REVITALIZING HIGHER AGRICULTURE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

India's recent economic progress is based on software, services, and information technology. However, more than half of country's 1.2 billion people still depend on agriculture for living, even though agriculture represents only about 17 percent share of Gross domestic product (GDP) and about 50percent share of employment. The agriculture sector is very complex. It has social, political, economic, and technological dimensions. In recent years it has become even more complex due to impact of climate change and global trade policies. Its performance depends on many factors including political will, commitment and proper governance, providing adequate funding for farm inputs and infrastructure, providing functional agricultural credit system, making available data on market research, and providing post harvest technology. However, the most important contributing factor is generating location specific technology to increase productivity per unit of land and transferring this technology to end users. There is an urgent need to develop highly qualified and trained human resources for this purpose by strengthening higher educational institutions in India.

Strengthening and development of higher agricultural education in India

1) EDUCATION PLANNING & HOME SCIENCE (EP&HS)

Educational planning strives to develop, co-ordinate, implement and monitors plans and policies including reforms in higher agricultural education in the country leading to quality human resource development and aims for maintaining and upgrading quality and relevance of higher agricultural education through partnership with 75 Agricultural Universities comprising of State Agricultural Universities (64), ICAR Deemed-to-be-Universities (4), Central Agricultural Universities (3) and Central Universities with Agriculture Faculties (4). The Indian Council of Agricultural Research provides financial supports for establishment of infrastructure facilities including Faculties and Students Amenities viz. Student Hostels, Examination Halls, Educational Museums, Sports and Recreational Facilities, Placement Cells, and Modernization of Educational Farms and Library Facilities.

2) EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE & REFORMS (EQA&R)

National Agricultural Education Accreditation Board (NAEAB): Accreditation is done to ensure the quality of higher agricultural education in Agricultural Universities and its constituent colleges. The University/ institution/ programme are critically evaluated by a group of experts as per approved guidelines of the Council. The National Agricultural Education Accreditation Board (NAEAB) undertakes the accreditation programme (i) to assist people, prospective students, educational institutions, professional societies, Government and other concerned agencies in identifying institutions and programmes which meet the minimum norms and standards as prescribed by the Council, (ii) to provide guidance for the improvement of existing agricultural education institutions/ programmes, and (iii) to develop new institutions/ programmes. Accreditation of Agricultural Universities is a continuous process, and since the constitution of the Board in 1996, 43 agricultural universities have been accredited. In order to infuse better accountability and intense monitoring for educational quality improvement in agricultural universities, The Government of India has taken a decision to link accreditation of agricultural universities by NAEAB with the Grant-in- Aid from ICAR, New Delhi.

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON HIGHER AGRICULTURE EDUCATION IN INDIA

COVID-19, the global pandemic has caused unprecedented havoc to various sectors of economic development, and education sector is no exception. The lockdown clamped by the Union and State Governments to contain the spread and ameliorate the impacts of this pandemic, has caught the entire academic fraternity by surprise. While the Traditional Educational Institutions in India have predominantly remained closed and had suspended their activities, the State and Central Agricultural Education Institutes, including the Deemed Universities under ICAR have relatively responded proactively, not withstanding their inherent limitations, which could be attributed to the sustained

efforts of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research in coordinating national exercises for building digital content in partnership with all members of the National Agricultural Research and Education System (NARES) and building the skill sets of the Faculty Members in using digital technology for teaching.

A study was designed to find out the consequences of COVID-19 during the lockdown period, response strategies adopted and lessons learnt for future. Data were collected during April, 2020 on a structured survey schedule administered as an online survey using Google Forms, targeting the students and Faculty Members spread across India. In all, 1132 students from 51 Agricultural Universities undergoing Ph.D. (14.9%), Masters (5.8%) and Undergraduate (79.2%) courses and 164 Officials from 61 Universities comprising of Administrators/University Officers (31.7%) and Teaching Faculty (68.3%) had participated in the survey.

About 84.0 % of faculty and administrators expressed that their Universities were able to handle the impacts created by COVID-19 and about 71.8 % expressed that they had facilities for imparting digital education. The broad impacts of COVID-19 on agricultural education as perceived by the University Officers (taking care of administration) / Faculty Members (engaged in teaching) and the students based on the survey are presented briefly under three broad heads viz., (i) course delivery, (ii) building professional competence, and (iii) physical and psychological health.

CONSTRAINTS OF HIGHER AGRICULTURE EDUCATION

Agriculture is a state subject and so is the agriculture education. During past few years, the higher agriculture education has been showing the sign of stagnation .The key issue is that agricultural universities lacks funds as well as faculty. The agricultural research and education intensity ranged from low of 0.08% in Uttar Pradesh and 0.15% in Orissa to a high of 1.37% Himachal Pradesh. During recent period, it has come to light that the establishment cost of agricultural universities has risen substantially to as high as 87% while the operational budget has reduced to about 13%. This situation clearly reflect that the universities are starved of operational funds, which constraints them in expanding innovative approaches in higher agriculture education, thereby adversely affecting the quality.

CONCLUSION

India has had rich heritage in education and was in the forefront amongst nations of the world until the1200 AD. With invasions from outside and colonization of the whole subcontinent, India suffered a severe setback in its overall growth and the colonizers exploited India's rich natural resources. This led to India being labeled as a "backward" and poverty-stricken country. After independence in 1947, India has come long ways from being a "developing nation" to being called an "emerged nation". The excellence achieved in the fields of Information Technology and Space Research and other field's has brought international prestige to the country. In the field of agriculture, the nation has become self-sufficient and exporter of some crops. Prior to green revolution, India had to regularly import food grains from USA under PL480 agreement and therefore was described as a nation "living from ship to mouth". The real challenge is to increase the productivity per unit of land and at the same time maintain natural resource base. To address this challenge especially in the globalized world, a strong team of well-trained and qualified scientists is needed. The SAUs have responsibility to produce such scientists. Time has come to take bold steps to revitalize the higher education system.