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India's Prime Minister Assails Universities as Below Average and 'Dysfunctional'

By SHAILAJA NEELAKANTAN

New Delhi

India's prime minister revealed on Friday that almost two-thirds of the nation's universities and 90 percent of its degree-granting colleges are rated as below average and that university curricula are typically not synchronized with the needs of employers or job seekers.

The prime minister, Manmohan Singh, also criticized faltering levels of enrollment. "In almost half the districts in the country, higher-education enrollments are abysmally low," Mr. Singh said in an address at a 150th-anniversary celebration at the University of Mumbai. "Less than 50 percent of secondary-school students continue into college education in any form," he said.

Earlier this month, a local newspaper disclosed details of a confidential report on Indian higher education by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council, an arm of the country's higher-education regulator, the University Grants Commission. The newspaper said that the council had assessed 123 universities and 2,956 colleges across India and found that 90 percent of colleges and 68 percent of universities were of middling or poor quality -- statistics that Mr. Singh confirmed in his speech.

The newspaper also said the council had found that 25 percent of faculty positions at universities remain vacant, 57 percent of teachers in colleges lack either an M.Phil. or a Ph.D., and there is only one computer for every 229 students, on average, in colleges. In India, colleges are mostly affiliated with universities and usually offer undergraduate education only.

The country's university system is in a state of disrepair, Mr. Singh noted. "We need better facilities, more and better teachers, a flexible approach to curriculum development to make it more relevant, more-effective pedagogical and learning methods, and more-meaningful evaluation systems," he said.

He called for using innovative methods to synchronize curricula with job demands of India's expanding economy and to hire and retain highly qualified faculty members. Educators, Mr. Singh suggested, need to look at alternative ways of improving the

remuneration of professors, of tapping into the large pool of professors of Indian origin around the world, and of linking Indian institutions with the best universities worldwide to promote cross-fertilization of ideas.

The prime minister also sharply criticized the governance at India's state universities, saying, "a dysfunctional education system can only produce dysfunctional future citizens." He expressed concern that, in many states, the appointment of university officials -- including vice chancellors, the chief-executive position -- has been politicized. "There are complaints of favoritism and corruption," he said. "We should free university appointments from unnecessary interventions on the part of governments and must promote autonomy and accountability."

Elaborating on an announcement this month that the government will set up at least one central university in each of the 16 states that lack one, Mr. Singh said a total of 30 new central universities would be opened across the country.

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