

An Investigation on Education Planning and Its Impact on National and Regional Development

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Abstract

Education, especially at the basic level, is strongly and significantly considered as a substantially king-size key to the attainment of national and, in its broad sense, regional development. It empowers people, strengthens nations and promotes economic growth, national productivity and innovation, and also values of democracy and social cohesion. Investment in education benefits not only the individual and society but also the world as a whole. It has a direct and proven impact on the goals related reproductive health and also environmental sustainability.

Broad-based education of good quality is among the most powerful instruments known to reduce poverty and inequality. With proven benefits for personal health, it also strengthens nations' economic health by laying the foundation for sustained economic growth. For individuals and nations, it is key to creating, applying and spreading knowledge — and thus to the development of dynamic, globally competitive economies. And it is fundamental for the construction of democratic societies.

Keywords: education, national and regional development, economy, society

Introduction

First, I must present the orientation against which I wish to peg my paper. I believe that EDUCATION is a lifelong process with identifiable bus stops or milestones. In education, the journey is as important as the destination and there can be no “End of the Affair” without “The Heart of the Matter”.

Advancement and application of knowledge increases both the economic and social development globally. Education in general and high level of schooling in particular, is fundamental to the construction of a knowledge economy and society in all nations. Despite this, problems of finance, equity, quality, efficiency and governance in higher institutions which provide these services are some of the difficulties in attaining higher level of education.

Most educational institutions have been subjected to underfunding by the government which resulted in declining level of educational output. For this reason, public policies on education must take the needs of the country in terms of developing human capital into full account, since there are limited resources for developmental growth.

Education is means of enriching individuals' knowledge, develop their full personality and also prepare them to perform functions that are essential in transforming their society, therefore, education can be considered as a consumer good and capital good as well.

Investment in human capital is essential in order to increase employability, economic prosperity and social welfare. It is important to give priority to the development of human capital in order to cope with the present and future challenges, the best means to achieve this is through education but, enough resources have to be allocated to this sector of the economy in other existing resources and a large appeal to private investment, the utilization of these resources must be maximized to ensure that both individuals and the nation at large benefit from it. This indicates the reason for a better use of research findings for educative policies.

Values education and national development

The concept of national development (economic, political and social) is said to bring with it valuable and positive changes that improve the living standards of the people, as it creates employment opportunities and equality of opportunity and also reduces poverty, among other things. “Education values” involves educating for character and for good moral values. It is the teaching of respect, responsibility and accountability (and other values) to the citizens for good character development and for the health of the nation.

I strongly believe that respect and responsibility are the two fundamental “moral values” that a society should teach its citizens. Other values are honesty, fairness, tolerance, prudence, self-discipline, helpfulness, compassion, cooperation, courage and other democratic values. However, rule of law, equality of opportunity,

due process, representative government, checks and balances and democratic decision-making are “procedural values” that define democracy. All these would enable the people to create a viable humane society and to act “respectfully and accountably”. Thus taking responsibility for the things we do wrong as well as the things we do right is the way to move the society forwards. Accountability matters!

Nevertheless, morality would not be important to the youth if it does not matter to adults. The youths need inspiring role models who make positive contributions to their communities because many of them that are “ethically illiterate” are growing up not knowing that without good moral upbringing of the youths today the nation may not produce enough good leaders to manage its affairs tomorrow.

Experts in “moral education” believe that “moral development” promotes critical thinking and moral reasoning, which positively impacts national development. “Moral education” or “values moral education” is essential for the success of a democratic society. “Because the people must possess the appropriate character to build a free and just society and the moral foundations to make democracy thrive in the society where it had never been cultivated.

I personally believe that good character and “loyalty to these democratic virtues must be instilled in the people at an early age. Good character as “as the life of right conduct in relation to other persons and in relation to oneself. Therefore, good character includes knowing what is good, desiring what is good and doing what is good. Other attributes of a good character include respect for the rights of others, regard for the law of the land, taking responsibility for one’s actions in public and private life concerning the common good. These virtues are necessary for leading a moral life of the individuals and also for the health of the nation and, therefore, “strong personal character should manifest itself in rendering service to organizations and communities.

However, the leaders should understand that “values education” does not occur in a vacuum – the leaders must plan it. The challenge for the political leaders is to confront the country’s problems with innovative ideas and include “values education” (teaching of respect and responsibility along with accountability and other democratic values) in the nation’s school curricula for good character development and sustainable national development.

I see education as the process through which individuals are presented with a number of experiences to make them acquire relevant knowledge and skills that will make them useful to themselves and their individual communities. Thus, it is a contradiction in terms to refer to a person as an “educated thief” or an “educated liar” etc. If you are educated, you cannot be a liar, or a thief, or a fraud.

The benefits of education to both individuals and society are as follows they :

- a. contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
- b. develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and the society;
- c. develop the capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
- d. acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environment;
- e. promote and encourage scholarship and community services;
- f. forge and cement national unity;
- g. promote national and international understanding and integration;
- h. increase productivity and earnings;
- i. reduce inequality;
- j. drive economic competitiveness;
- k. have synergetic, poverty-reducing effects;
- l. contribute to democratization;
- m. promote peace and stability;
- n. promote concern for the environment;

The summary of all these is that whatever is socially and morally unobjectionable and is desirable is good for the individual and individuals who always pursue such desirable objectives will always be good members of their respective communities. An educated or disciplined man must have something to do and know how to do it. Consequently, education helps the individual discover and actualize himself by developing relevant skills in a given field of endeavor.

The role of university in national development

The role of the university in this venture is to serve as a center of learning, a center of excellence whose primary goal is the search for truth. To do this, it must carry out research activities and formulate theories that can guide policy decision-making processes. Another role of the university is teaching and the training of skilled,

high-level professional manpower needed for the rapid development of the nation. In all these, it aims at impacting on the society and also responding to influences from it.

When we consider all these, I am sure the answer to the question I am going to ask now will become obvious. The question is, “As presently operated, is our educational system capable of moving us into the 21st century and beyond?” Have we succeeded in actualizing ourselves? Has our education been able to equip us to meet the challenges of the 21st century? I want to give only one illustration to guide you in arriving at an answer.

We all, I hope, appreciate the place of research and documentation in policy formulation. However, the image of the researcher is that of someone who is unbiased and distanced from the emotional battles of politics. Partly because of this, the policy maker hardly involves the university researcher in carrying out studies that impact on policy formulation and, occasionally when he does, it is only for cosmetic purposes. There is no link between research and policy in Iran. Several reasons may account for this:

- a. the outcome of research does not represent the only issue that informs policy formulation;
- b. most of our research endeavors are literature induced rather than being policy or issue induced;
- c. there is no enduring philosophy of national development;
- d. there is mutual suspicion between the researcher and the policy maker even though one fundamental principle of administration is that those who determine and formulate policies should be well advised by those who should implement them.

The long and short of all this is that our educational system has not acquired the necessary ingredients to make it an instrument for national development. Many of the graduates of our institutions of learning are virtually illiterates. Our products are discriminated against in some advanced countries. The system does not equip its recipients to be able to use their heads and their hands. And then there is the *acceleration* of history which demands that our practices are constantly reinvented and reengineered. The skills required to move a nation forward in 2012 and forth are different from the skills required to maintain a stable society some fifty years ago when history was gradually *evolving*.

Why are we where we are?

It is conventional and convenient to heave all the blame for our educational predicaments on the manner in which American-type education was brought to Iran. But the position we sponsor in this paper is that, it is not only unfair but also self-defeatist to blame the missionaries or even the colonial masters. The education brought by the missionaries was relevant and sufficient for their evangelical designs. Thus, we should look elsewhere for the reasons for our thirty-three years challenges and several Reforms after Islamic Revolution. The following factors readily recommend themselves:

1. We have not succeeded, as a people, in evolving an enduring philosophy of national development, a philosophy that will spell out in what direction we want to develop as a people, a philosophy that should not change even when political power changes hands. If we don't know where we are going we can't assess how far we have travelled.
2. Consequently, rather than planning for the future, we are merely drifting into the future. Our policies and “reforms” are mostly regime or person based rather than being based on issues and projects that would move the nation forward. The consequences of this is the begin-again syndrome which characterizes every change of political power. Even the data on which strategic planning can be based are not usually readily available and, in any case, policy makers are suspicious of university researchers. Our policy-formulation process is a top-down arrangement and stakeholders whose responsibility is to implement these policies are hardly ever involved in the process of their formulation.
3. There is the problem of a lopsided or out-rightly confused value system. To the average Iranian today, it is not clear what the “good” life is. It is a matter of the end justifying the means and, as far as most Iranians today are concerned, that end is amassing wealth by all means, fair or foul. This also affects happenings in our institutions of learning where today all that matters is obtaining a certificate by whatever means.
4. There is the growing gap between theory and practice, between town and gown, and between the school and the world of work outside school. They once referred to Universities as Towers. There is no link between the tertiary institutions and the employment bodies nor is there any link between what we teach and the skills required of graduates by the world outside. We are merely producing graduates who do not fit in anywhere after school because the situation out there has changed. There must be well over ten million university graduates in Iran today who are jobless. We no longer pursue activities that promote scholarship. Handouts have virtually replaced meaningful classroom interactions and our universities have virtually become examination centers. Our assessment practices are faulty just as our methods of

teaching merely emphasize memorial regurgitation of isolated pieces of information. Our research endeavors are not original and both teachers and students now engage in unbridled plagiarism.

5. There is the share incoherence, inconsistency and incomprehensibility in our plans, programs and policies. This leaves the students and teachers constantly confused. Before one policy is internalized and implemented, another one is introduced to replace it. There is no sense of history as every regime condemns the immediate past regime and evolves its own policies to replace those of its predecessors.

What's the Way Forward?

I am optimistic that we can still review our educational system and make it more relevant to the needs of Iranians and Iran as a developing country. In particular, I believe that postgraduate (or graduate) students in our universities have a role to play in national development. The manpower available for moving any nation forward depends on the quality of professionals produced by its tertiary institutions. But these must be graduates who are proficient and skilled and have much more than their paper qualifications to offer.

We expect graduate students to engage in such activities (particularly research activities) that would generate data that can inform policy formulation.

Our position is that the main distinguishing factor between undergraduate and graduate students lies in the quality of research activities carried out by both groups.

We expect that our graduates (who are now engaged in various postgraduate training programs) should acquire the skills of divergent thinking and looking at issues objectively if they are to contribute to national development, especially as it relates to fostering unity among the various ethnic groups that form the Iranian nation.

But for you to be able to play these roles and more, certain conditions must conduce:

- a. We must have an enduring philosophy of national development and formulate policies that are consistent, coherent and enduring.
- b. We must review and revise our value system such that honesty and hard work are once again recognized and rewarded.
- c. Our education system must be reviewed to guarantee quality assurance at all levels. The main import of quality assurance refers to the tripartite factors of quality input, quality process and quality output.
- d. As hinted earlier, I believe that the main essence of any postgraduate work is to conduct research. Any postgraduate student who feels a deficiency can audit some courses of his choice. Consequently, I believe that postgraduate students should change their attitude to research activities. They should see them as their own efforts rather than the products of the supervisors' efforts and be ready to take responsibility for the outcome of their research activities. Such research activities should now be problem or issue induced rather than being literature induced. They must address relevant contemporary national issues. They must follow what I have personally in educational management faculty (2012) identified as the PAF model: Participatory Research, Action Research and Formative Research. An example of such research activities is the SWOT analysis which refers to the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats involved in any particular government program.
An idea worth considering is the need for joint activities even if they would involve interdepartmental or even interdisciplinary or inter-institutional collaboration. For that reason, supervision of students' theses should also involve panels comprising of experts in various fields. Such research activities would now need to be more issue based than literature based. The goal, against the backdrop of the imperatives of the acceleration of history, should now be integration and collaboration rather than compartmentalization, collective efforts rather than individual efforts, cross-cultural rather than mono-cultural approaches, national issues rather than personal issues, information sharing rather than mere research for certification. The right hand should (and can) now know what the left hand is doing. Cooperation should now replace competition. If you want to move fast, move alone; if you want to move far, move with others.
- e. If the experiences of our postgraduate students are to equip them for functioning as responsible members of their communities, we must bring about a paradigm shift in our curriculum matters. Such a shift must move us away from existing beliefs and practices:
 - from curriculum as a finished, static product to curriculum as a dynamic process;
 - from teaching to learning;
 - from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches;
 - from schooling to life-long learning;
 - from compartmentalized learning to integrated learning;
 - from rote learning to applied learning;

- from *how much* to *how well* students have learnt; etc.
- f. In my undergraduate days, a lot of mentoring was going on in our universities. As a graduate student, I was involved in coordinating tutorials for final-year students and eventually took over two courses when my supervisor was appointed a commissioner in his state. I believe that this practice should be revived and strengthened. Those who presently lecture in our universities will not be there forever. And I believe that, whatever system is operated in particular universities, emphasis should shift from course work to seminars and presentation of papers. A similar suggestion is that we should now team teach and team assess the outcome of schooling rather than leaving students' faith in the hands of one lecturer alone. Some people have even gone beyond this to recommend that all university teachers must obtain some proficiency in pedagogical matters.
- As you deliberate on these and other possibilities, I think we must spare some moments to appreciate the following efforts put in place by some government agencies and universities:
- a. using students to assess program offerings;
 - b. encouraging academic staff to obtain professional qualifications;
 - c. award of special scholarships for Ph.D programs;
 - d. the Iranian University Doctoral Theses Award Scheme (IUDTAS) to encourage high-quality research among doctoral students; etc.

Conclusion

To a hungry man, half bread is better than none, but to a man thirsty for education, half education is worse than no education at all. Whatever you find yourself doing, do it well.

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