

Strengthening the learning and research base

V K Ramachandran

Vice-Chairperson of Kerala State Planning Board, Government of Kerala

If Kerala is on the map today for its outstanding achievements in the overall field of development, a large part of that progress must be attributed to the emphasis that public action paid to the State led formal education. The combination of land reform and formal education, referred to by Professor Isaac and the freedom and progress that comes from that has been the basis of the progress of our State with respect to health, social welfare, and the growth of disposable incomes. Our international participants should also know that, Kerala also has the highest per capita consumer expenditure among all the states in India. So that is developed from our progress in what we have called human development indicators. Progress has been most striking in school education, of course, in the 1980s and onwards Kerala is the only state that fulfilled investment levels in school education, that were comparable to that of South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, etc. In recent years, the impact of the present government policy and the investments that have been made in upgrading infrastructure and the quality of education, have been extraordinary.

One of the most striking developments in India's public education scenario over the last five years, and perhaps over a much longer period is that since 2017, more than 500,000 school pupils in the state of Kerala have transferred from the fee paying private system to government schools. Now this is an absolutely extraordinary situation to compare what exists in the rest of India. To the sparkling modern structure that now exists in many parts of the state with new desks and school furniture with electronic whiteboards in schools. This is surely one of the most moving and perhaps most important signs of what can be achieved by a combination of investment, political will and people's participation in the field of knowledge. The Chief Minister mentioned briefly something about experience in higher education, and I see Professor Isaac, but despite our progress, despite our history, the overall

experience has been that the state is yet to establish itself as an outstanding location for higher learning and research.

The knowledge economy must be based on a strong, independent flourishing and inclusive system of higher education with systematic, that is not ad hoc state support. It is, as Professor Lundvall said that may not be a sufficient condition, but certainly this is a necessary condition for our knowledge economy and knowledge society.

The broad themes that are of immediate importance to us in the area of higher education are as follows. One is the whole problem with higher education finance. This is an enormous problem particularly in the state in an economic structure where we are perpetually in a state of financial stringency and difficulties. Take for instance, a university that serves in the northern district, Kannur University. We spend about Rs.75 crores non plan and Rs.22 crores plan expenditure. This is what we allocate or what we spend to something else. So the plan expenditure that we allocate to a university that serves about 25000 to 30,000 people on the main campus and is accountable to about 150,000 people altogether. We spend only about Rs.22 crores in the plan and about Rs.75 crores on regular expenditure in a year. How we're going to break through this is an enormous question.

The second area is that of curricular innovation strategies to strengthen our specific disciplinary knowledge, while simultaneously introducing methodological development from other disciplines at later stages of education of the higher education system. The third area is trying to explore how new technologies of instructions moves for instance, but can best be introduced in colleges and universities and set up inter university groups for sharing knowledge.

The next area which is very important for us is institutional innovation. Learning from and establishing successful institutional innovations to make Kerala's universities academically autonomous and develop flexible administrative regulations that are transparent and responsive to the requirements of teachers and students. The next area in which we are trying to study and concentrate our attention is networks for teaching, research and student exchange that is to substantially expand our national and transnational networks for teaching, research and student exchange. We are looking very seriously at how to expand innovations in libraries, technology and information availability to college students, university students all over the state. Finally, we need to retain and strengthen the socially inclusive character of higher education, which is our historical heritage and legacy.

We recognize the crucial role that skill training and development play. We have certain strengths here. A relative abundance of educated and skilled workers, a long history of entrepreneurship and exposure to the wider world. We are quite interested in some of the International Labor Organization (ILO) proposals in the area of skill development and employability, particularly the need to link training to current labor market needs as well as anticipating and building competencies for jobs for the future. A key aspect of the ILO framework is to expand access to formal employment related training in order to equip women and men to work in the formal economy.

Let me end by saying that where there is a combination in Kerala particularly of government will from above and the civic cooperation in people's participation from below. Where these are joined together, as I believe they will now join in our striving for a knowledge economy for a better system of higher education and a huge improvement in system of skill development. Then that force in this state becomes unstoppable.

Thank you very much, and I wish you all success to this to this deliberations, and I look forward to learning from the results of your deliberations.