Panel discussions held on GER and Ranking and Accreditation at Akhil Bhartiya Shiksha Samagam 2024 indicate important takeaways

Posted On: 30 JUL 2024 6:41PM by PIB Delhi

The Ministry of Education celebrated the Akhil Bhartiya Shiksha Samagam (ABSS) 2024 at the Manekshaw Centre Auditorium, New Delhi on 29th July 2024, marking the 4th anniversary of the National Education Policy 2020. Minister of State for Education & Minister of State (IC), Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship Shri Jayant Chaudhary and Minister of State for Education & Development of North Eastern Region, Dr. Sukanta Majumdar were present at the event. Shri K. Sanjay Murthy, Secretary, Department of Higher Education; Shri Sanjay Kumar, Secretary, Department of School Education & Literacy; academicians, Vice Chancellors of the universities, officials, and students, also attended the event. Six panel discussions were held during the day, among which three were on schools education and three on higher education.

One of the panel discussions on Higher education centered on Ranking and Accreditation. It was moderated by Prof. Anil Sahasrabudhe Chairman, NETF. The four panellists were Dr. Manoj Tiwari, Director, IIM Mumbai and officiating Vice Chancellor of TISS; Dr. Rajnish Kumar, Professor of Chemical Engineering, IIT Madras; Dr. S. Vaidhyasubramaniam, Vice Chancellor of Sastra Deemed University; and Dr Ujwala Chakradeo, Vice Chancellor, SNDT Women's University.

The National Education Policy 2020 has been hailed as a comprehensive framework that aims to promote the holistic development of learners and enhance the quality of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through a slew of reforms that include multidisciplinary education, nurturing critical thinking and analytical ability, promoting research and innovation, improving the quality of infrastructure, effective and empowering teacher training to deliver high-quality higher education ensuring well-rounded, creative employable and entrepreneurial individuals rooted in Indian values.

Measurement and monitoring are two important tools to improve the processes to achieve desired outcomes. Ranking and Accreditation are two such tools, which enable an institution to know where it stands and what are its strengths and weaknesses so that it can improve the processes to overcome the weaknesses and strengthen the strengths even more and excel. This along with collaboration and competition shall lead to learning best practices from each other thus improving the overall education ecosystem in the country.

Several significant suggestions on Accreditation, Program Accreditation by NBA, Ranking, NIRF, and QS Ranking were received from the eminent panellists. Some of the main takeaways were importance of HEI's research output both quantity and quality in enhancing their standings in national and global rankings; improving the quality of data submitted by HEIs through robust data collection system and data validation which helps in increasing the effectiveness of ranking; pathway for top institutes featured in NIRF to participate in global rankings to ensure 10 Indian HEIs are in the top 100 in global rankings by 2047; etc.

In another Panel Discussion on Role of HEIs in Promoting STEM & Enhancing GER through Vidya Shakti, the Department of Higher Education expressed its aim to increase STEM enrolment to meet the demands of technologically driven fields by implementing the Vidya Shakti Scheme. This initiative will establish 10,000 Rural Interaction Centres (RICs) over two years, targeting 500,000 students from 8th to 12th grade, focusing on female students. The curriculum, developed by IIT Madras, includes practical exercises and simulation software. Local Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) will act as hubs, with students serving as mentors or "Shiksha Saarthis." The scheme will

use CSCs, leveraging their successful educational outreach. IIT Madras will provide ongoing training and support to mentors.

The session was moderated by Prof. V. Kamakoti, Director, IIT Madras. Shri P. Nagarajan, Managing Trustee, Open Mentor Trust, was one of the panellists and the Keynote Speaker. Panellists who shared their insights were Shri Himanshu Nagpal, Chief Development Officer, Varanasi; Shri Rajender Aekka, South India Secretary, EKAL Gramothan Foundation; and Smt. R Aruan, Lecturer, SEMAT Andhra Pradesh.

During the discussion, it was highlighted that the NEP 2020 must address the needs of grassroots communities. While COVID-19 was a brief disruptor, it paved the way for digital education. Vidya Shakti Scheme emerged as a product of these disruptions. Under the NEP 2020, the goal is to achieve a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to over 50% by 2030.

The Vidya Shakti Scheme, implemented by IIT Madras, was discussed in length which has started in 5 villages in Tamil Nadu and has now expanded to 504 RICs across India and Sri Lanka.

The success of the Digital Didi program in empowering rural women and creating jobs by training 3,300 teachers in science and math simulations in Varanasi and Andhra Pradesh and significant improvements in students' attention spans, retention capacity, and performance in weekly micro assessments were highlighted.

Action plan of centralized live online teaching for grades 5-12 in the students' mother tongue by using simulation software to demonstrate experiments and virtual labs to enhance learning for weekly micro assessments to track student progress and understanding and how it is being implemented was also discussed.

The potential of virtual reality sessions and STEM kits to engage students in practical learning was also highlighted. To address the educational gaps at Vidya Shakti, it is crucial to assess the extent of these gaps comprehensively. Evaluating the current situation involves understanding both academic performance and socio-economic factors. Additionally, shifting parental perceptions through awareness and engagement can help break the cycle of poverty by improving educational outcomes.

The EKAL School initiatives were also discussed, focusing on the single-teacher institutions in rural and tribal areas and the EKAL's on-wheel program, which converts buses into mobile computer labs to ensure rural students, including the drop-out children, receive computer literacy.

EKAL Scheme for Virtual Education and Employment Skills emphasize on the provision of generic maths and science teaching through virtual mode, manual software training for homemaker women, and promotion of employment skills to enable women to work online from their homes.

The discussion focused on integrating STEM education, adopting a holistic approach, and strengthening literacy and numeracy. Key points included technology integration, and experiential learning, support flexibility in curricula, continuous teacher development, and industry collaboration while prioritizing equity, research, and accessible resources.

The Panellists recommended valuable suggestions for the way forward, such as engaging at the grassroots level by interacting with parents of higher education students to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER); collaborating with higher education institutes to significantly boost the GER and foster research and innovation across all higher education institutes; utilizing initiatives like Vidya Shakti to enhance GER by expansion of the number of RICs to cover more villages and ensure every rural child has access to quality education; etc.

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(Release ID: 2039220)