

# Privatization in Higher Education: Achieving Quality Through Electronic Governance

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## Abstract

*The present rapid proliferation of private institutes of higher education, with the sole motive of making maximum possible profit, and keen global competition, call for urgent steps to streamline them and for introducing some stringent regulations to check the deteriorating quality of education and monitor their practices. The government has set up various agencies to monitor and control the activities of the private institutes but these have only limited success due to their overlapping and opaque functioning. Moreover, corruption and dubious practices have crept-in in these private institutes and they have successfully circumvented the rules with impunity. It is argued in the present article that e-governance through a national or nodal agency or a Central Commission of Higher education will be a more effective regulatory body instead of the many agencies with overlapping and ambiguous responsibilities. E-governance would also result in greater transparency in the affairs of private institutes, in particular, and at the same time would make services delivery more prompt and cost-effective.*

**Key words:** Central Commission of Higher Education, E-governance, Nodal Agency, Privatization, Quality.

## Introduction

Though the educational system has grown over the last few decades in India; it has also created a number of problems. Global competition with foreign universities, as well as national aspirations demands high quality of education. The rapid growth of Higher Educational Institutes (HEI), especially the private ones, has brought new problems in its wake.

India has around 18,000 colleges and more than 35 Universities. But only a few have been given A grade status, by NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council). The rest are mediocre and lack in infrastructure. Compared with 1947, the number of students has increased 29 times (in 1997). But this covers only 6% of Indian youth between 17 and 24 years. It is much lower compared to other developing and developed countries, as the table 1 below shows.

**Table-01 Percentage of Youth in Higher Education in Different Countries**

Countries	Indonesia	Brazil	Mexico	Thailand	U.K	France	USA	Canada
% of youth (between 17& 24 years)	10	12	14	19	30	50	81	99.80

Source: Soundararaj, F, (2003)<sup>10</sup>

It is obvious that the Government alone cannot meet the ever-increasing demand for education. But the burgeoning growth and mushrooming of private institutions, in the absence of effective monitoring and regulating mechanism, is resulting in the deteriorating quality of education. Exploitation of teachers and students presents a depressing and gloomy scenario.

With privatization, hundreds of private institutions of higher education have come up. In a small city like Aligarh, a district of U.P. there are more than twelve private colleges which are teaching mostly engineering, management and B.Ed courses, as these are lucrative business. Profit is their sole driving motive.

### **Privatization of higher Education in India: Problems and Prospects**

Education has become an attractive area of commerce for doing lucrative business; as privatization inevitably leads to commercialization. Most of these private colleges have inadequate infrastructure, insufficient and unqualified or under-qualified staff. It is estimated that most of the engineering colleges (as well as others) are functioning with just 30 percent of the required faculty strength, (Times of India, 05.09.2010)<sup>11</sup>. Teachers are not paid what they are entitled to. Most of the teachers have no competence in ICTs (Information & Communication Technologies), nor do they have any motivation for getting the necessary skills. The Education Commission (1964-66) has very rightly observed that “*of all the different factors that influence the quality of education, the quality, competence and character of teachers are undoubtedly the most significant.*” In private institutes teachers have no security of job and they are “hired and fired” on the whims of the college owner. No wonder the quality of teachers and education; has taken a beating. The students pay high fees but they don’t get quality education. They get the degrees anyhow-as the examinations are farce.

In India both public and private institutions operate. In 2000-01, of the 13,072 higher education institutions, 42 percent were privately owned catering to 37 percent of students enrolled into higher education, that is, approximately 3.1 million out of total 8.4 million. Most of the growth in the rapidly expanding higher education sector took place in private unaided colleges or in self-financing institutions. It is estimated that at present more than 50 percent of the higher education in India is imparted through private institutions, mostly unaided and self-financing (Kaul, Sanat,2006)<sup>7</sup>.

The massive growth of higher education in private sector has made the task of regulatory bodies not only difficult, but their own functioning has become opaque and less visible. The multiplicity of these regulatory bodies, such as UGC (University Grants Commission), AICTE (All India Council for Technical Education) , NCTE( National Council for Teacher Education), NAAC, etc has resulted in duplication of procedures and increasing the scope of fraudulent practices, as well as causing immense waste of time and resources. Lack of transparency in the functioning of the regulatory bodies as well as in the functioning of the private institutions makes it easy for the officials to hide their misdeeds and tricks, and detecting the corruption becomes difficult. It is estimated that more than 50 percent of the higher education in India is imparted through

private institutions, mostly unaided. It is mostly in these private institutions, where unqualified teachers are recruited and paid poorly. The infrastructure too is unsatisfactory.

The poor quality of education and lack of proper management has also adversely affected “*export*” of education. In spite of our education system having certain factors in its favour—such as English medium, autonomy, relatively low cost—our “*export*” of education is very meagre as compared to other countries. The table 02 shows how low is the percentage of foreign students in India compared to other countries, (Dubhashi, 2001)<sup>2</sup>.

**Table 02 Number of Foreign students in India**

S No.	Country	No. of students	% of Foreign students to total
1.	USA	43,8000	5.65
2.	U.K.	85,000	10.3
3.	Australia	52,000	9.1
4.	Canada	37,000	6.6
5.	India	13,000	0.3

(Source: Dubhashi, P.R., 2001)<sup>2</sup>

Instead of the many regulating agencies like UGC, AICTE, NCTE, etc, a single window like Central Commission of Higher Education (CCHE) to receive and supply necessary information for various purposes and for various stakeholders, would save and economise a lot of time, money and in general boost efficiency and performance. In-effect, e-governance would imply that the CCHE, the apex body, would have an interface with all the Universities/Colleges, Institutes of higher education. These will furnish all the details on a periodic basis to the Commission regarding the following:-

1. Details of funds received and utilization thereof.
2. Details of all the students and staff including information regarding their qualification, salary etc.
3. Details of courses, projects etc.

In the absence of any fool-proof regulatory mechanism and strong monitoring system, the affairs in private institutes are shrouded in mystery. How have they obtained approval & “*recognition and affiliation*” is anybody’s guess. Private service providers are fully aware of the loop-holes in the legal provisions and are adept at circumventing them for their pecuniary gains. Many people have observed that there is generally “a nexus between service providers and decision makers, who most generally belong to the same socio-economic group, create obstacles in checking commercialism in education” (Shafi, 2003)<sup>9</sup>.

## Electronic Governance in Indian Higher Education System

E-governance comprises the use of ICTs, such as WAN (Wide Area Network), the Internet, mobile computing etc. The main aim of e-governance is improving service delivery and making management of institutions more accountable, their functioning more transparent and effective. It will improve efficiency and reduce cost and prevent wasteful expenditure. E-governance would ensure continuous monitoring, evaluation of recruitment policies, scrutiny of quality and quantity of input/output regarding all the relevant items and issues. Obviously, e-governance is integrative with the development of computer technology and networking of computers and communication system.

E-governance would require the setting up of a single nodal agency, which may be called CCHE, and which should create a website or Internet Portal to be made a single point of interaction for all the stakeholders including all the institutions of higher learning.

The main objective is to reduce cost, increase transparency, interact with citizens more intimately without waste of time and resources, and reduce corruption. India has also taken several steps for introducing e-governance at all levels-national, state and local. It must be emphasized that simply setting up a website of e-governance is not a sufficient condition for effective e-governance. The site must also include information and features of online public services. Norris points out that e-governance should be evaluated by the way in which the relationship between the various political institutions, babus and citizens, develops, (Norris, 2001)<sup>8</sup> .

As per UNDESA(United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) survey, at the level of Central governments, 189 of the 192 UN member states have set up government websites by 2009 ( Table 01), which indicates how fast governments everywhere are adopting ICTs for interacting with public.

**Table -03 Countries with government websites**

SNo.	Countries	Year 2003	Year 2009
1.	Countries with Central government websites	173	189
2.	Countries without Central government websites	18	3
3.	Total UN Member states	191	192

(Source: UNDESA 2003, and 2010)<sup>12</sup>

Part of the remedy lies in the ICTs and e-governance comprises the use of ICT for wider participation of citizens in government affairs. ICTs such as WANs (Wide Area Networks), LANs (Local Area Networks), the Internet, mobile, computing etc have the ability for efficient management, of increasing transparency and reducing cost and corruption. The term “e-governance” refers to the use of ICTs like Internet, www (World Wide Web) and mobile phones. E-governance, also known as digital or online governance, creates a transparent and government –to-citizen relationship. The aim of e-governance in India would be to make India’s higher education system a SMART (Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent) one.

The educational system in the country as a whole must be developed as one unit. Networking of all the higher educational institutions should be part of this networking. Some nodal agency like NIC (National Informatics Centre) can be entrusted with the task of networking of the education sector.

A single portal or nodal body would improve the operational efficiency and would enable the Government and the national bodies to have a better regulatory and monitoring system. Ideally a single window or a central nodal agency such as NIC or establishment of integrated CCHE would usher a digital culture. The nodal agency or CCHE would create a website or Internet Portal which would be made a single point of interaction. This will include all the relevant information regarding services that it can deliver. Every University/Institution shall furnish details regarding courses, fees, teachers, students, sources of funding etc.

Setting up a website is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for effective e-governance: it must include information and features about the type of services offered. They may be required to furnish to the CCHE detailed information regarding approved and actual intake, teachers and their qualifications etc., on a periodical basis. There would be no need of any manual interaction. This would enable the CCHE to be more stringent and effective in its monitoring and regulating function. The decisions taken and their enforcement will have to be in accordance with the rules and regulations and the information will be freely and directly accessible to all concerned. In short, there has to be transparency in all the exercises. It will also make all the institutions and organizations accountable to the public and to their stakeholders.

### **Benefits of E-governance in Higher Education**

The main benefits of e-governance would be as following:

1. The website of the Portal would store integrated information regarding services that can be delivered which can be obtained by any of the stakeholders. It will also enhance transparency and reduce delay.
2. It will increase the efficiency of officials and enable them to take better decisions and make better planning.
3. The website can include information regarding these institutions who charge excessive fees etc. It will curb corruption and unethical and fraudulent practices by any one, especially owners of private institutions. For this, some features that lead to greater transparency and accountability need to be consciously built in the design objectives of the website.
4. Features such as online testing tools to appraise both teachers' and students' performance can be added.
5. In addition, there should be an effective redressal mechanism in place, for all the stakeholders.
6. Further, an integrated higher education apex body at a national level can be one of the key ICT initiatives to help India become a provider of world class education. It would also make our students more employable, and enable the Universities to compete more successfully with foreign Universities.
7. The system would also help in keeping a check on fraudulent practices by any of the stakeholders.
8. The authorities can easily compare the performance of different Institutes/teachers/students etc, and this would result in improved quality of education.

## Possible Impediments in the Successful Implementation of E-governance

There are some socio-political implications which also must be considered. India has a very low position in the use of internet services, which is just 0.7 Internet users per 100 inhabitants. Internet access is too expensive for the common man. As India is one of the poorest countries in the world, poverty, illiteracy, inequality is major roadblocks to the effectiveness of e-governance. A low rate of literacy and infrastructural limits such as availability of computers, electricity and telephone connections, constrain citizen's access to electronic communication. Most of the benefits of internet have been reaped by the affluent sections of the society. But concerted efforts have to be made to direct e-governance reforms for the common and poor citizens. It has been observed that in India the benefits of e-governance have been enjoyed by the affluent section of the society. India is a poor country-poverty and illiteracy are major roadblocks to effectiveness of e-governance.

Constraints in the successful implementation of e-governance are many, not the least is the connectivity factor. Teledensity is low. India lags far behind the developing countries in terms of a bandwidth necessary for people to access Internet. According to the Economist, only 0.1 percent of our population has Internet access at home (Kashyap, 2000)<sup>6</sup> Internet access is too expensive and availability of computers, telephone, electricity are not satisfactory.

For implementation of e-governance basic infrastructure such as computers, Internet is a pre-requisite. The problem in urban areas is not as acute as in rural areas; many people in urban areas own computers or have access to privately run cyber cafes. In rural areas no such facilities are available. The problem to some extent can be solved if the government sets up Kiosks in remote areas.

## Conclusion

Private higher educational institutes are significantly large in number and most of these are run with purely profit motive. They indulge in fraudulent practices not only for obtaining recognition but also in other matters like fee charged from students and recruitment of teachers. The regulatory bodies are either unable or unwilling to control and check their unscrupulous activities.

It is suggested that a national agency like Central Commission of Higher Education with e-governance policy would bring about transparency in the affairs of private educational institutes' activities and create better awareness in the stakeholders. It would also increase efficiency and save a lot of wasteful duplication of work and expenditure. E-governance would also enhance quality of education and increase the employability of our students. However, to make it successful, the government will have to improve the infrastructure and also make the private players cooperate with the Central Commission of Higher Education.

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