

Education sector needs radical reforms

Quality, excellence major challenges: President Pranab Mukherjee

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"We should create an atmosphere for cross-fertilisation of ideas from different parts of the country," said President of India Pranab Mukherjee last week, while expressing concern over the quality of education in the country. The President spoke during the launch of the book 'The Education President' in New Delhi. The book is published by the International Institute for Higher Education Research & Capacity Building, OP Jindal Global University.

The President said that issues relating to quality and excellence are major challenges. "Ancient and medieval India boasts of universities such as Nalanda, Takshashila, Vikramashila, Valabhi, Somapura and Odantapuri," he said.

The President expressed concern that no Indian from an Indian university, since CV Raman in 1930, has won the Nobel Prize. "We spend only 0.6% of our GDP on research, as compared to 2.8% by China, 3% by Japan and 5% by the US. If we have to create a knowledge society, we must invest more in R&D." He further added that India still faces the problem of brain drain.

Hamid Ansari, the Vice-President of India, added that while 59% students in the Indian higher education sector at-



tend private institutions, some of them have reduced themselves to mere degree-granting portals.

"The proportion of university- and college-going student population in India in the age group of 16-23 is a dismal 6%, low even when compared with developing countries; the figure is 20% for both Egypt and Thailand, 10% for Turkey, 11% for Brazil and 16% for Mexico. In the developed countries, ac-

cess to higher education is to the tune of 40% and more. Thus, even though higher education in India has expanded generally, inadequate access continues to cause concern," said Ansari.

The Vice-President also raised concern about the quality of education, citing a NASSCOM-McKinsey Report of 2005, which had found that only 25% of Indian engineers were employable in the offshore IT indus-

try. The National Knowledge Commission's (NKC) working group on medical education similarly noted that the rapid expansion of private medical and nursing colleges led to falling standards and reduced quality of graduates. "There has been no perceptible change in the past decade," he noted.

Talking about the lack of research orientation and increasing financial burden on students and their parents in the form of educational loans, the Vice-President said, "The cost of higher education in private institutions constitutes a substantial financial burden, making it increasingly more difficult for economically weaker segments to use education as an opportunity equaliser. Data shows that by December 2014, about 30 lakh students had availed of educational loans amounting to Rs 70,475 crore."

Clearly, there is a need for an effective and transparent regulatory mechanism that can encourage private investment in improving the quality of state universities, starting skills development courses and capacity development of faculty. "These regulations need to be strong to ensure that private universities are well governed and provide quality education," he added.