

A study in mediocrity

Author: C. Raj Kumar

The QS World University Rankings 2012 was released recently. While a number of Asian universities find a mention in the list of the top 200 universities of the world, unfortunately, not even a single Indian university features in the list.

The methodology adopted for this year's rankings has reinforced the importance of research and publications. The weightage of the six indicators used for these rankings are as follows: academic reputation, 40%; citation per faculty, 20%; faculty-student ratio, 20%; employer reputation, 10%; international faculty ratio, 5% and international student ratio, 5%. Academic reputation, which carries the maximum weightage, is based on the views of academics around the world with regard to the universities that produce best research in their field of expertise.

The universities in Asia are working hard and orienting themselves to be research-intensive. Hong Kong and Singapore, although small cities in Asia, have some of the world's leading universities. This year, Hong Kong has five universities and Singapore has two universities in the top 200 list. It is notable that Universiti Malaya in Malaysia is ranked 156 this year and it has been steadily improving over the years.

These rankings have demonstrated the fact that our higher education system needs to be overhauled for India to compete in the world of university education where academic innovation, intellectual freedom and research excellence are constantly promoted. The challenges related to higher education in India deserve an urgent and determined response.

The state of our universities requires careful examination and critical reflection, as there has been a steady deterioration in the ability of our universities to serve as 'knowledge centres'. There are four major challenges that Indian universities must overcome to become truly global universities. These challenges are:

Faculty: One of the most difficult challenges that the Indian university system faces is its inability to make outstanding graduates consider academia as their first career choice. Globalisation and the transformation of the Indian economy have created diverse career opportunities for Indian graduates, both within the country and abroad.

We must make efforts to identify and inspire the best students across India to consider taking up academic positions in India and simultaneously encourage Indian students settled abroad to return and take up faculty positions. We must also realise that democratisation of knowledge creation means giving faculty members the freedom to work in India regardless of their nationality. To attract talent from around the world to India, we will have to re-examine our faculty recruitment policies, including visa regulations and compensation.

Research: Time and again, we have recognised that the lack of rigorous research has been the bane of Indian universities. There is little or no incentive whatsoever for the faculty in most, if not all, Indian universities to undertake research.

Most universities do not promote research because of an overemphasis on teaching in large classes, lack of career development and financial incentives for research; lack of recognition and appreciation among academic peer groups in India; and lack of financial support in the form of research grants for faculty.

This has created a situation in which there are no policies, programmes, initiatives or incentives that encourage research in Indian universities. If Asian universities, particularly those in Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taipei, have enhanced their global reputation over the last decade, it is because they have put an extraordinary emphasis on research. We must follow suit.

Scholarship and Publications: Most of our universities have a rather disproportionate emphasis on teaching. The poor faculty-student ratio doesn't leave faculty members with enough time or opportunity to engage in research. Academic scholarship and the desire to publish among faculty members thrive only in inspiring university communities. Unfortunately, our universities have not been able to inspire faculty members to undertake scholarships that lead to publications.

While teaching is a critical component of education, higher institutions of learning that focus on knowledge creation and research should foster scholarship through the publications of their faculty. The publication of their work and citations of their research by other scholars and policy-makers is one of the most effective ways for a university to gain international recognition.

Indian universities need to recognise that universities, unlike high schools and, to some extent, undergraduate colleges, have a larger commitment towards contributing to knowledge through publications.

Law and Regulations: For Indian universities to get global recognition, the regulatory environment should favour complete autonomy and academic freedom based on the principles of regulatory transparency and institutional accountability. The existing regulatory framework of higher education in India is limited to keeping malpractices in higher education in check. While this is important, this process institutionalises mediocrity, where the ability to inspire confidence among faculty is significantly marginalised. Innovative measures are required to differentiate our universities on the basis of internationally-recognised benchmarks.

All this means that we should be willing to learn and to change, which also includes changing our attitude towards our universities. Our higher education system is crying out for reforms. But to introduce reforms, we must be prepared to introspect and then honestly address all the challenges that our higher education system faces today.

C. Raj Kumar is founding Vice-Chancellor, O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat. The views expressed by the author are personal.