

## Thoughts on higher education

Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh was searching for a credible personality to head the National Knowledge Commission and found that telecom and computing guru, inventor and entrepreneur, 66 year old Sam Pitroda was well qualified and competent for this job.

Invited by the Prime Minister in 2006, Pitroda chaired the highly controversial seat of the National Knowledge Commission for over two years and the Commission, it is understood, after hearing so many shades of opinion, has edged out a detailed education frame work for the country.

### Recommendations

To our knowledge, following are some of the findings and recommendations for higher education reforms;

\* Implementing the policy of 'needs blind admissions'. It means that an applicant's ability or inability to pay shall not influence the admission policy of a university. The doors of higher education should not be denied due to an inability to pay;



In establishing new universities a new regulatory framework should

be carved-out. Picture Internet

\*However, the National Knowledge Commission is not in favour of an across-the-board subsidy in professional education. To maintain the schemes and the targetted changes, sustainability is vital, therefore, the commission suggests that fees be indexed to the cost of living , as are the expenses of institutions;

\*However, the Commission says that this rationalization of fees should be matched by an increase of scholarships, loans and fee waivers for needy students;

\* In establishing new universities and university colleges, a new regulatory framework should be carved-out. The commission has noted that some of the State Governments have collaborated with private partners in the field of higher and professional education;

\* The Commission notes that the HRD Ministry and the University Grants Commission have encouraged the expansion of private initiatives through the grant of deemed university status;

\*The Commission has recommended the setting-up of an independent regulatory authority for higher education by an Act of Parliament. It says that as the umbrella organization for the coordination and maintenance of standards of higher education, the University Grants Commission and other professional statutory Councils, such as the AICTE, MCI, and NCTE have played a crucial role in laying down a strong foundation of higher professional and technical education.

However, the commissioners point-out that in view of the changing structural paradigm of domestic education, their role needs to be reviewed and redefined.

National Knowledge Commission feels that the role of the University Grants Commission should be limited to disbursing of public funds;

\*The Commission has found that professional institutions have only proliferated in certain areas in the country. If the Government is keenly interested in addressing this anomaly, the Government would need to establish new institutions in the under-provided states. The commission recommends that a framework for public-private partnerships should be carved-out in collaboration with the concerned states to establish new quality institutions.

### **Government's role**

In taking-up this challenge, the Government has a key role to play; however, recent growth suggests that the private sector would be the major partner in this expansion.

\*The Government has a leading role to play in the field of education, especially in terms of public out-lays and addressing issues of inclusion. There is an urgent demand for new institutional mechanisms, which forge collaborative models.

The Government is an important player, but a vital role has to be played by the corporate sector, the academic community and the not-for-profit-sector.

\* Disparities in educational attainments are related to caste and social groups but are also strongly related to other indicators such as income, gender, region and place of residence.

Therefore, we suggest the use of a broad-based deprivation index. In addition, to reservations, we also need a major expansion of quality secondary education to reduce differences in academic achievements.

\* There should be due emphasis on school education. In the absence of a standard primary and secondary school education accessible to every child in the country, one cannot expect good and well-trained students to enter the portals of higher education.

I have emphasized here, the findings and major recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission of India to carve-out a road map for higher education strategies to meet the global challenges of the 21st Century. The SAARC Education Ministers who met in Sri Lanka last week to carve-out a road map for a common higher education policy for the entire region, have lot to learn from the findings of the National Knowledge Commission of India.