centered on issues of leadership and governance.

1. Broader infrastructure reforms in the state by providing energy and internet services to the more remote hill regions will provide a better chance for the youth and student community to realize their potential and prepare themselves better in their pursuit for higher education. Further infrastructural upgradation of the government institutions by providing modern research facilities, equipment and resources for improved learning.
2. Stricter guidelines and obligatory standards must be established for private institutions which must then be rigorously controlled and periodically audited. This will set higher benchmarks which are imperative to higher education in the 21st century. The Yashpal Committee Report (YCR) as well as NKC recommends the establishment of single and independent regulatory body in higher education. This should not only prevent, prohibit and punish education malpractices but provide a mandatory assessment and accreditation in higher education.
3. The chronic issues of the organizational cultures of the state and central universities and colleges have over the decades created an outmoded approach to curriculum and pedagogy with ineffective modes of assessment, and corrupt practices of staff

recruitment and promotion (Rizvi and Gorur, 2011). Alignment of the state and central roles and responsibilities with emphasis on simplification and transparency will be necessary to check this chronic failure. Rigorous implementation of policies with emphasis on quality and merit should enable us to push the strategic plans into action.

4. Strategic planning based on the demographic changes occurring in the state with the out migration issue being a major challenge requires urgent attention for the sake of our sustainable growth and prosperity.
5. Higher education reforms are needed urgently to align with the rapid advancement in technology which is shaping our world and the jobs of the future. As Rizvi and Gorur (2011) point out, 'Much of India's R&D is conducted by transnational corporations and at specialist government sponsored research centres, and not at the universities where research training is mostly provided'. Advancements in robotics, artificial intelligence, digitalization and block-chain are revolutionizing every aspect of our life at breathtaking pace. Adopting our educational practices and curriculum to this trend is no longer an option but an urgent demand.
6. We can only know if we are winning or losing if we keep a score. Global Quality standards should inspire us to be more competitive and measure our performance against the best in the industry. The key performance measurements should be based on the metrics discussed earlier in this paper.
7. The students from the hill region struggle with language barrier especially from the lack of proficiency of the English language which is most widely used in academic

training and research, especially in sciences and technology. As general and professional courses are neither taught nor available in the vernacular languages it is of utmost importance to drive campaigns to improve English language training in the public schools and state education system.

## CONCLUSION

The State Government of Uttarakhand, since its formation, has taken a number of steps to institute reforms and greatly increased investment in higher education; however, to meet the challenges facing higher education, these are not enough. Besides a sustained financial support, there needs to be autonomy and accountability, effective administration, meritocratic hiring and promotion of academics and similarly rigorous student selection and instructions (Altbach, 2005)

In order to ensure that India does not throw away its advantage in knowledge based service driven economy, it is imperative that it continues to produce a critical mass of highly skilled manpower at an accelerated pace. The State of Uttarakhand, despite its history and reputation as an educational centre has somehow faltered in providing quality education while the quantity of institutions has drastically increased, though unevenly across the State. There is an urgent need of leadership at national and state level to make higher education central to its strategy for global competitiveness.

The State confronts a range of complex dilemmas. The failure to recognize and confront them will lead to changes which at best will be superficial, uneven and perhaps even incompatible. There is a unique opportunity to convert the demographic surplus into the State's economic strength by providing its young people the right kind of skills and knowledge.

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