

SOME CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

In the last sixty six years of independence, India has developed the world's largest system of education but it would be worthwhile to draw attention to the growth of numbers and the decline in quality. There is an aura of dissatisfaction among the public as the educational system in India today is resistant to change. There are many loose ends in the system making it neither relevant nor effective. The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed some dramatic changes that were ushered in mainly because of the break-down of political barriers and the unprecedented developments in the field of information technology. And this transformation which society is going through, calls for a rejuvenation in what we teach and how we teach. The whole educational ethos needs to undergo a change. The total structuring of educational institutions, a metamorphosis in curriculum, a check on unplanned breeding of institutions, a deliberate curbing of unguided and blind student enrolment is required for brining desired results.

KEYWORDS: Globalization, Autonomy, Standards, Vocationalisation, Information Technology, Empowerment, Appraisal.

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INTRODUCTION:

The entire scenario of higher education needs to be perceived in view of the socio-cultural, political and technological Advancements with the background of a cry for globalisation and the emphasis on the concept of global village. The 21st century is striving for the development of highest technological and informative skills in order to convert the whole world into a global village and the establishment of vast cyber space network in the developed and developing nations is bound to create such an impact on the world which was never thought before. There is a need to plan and implement the fundamental reforms in the higher education and every effort has to be made in facing the challenges which we are confronting. Funds and finances also cannot come to rescue in the direction of improving quality of higher education. It urgently needs the attention and sincere efforts on the part of teachers, administrator, educational planners, policy framers and students. Only then we shall be able to tap all our economic and human resources and to complete at national and global level.

India, now cannot afford to have that age old system of producing sub standard graduates who lack the desired skills and competencies, talent and optimum level of knowledge. All the four pillars of learning have to be strengthened viz learning to be, learning to know, learning to do and learning to live together as stated in the UNESCO REPORT 2006. The individuals are to be empowered to unfold their talent and become harmoniously developed personalities. Necessary modifications, innovations and changes have to be brought the existing university system of education of ensure better results. Some of the contemporary issues in higher education are:

1. LEADERSHIP & PLANNING ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL :

The principal acts as a catalyst in pushing the academic ideals for which the college stands. His management style is the only parameter which lends credibility and confidence to the institution besides creating an ambience of academic respect. He is an interactive institution as such. He is the undisputed kingpin of the system who has to make use of all available assets and technological inputs to the institution under his control and stay transparent, committed and unidirectional in the managing the college. The college will thrive on his ideas and intellectual ferment. He has to combine vision with commonality, dissolve un-touch ability syndrome of elite and offer a new ethos based on interactive freedom and sharing of ideas in the spirit in

management strategies to meet the future challenge. The principal has to be an informed professional. His planning has to be incremental. He has to be alive to the needs of the students and teachers through a participatory mode of management while also ensuring maintenance of quality and standards. It is only then that institution can answer the social responsibility call and change this period of transition into an era of fulfillment that can turn out students who are confident to face the world.

2. HOW FAR DISTANCE EDUCATION IS A VIABLE SOLUTION ?

Distance education, in the present day situation, can no longer be considered the 'poor cousin' of the main education system. It has emerged as the only viable alternative to the financial constraints, offering the modern youth wide vistas of education and professional courses so that education can be hailed as continuous life-long process. The mode of education is viable even for those who are already employed in business, industry where updating of knowledge will bring miraculous results. Moreover, the fast increasing population and the financial load on the existing educational institutions makes them too weary to retain the burden and requires an immediate relieving system. It would cater to the needs of those who want to carry on their education but are not able to do so through conventional system. Open universities are serving this purpose to the fullest of their capacity. And the universities with dual modes of learning are sharing their work. So both these modes of education have to be nurtured and groomed together and should act as supporters of each other. A due preference should be given to the distance mode of education over the conventional university system so that education can be brought at the doorstep of the learner. One assumption should be kept in mind here that the open universities must be fully equipped with the modern technological facilities and they do not sacrifice quality at any cost.

3. FINANCING OF HIGHER EDUCATION : WHAT IS THE WAY OUT?

The issue of financing of higher education involves the debate as to whether education should be only a state responsibility or it should be shared by the private agencies ? The expenditure that universities are incurring should be financed by the Government machinery or the private sector. The lack of public funding for education is a phenomenon experienced not only by our country

but almost all developing countries of the world. Most of the government are shirking and withdrawing from the responsibility. It is paradoxical that as long as higher education was elitist, governments were able to meet almost the full cost of higher education. But with its 'massification', governments now find it difficult to meet even the essential requirements (Ziderman and Albrecht, 1995). Hence a shift in focus and private sector has come forward to bring improvement in the existing financial crunch of the public sector. A proper planning is required for collaboration between both the sectors where the idea of privatisation would go a long way in revitalizing the public machinery. It is suggested at various platforms that universities, even though, are financially managed by the governments should be helped by other institutions and funding agencies at the time of financial crisis.

4. HOW FAR WE CAN MEET THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS ?

The development of a country is primarily determined by the quality of the human resources which basically rests on the level of information, the standard of knowledge, the fruitfulness of skills and attitudes. So quality has become a necessity and total quality management now applies to all aspects and areas of human life and living. Quality in higher education attains an utmost importance because of the facilities available for students and faculty to expose themselves to international experiences. The students who are taught in our institutions should be able to compete with other taught elsewhere in the world. So quality assurance has to be a deep concern and all institutions must strive to elevate themselves and must be evaluated by National Assessment & Accreditation Council (NAAC) and National Board of Accreditation (NBA).

5. ARE OUR RESEARCHES WORTHWHILE ?

The researches being carried out at the higher education level are most of the times not very relevant, and productive. Some of the studies are just imitations or duplication of what is being done in the countries abroad. We have to make them relevant particularly in Indian Context otherwise the whole pursuit would turn out to be futile. The research should aim not only at enabling the researchers to earn Ph. D. degree and attain promotion, it should also aim at solving the existing problems that we are facing in the field of education.there is not much motivation for doing good quality research or for solving real worthwhile problems or for creating an impact on international research (J.N. Kapur, 1996).

Some of them are terminally ill. It is not to suggest that which do not suffer from these maladies and which do not infuriate us are not there. There are still some of the universities which are well governed despite limitations and have been adjudged as the by UGC and National Accreditation and assessment council. Universities must seek recognition and stay firmly at the forefront of research and continue exploring emerging niche areas and focus efforts on pioneering innovation and reliable home grown technologies relevant to social requirements and economic growth.

6. URGE FOR EXCELLENCE : NEED OF HOUR

Higher education of a spectrum of standards and courses characterized by diversity in all sectors is being offered. Self-regulatory mechanism is not effective. So there is an unplanned opening and control of colleges. The process of privatization has grown during the last two decades and the quality of education has gone down. Many politicians have constituencies in educational institutions of their own creation, sowing dissent and confusion. Nonetheless, colleges are a focal point for national integration and have to be served as such.

Higher education has to enhance human capability through empowerment that knowledge gives. The management role is to assure that the academic inputs are correlated to meet this instinctive competitive excellence in this world. Here not only the teachers have to share the initiative but the management style has also to be participative so as to make teachers responsive and accountable to the students so as to ensure their better performance through inbuilt appraisal methods and incentives with persuasive, non-threatening and non-exploitative means. This will not only give them participative joy but will also give them autonomy of thought and action in the process of teaching and evaluation of their students. As a part of monitoring mechanism, regular in-house meetings with the staff would enthuse and motivate every one towards better performance.

7. UP-GRADATION OF SKILLS THROUGH VOCATIONALISATION

Up-gradation of skills of the students is the need of the hour. This is critical for development and helps to meet the requirements of emerging occupational patterns. Vocational courses offered by the UGC are a laudable initiative to be grabbed by the enterprising principals to prepare

graduates with market sensitive competencies enabling them to take up careers and fill immediate job positions in local and regional market. The scheme is a welcome shift from the conventional worn-out courses to granting hands-on experience and placements with inputs for self-employment. This aims at remediating students towards emerging business needs.

8. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY BOOM AND ITS USES :

In the present age, information is power and technology for dissemination of information has helped all to reach out to people to foster the spirit of change. It is needless to add that computers have revolutionized the entire spectrum of information transmission and brought down the geographic and knowledge barriers among all thinking persons. There is qualitative improvement in the level of acquisition and people have become more interactive and resource sharing to enjoy fruits of development. It is now a major management tool. Besides creating an online database of all audio and visual activities and programmes of the institution, the entire management of accounts, student's admission and examination record, teachers' particulars, and student support services can be through computer. Information node, home-page could be made available to students to expose them to the academic world through the guidance of teachers. There could be use of technologies as teaching tools to improve the quality of instructional methods. Technologies such as video conferencing, call-in and on-line discussion expand or create new types of teaching activity. In fact enhanced use of computer immensely adds to the teaching programmes of the institution. This enables the students to learn anything anywhere and exposes them to the possibilities of the latest information on any subject. Besides this it is cost effective and generates revenues for the college.

9. PROFESSIONAL EMPOWERMENT OF TEACHER:

Teachers are the backbone of the collegiate system. Functional autonomy is the Key to their professional empowerment. Allowing them opportunities of exposure through participation in academic workshops, seminars and conferences at the national and international levels, grants for minor research projects and other curricular activities which will bring them closer to their subject and main stream issue with genuine interest in their teaching. In fact, teachers

empowerment is the right road of institutional power. In fact, Academic Staff Colleges supported by the UGC are precisely a step in this direction.

10. STUDENT ACTIVISM :

Student activism is the bane of the present system. Though participation in election exposes them to the democratic process, yet this results in wastage of quite a few valuable teaching days and even at time result in acrimonious exchanges and politics. Student should be creatively involved in the welfare activities and social out-reach programmes such as NSS, Blood donation activities, Human Rights Education and duties that give them feeling of social participation and pride. They should be co-opted in all sports and academic programmes that promise their enhancement. The principal and teachers have to be their role models.

11. APPRAISAL REQUIREMENTS:

There has to be transparent system of appraisal which enables the teacher to know himself in most unerring terms with a chance to improve, if so required and the student should be allowed to give opinion on the performance of the each teacher. However there should not be any coercive action in the process or as a result thereof. The teacher's autonomy and his integrity should be respected as in his honour lies the future of the students and the institution. The principal has to inspire confidence in all that the teacher does in the institution. It is also not to suggest that the teacher would be free from the basic element of accountability. In fact accountability has to stay through the confidence that the system has to inspire. It has to be self-regulatory mechanism. The principal has to counter any apprehensions on this score.

12. STUDENTS SUPPORT SYSTEM:

For the success of any institution that handles young students, it is necessary that there is a well conceived and articulated student Support system in place. This means that there has to be a procedure for the removal of grievances and difficulties. For this teachers have to involved and made responsible.

13. PERIODIC REVISION OF COURSES:

Universities are generally held in high esteem by the academia. They offer academic innovation and leadership. All courses are prescribed by them for the colleges. These should be upgraded periodically. The principal in consultation with the subject teachers should ensure that the university bodies take up their revision periodically so as to keep with the latest development and subject specific requirements and courses stay in consonance with the market needs. The principal has to be a creative in this exercise.

14. UNIVERSITY COLLEGE RELATIONSHIP – NEED FOR AUTONOMY

Universities usually do not have any time for the college and the colleges are in fact becoming invisible in the scheme of universities. Even otherwise the universities are uneven and complex and at times their roles are both futile and damning. It is , therefore imperative that the colleges should opt for autonomy which will lead to their empowerment and enable them to be functionally and academically autonomous which will lead to their empowerment and enable them to be functionally and academically independent. This will also enable the teachers to enjoy a sence of participation in their teaching and be more proud of their students for whom they will not only tailor the courses but will also be responsible to teach and evaluate them the way they like and in a time own. This would be a chance for the institution to be close to excellence and credentials in this competitive world through its own unassailable inputs. The principal has to be the chief architect of this institutional initiative and has to bring the entire faculty together for this corporate venture.

Perhaps, yes, In the Indian scenario, the abuse of the freedom and autonomy has resulted in making accountable the first casually in all institutions at all levels. Evaluation which is an integral part of accountability is not welcomed by our teachers. They consider it a humiliating and irritating process. The practices like assessment of the teachers by the students, and self-assessment by the teachers are not practiced in our organizations. Annual confendial reports hardly provide any feed-back to our teachers, hence resulting in a far starched misuse of autonomy in class-room, practices. The accountability is at stake in case of students also. They are not accountable to their teachers , are not required to submit any assignment. Moreover , home examinations are also not taken seriously by them, Our students are happy to be assessed

by the unknown external examiners but they shrink to appear in home exams. Even parents want that their wards should not be troubled by home examinations. They are ready to pay a huge amount to the tutors instead of forcing to be attentive in regular classes.

15. HOW FAR IS OUR POLITICAL SYSTEM TO BE BLAMED?

The answer is to a great extent. Our political system has almost gone crazy. Our politicians are not aware of what are our national goals. What is education actually meant for? They never show their concern for the deteriorating quality of education which is being attained by providing poor quality of education to all. Excellence and richness of educational experience are the concepts that they almost avoid to concentrate on.

THE KEY ISSUE: ARE WE READY TO ACCOMPLISH THE TASK?

Let us all keep in mind that if we want to make higher education a means of optimal development of human resources of this country, it can be done only if we broaden our vision, develop and integrate all those skills which are required for the best utilization of human resources. And it requires perseverant efforts and dedicated motivated at individual level, institution level and then at state, national and international level. Let us not consider higher education only a via media of bestowing degrees on our students, but let us make joint efforts to make higher education a means of unifying the quality of life and a support for living a life with dignity and self Esteem. But how far can we accomplish this task? The question still remains unanswered.

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