

Doctoral Studies in India: An Overview

Jyothi

Asst. Professor, Dept of English, University College of Science, Tumkur University, Tumkur, (Karnataka) India

Abstract

Doctoral education plays an important role in the production of knowledge as well as development of higher education. In western countries, three cycles of learning are clearly demarcated and the way they are integrally linked to each other has helped to give a shape to higher education. What is required in India is an approach to see research segment holistically; from introducing research-based curriculum at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In fact, there is a considerable increase in the number of PhDs produced over the last ten years. But, there is no qualitative listing of all PhD theses submitted to all Indian universities for the reference of prospective research scholars to understand what is done and what needs to be done. So far doctoral education has not been studied in India systematically. We need to have a critique of doctoral research in India before making policies and reformation of doctoral education. In this context, the present paper makes an assessment of doctoral education in India and discusses what needs to be done to improve the system.

Key Words: Higher education, Doctoral Education, three cycles, western model

Introduction

Doctoral education plays an important role in the production of knowledge in general and in the development of higher education in particular. The effective transfer of knowledge takes place at the level of doctoral and post-doctoral level. In a way, PhD programme is a sort of training in research by research. Hence, one of the criteria to assess the quality of higher education is to examine the status of doctoral studies.

Let us start with a glimpse of higher education scenario in India, as doctoral studies are an integral part of it. India, as a major stakeholder in the global knowledge economy, has been exploring all possibilities of knowledge production, and higher education is being considered an important site for knowledge production. But the big question: Is our higher education sector competent enough to take

the challenge of giving essential higher education to enormous number of people? The growing rate of Gross Enrolment Ratio, ever increasing number of undergraduate colleges, universities both the state and the central, and the emergence of private institutions of higher learning are some of the indicators of the expanding scope of higher education in India. Professionalization of collegiate and university education; emergence of assessment agencies including the NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council) and the NBA (National Board of Accreditation) ; introduction of new policies and prospects regarding the governance and execution of higher education by the University Grants Commission(UGC), and more importantly, the setting up of the National Knowledge Commission(NKC), which has made rigorous recommendations to improve the

quality of higher education are some of the indicators of our exercise to bring quality to higher education. Nevertheless, policies and measures need to be based on real issues and problems we are facing.

In short, as higher education is very important index of national growth, it is the time for introspection on what is lacking in our higher education sector. What are the initiatives taken by the government so far and how to take them forward? Is there any link among the three major facets of higher education; teaching, learning and research? Are three cycles of education based on western model interlinked phases in Indian higher educational system?

Higher education system takes account of everything related to teaching, learning, research and extension activities. There is a lot of debate generated on teaching, learning, research and extension activities of higher education along with other non-academic issues. However, each aspect needs to be studied separately, without losing sight of the fact that they are interrelated. One of the focus areas for higher education studies is 'research activities' as university research plays a crucial role in the development of knowledge society. But the research profile of the country suffers from several lacunas. Therefore, a lot of measures are being taken to enhance the quality of research in India. However, this task requires strategic initiatives. Moreover the system should encourage research activities which could contribute for the welfare of the society. Of late, there are certain measures taken in this regard. But before looking into these measures, let us glance at what has been done in the west to improve the quality of higher education

system. Compared to the initiatives undertaken in the western countries, especially in Europe and North America, we have not progressed much. We need to learn from the western academia.

Western Model of Higher Education

Western countries have included research as integral and extended part of the system much earlier than us. The clear cut demarcation of three cycles of learning and the way they are integrally linked to each other have helped to give a shape to higher education. Along with the idea of the university, the idea of research has been a subject of philosophical and empirical investigation in the western intellectual history. Let us not delve into these issues in detail, but concentrate on understanding how the west has been approaching university research, especially the doctoral education. A substantial work is being done both at the level of policy formulation and at the level of academic investigation to examine and rethink doctoral training at western universities. In Europe, the Bologna Declaration of 1999 to create a European Higher Education Area and the Lisbon Strategy, formulated in 2000 to create a European Research and Innovation Area, are major steps to conceptualise doctoral education and training. "Doctoral education and training are the major link between the two goals to create a European Higher Education Area and a European Research and Innovation Area in order to make European higher education more attractive and more competitive in a globalizing world" (Kehm,2007:307). According to the framework of Bologna Process Doctoral education was formally introduced as the Third Cycle (undergraduate education being the First Cycle and postgraduate

education the Second Cycle) by Ministers meeting in Berlin in 2003, and doctoral education has since become an increasing priority in the western higher education. Likewise, North America, Canada and most western countries have been rethinking doctoral education and training rigorously.

Lessons to be Learnt for Indian Higher Education

The above illustrations from the west help us to have a look at the status of higher education scenario in our country. We need to make a systematic planning by taking positive points from the west. Though we are in post colonial situation, western examples still hold good for us, as we don't have a well developed strategy for higher education still. The concept of university education is a western concept. Following the western model, what is required in India is an approach to see research segment holistically; from introducing research-based curriculum at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels to see the above-mentioned cycles as interconnected, and at the same time to focus on each cycle; for instance, to focus on understanding and analysing doctoral education and training. Doctoral training has to be taken as a part of higher education and it should prepare and give the scholars a focus on what needs to be done and how best one can do it. Meanwhile, there is no qualitative listing of all PhD theses submitted to all Indian universities for the reference of prospective research scholars to understand what is done and what needs to be done. If it is done, it will help in their literature review and in finalizing their scope and limitation of research. So, the theses submitted in Indian universities

have to be collated in a system for future reference.

Doctoral Education in India

In India, there is a considerable increase in the number of PhDs produced over the last ten years. In the advent of recent changes in Higher Education policies undertaken by the Ministry of Human Resources and the UGC, more number of teachers, especially at the tertiary level are undertaking doctoral studies. Once, PhD used to be an intellectual pursuit at the university level merely; now, the collegiate education considers research as an integral part of its identity. Such a situation demands taking stock of the existing scenario. Then, the question is, what is the status of doctoral education in India? What have we done to the doctoral studies so far?

Before analysing our system, let us look at how is the doctoral education in the western countries.

Doctoral Education in the West

Most importantly, Barbara M Kehm (2006), in her article on 'Doctoral education in Europe and North America' states that doctoral education and training is considered as an important factor in the country's economy. So Europe and North America are making efforts to scrutinize doctoral education and training. Universities are requested to develop institutional strategies to improve it. There has been an upswing in the number of doctoral degrees awarded. In North America and some European countries, research scholar has to pay tuition fees to the University. However in some European countries they are treated like employees of the university. Funding is a serious problem that research scholars' face and results into high drop-out and also lengthy

periods to complete the thesis. In spite of this, in most of the European countries like Spain, Sweden, Germany, and the UK the number of research scholars has gone up considerably in the past 10 years. But there has been an imbalance in the doctorates awarded in humanities and natural sciences. To further focus into this issue, in the humanities it takes the longest time, and in life sciences it is often completed quickly. It is rightly observed that lack of supervision and insufficient quality assurance are responsible for long duration in doctoral studies. Lisbon Strategy tried to find solution to these issues. The topic of international mobility of research scholars was limited in European countries due to the fear of brain drain, losing tuition fees and low return on investment. But North America and Canada attract doctoral students and retain them by offering them attractive conditions. These countries have formulated mechanisms to streamline the process of awarding the doctorate degree. Measures like writing a thesis and defending it and involving external examiners are some attempts in this regard.

Meanwhile, Nerad and Heggelund (2004) emphasize the problems of doctoral students in the USA as; they are educated narrowly, they lack professional skills, not qualified enough to teach and find employment outside academia, and take too long to complete their doctoral studies. In Canada, more public and private funding is available to science subjects, as a result more than 50% of doctoral degree holders seek employment outside the academia.

Likewise in Europe, there is paradigm shift in doctoral training and advanced research due to the implementation of Bologna

Declaration and Lisbon strategy. They helped in framing standards to get quality doctoral degrees. Where as in USA private foundations set up initiatives to monitor the research programmes. In Europe and North America, the latest trends in doctoral research are; implementation of systematic structured programmes with code of ethics for students as well as for supervisors, increased internationalisation through mobility and increase in interdisciplinary approaches.

Further, in 1990s German Science Council made recommendations to establish structured PhD programmes; it encouraged interdisciplinary research, and research supervision was allowed to share among professors. Research departments were allowed to apply for funding with government agencies. Funded projects were evaluated regularly. Funding included for administration and coordination of the programme also, in addition, for the candidates to organize lectures, seminars, events and discussions by themselves and experts in the area of research. Bologna Reform Process was accepted in 2003 and doctoral study was established as third cycle of studies after Bachelor and Master Degrees. Doctoral education has moved to cadre of national policies, not just a university academic affair.

Similarly, in Spain, by 1960s university was not meant only for education but also for research. Research learning became necessary for students who want to become researchers. Demand for doctorate increased as PhD was a must for a university career. Employment of doctorates outside the university set up was considered important for economic growth and innovation. As mere research

training targeting academic teaching was considered insufficient, doctoral education was thoroughly reviewed.

Interestingly, European University Association (EUA) observed that doctoral graduates often lack skills needed to work outside the university set up. So it emphasised the need to strengthen transferable skills to work in other sectors.

At the same time, European Union supported research competitiveness by establishing European space for research networks, better international and mobility agreements. Attempts are made for Europeanization of academic research with additional efforts for collaboration and competition among European researchers.

In many western countries higher education is going through many changes with increased focus on efficiency, quality and relevance of doctoral education. Collaboration with firms is looked into for funding. PhD is no longer considered as preparation for an academic career in universities only, but also to work outside the academy.

So, the next issue that has to be worked on is the career prospective for doctoral degree holders outside academia, as industry and commerce are sceptical about their skills and competencies. Western countries have awakened to the need for programmes to enhance their professional skills. Coursework is designed to include these skills. Hence, India has a long way to go and learn a lot from the west as far as doctoral research is concerned.

History of Doctoral Research in India

If we go back to the history of academic research in India, it was initiated in 1784 with the establishment of Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta for promoting oriental studies. But it was focussed more

on teaching and the field of science. But it led to the establishment of Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (IACS). But the real beginning of academic research started with the establishment of modern universities in 1857 in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in the model of university of London. Though they started with issuing degree certificates, later on with the services of eminent scholars of the country and abroad, the doctoral students were trained.

As it happened, the number of universities granting degrees increased tremendously after independence. In 1953 University Grants Commission was set up to maintain the standards of institutions of higher education. But until recently UGC had no strategy to monitor the doctoral education in Indian universities. As Arkadev Chatterjea and Satya P. Moulik (2006) point out India followed two approaches to doctoral education in India; British influenced research and American influenced research. The latter gained momentum in India, where a topic is taken in specialized field and thesis is submitted after research. UGC also encourages full time research by granting scholarship for interested and eligible candidates.

In spite all these efforts, Indian universities have failed miserably in global scenario in quality academic research and doctoral training. None of our universities figure in the list of top 300 universities as far as academic excellence is concerned. As Paavo Uronen (2005) rightly points out, research training should shift its focus from disciplinary research to multidisciplinary research as well as from academic to professional.

Likewise, Arkadev Chatterjea and Satya P. Moulik (2006) observe that doctoral

education and academic research in India is poor compared to universities in developed countries. Probable reasons could be lack of facilities given to students, financial constraints, faculty quality and other related issues.

What is Ailing Our System?

Reasons are many. There is sheer lack of resources, facilities and opportunities to the research scholars. As well, lack of expert faculty guides is major issue to be focussed. In comparison, many countries have responded to this problem positively by offering better facilities now. Attractive awards and recognition to quality research papers would encourage the scholars to contribute. Financial constraints of the research scholars are also a hindrance in getting quality research. Research is an expensive project, unless funded adequately, many would drop out in the process also.

Further on this issue, Dr. Sanjay Goel (2011) observes that Indian doctoral education never went through scrutiny as the major employer of PhDs was the university system. They were not tested in other industries. It created complacency in the system. Moreover the expansion of higher education in the last decades demanded more PhDs, so PhD production went up not paying attention to any quality. Absence of guidelines encouraged this mass production of PhD degree. But of late, Research and development activities are highly funded by the corporate and they are absorbing researchers in India. In contrast to UK, in India part time PhD scholars are abundant who work full time in some other institutions simultaneously, as they consider academic career is equally important. On the other hand it is affecting

duration as well as quality of their research. Doctorate is the highest degree in other parts of the world. So effort to get the degree has to go through the proper channel, or it will encourage negative academic morality and pulls down higher education system.

Present Scenario

In fact, there is a considerable increase in the number of PhDs produced over the last ten years. In the advent of recent changes in Higher Education policies undertaken by the Ministry of Human Resources and the UGC, more number of teachers, especially at the tertiary level are undertaking doctoral studies. Once, PhD used to be an intellectual pursuit at the university level merely; now, the collegiate education considers research as an integral part of its identity. Such a situation demands taking stock of the existing scenario. Then, the question is, what is the status of doctoral education in India? What have we done to the doctoral studies so far?

Most importantly, the National Knowledge Commission and the UGC have taken some steps to bring about quality improvements in doctoral studies. Recently, the UGC has issued certain guidelines to the universities regarding their PhD Programmes. Coursework and publication of research papers during the programme, for example, are some mandatory measures.

What needs to be done?

In short, what we need even at the policy level is that policies need to be based on the findings of the informed studies. So far doctoral education has not been studied in India systematically. We need to have a critique of doctoral research in India before making policies and reformation of

doctoral education. Such an act is required even for taking stock of the present status of the knowledge produced in particular disciplines which helps us to map the progress of the disciplines. One of the ways to do so is to scrutinize the theses in different disciplines.

However, this is not enough. We need to do more than this. We have to begin from the beginning. Until recently, we have not made a systematic attempt to create a database of PhD theses. A PhD scholar within a state seldom knows what another scholar in the same field in another university is doing. Of course, thanks to *The University News*, which publishes a list of theses and very recently the Inflibnet (www.inflibnet.ac.in) started an initiative called www.shoodhaganga.com, and we have another database www.vidhyanidhi.com, reservoirs of Indian theses. Nevertheless, the UGC guidelines and data-bases need to be complemented by the qualitative assessment of doctoral education. There is a felt need to integrate three cycles - undergraduate (FC) and postgraduate (SC) as preparatory training cycles for doctoral studies (TC). At present, they are seen as separated segments. So far, in India, we don't have a focused attention paid to

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doctoral education. Further, we have not initiated any prospective plan for doctoral education in the manner of European Commission - Bologna Declaration (1999), Lisbon Strategy (2000) European Research Area (ERA), etc. In the light of the centrality of doctoral education, and when the very idea of research, research methods and methodology, and the model of PhD are undergoing constant revisions, we need to take stock of doctoral education in India. In the west, we have plenty of examples, to mention a few, in the form of conferences (Williams: 2005; Teichler: 2005), research and academic studies (Scott et al.: 2004; Sadlak: 2004; Eua: 2005; Green and Powell: 2005; Golde and Walker: 2006; Maki and Barkowaski: 2006), policy related studies (Bologna Declaration: 1999, Lisbon Strategy: 2000; Dublin Descriptors 2004; Manifesto: 2006;), which have tried to understand and assess doctoral studies. Doctoral training is being scrutinized in the western universities and it is regarded as the most important phase to pursue knowledge in higher education whereas in India it is not yet so. In this respect, doctoral education in India needs to be the focus of higher education policy and it needs to be subjected to academic exploration as well.

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