

Still not in a class of their own

Without institutional changes and a broader vision, Indian universities will never be able to become centres of excellence

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Much attention has recently been given to international rankings for assessing the quality of Indian universities, especially in relation to their counterparts across the world. Regardless of the ranking list considered, it remains clear that we have a long way to go. The most important question that we need to ask is this—what future do Indian universities have?

The five major challenges facing Indian universities are listed below:

CRAMPED INSTITUTIONAL VISION: Indian universities are not yet fully absorbed the contemporary global realities of knowledge creation and their relevance for social transformation. With over 50% of its population being below the age of 25, it is critical for the country to acquire a vision that is transformative for its youth. To face the global challenges of knowledge creation, problem solving and employment generation, India's young need not just education, they also need empowerment. It is time that the Indian universities placed an emphasis on interdisciplinary education, recognising the symbiotic relationship between the natural sciences, medicine and other disciplines.

LACK OF INNOVATION: While a large quantitative leap has resulted in the establishment of 650 degree-awarding institutions in India, quality and excellence seems to have suffered greatly in the process. Mediocrity has been institutionalised, leading to a complete lack of creativity and innovation. The mere celebration of a few islands of excellence, mostly specialised single discipline institutions, is not going to

address larger problems. The quality of Indian universities has to be significantly enhanced and the best global practices need to be contextualised for an Indian audience. We need to understand and appreciate the remarkable transformation in higher education that has taken place in other Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore, and China. Like them, we must also transform our curriculum, courses, teaching pedagogy, faculty recruitment and student admission processes.

INDIFFERENCE TO RESEARCH: Research in any and every discipline can have a profound impact on our society. Because of their indifference to research, universities have been unable to provide solutions to social, economic and political problems that affect India. Indian universities ought to become fertile ground for the generation of ideas. Research produces knowledge that offers clarity and a more informed understanding of the subject at hand. Scholarships and publications help create a platform for scholars to reflect upon issues in a critical and coherent manner. Only by giving credit to the history of ideas, will we be able to challenge existing patterns of thought.

ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL FUNDING: The question of funding for Indian universities is inevitably connected to the role of State and regulatory bodies. Major reforms ought to address the acute shortage of funds and availability of resources. The Indian university landscape has a range of actors: state government-funded public universities, central government-funded public universities: state private universities, deemed universities and many other colleges in the form of degree awarding institutions. The current system of a one-size-fits-all policy for funding and resource allocation needs examination. Every aspect of funding and resource allocation — tuition fee, scholarships, infrastructure, faculty, salaries, research funding, endowments, etc — needs to be thoroughly analysed.

MYOPIC LEADERSHIP: Leadership is central not only for providing an institutional vision, but also to reflect upon the larger role of the Indian universities that connect it to professions, the government, intergovernmental organisations, think tanks and NGOs. Leadership is about taking responsibility and being accountable for one's decisions. Unfortunately, leadership of an Indian university continues to be seen as a natural career progression for senior academics who regard a leadership role as their pinnacle of success, when they have but few years left and very little to give. This practice needs a conscious review.

The future of Indian universities will clearly depend upon our ability to create transformational institutions that will inspire young minds with the spirit of enquiry and instill in them the flame of imagination.

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The views expressed by the author are personal