

Reimagine universities to tap India's youth bulge

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses at the launch of Viksit Bharat @ 2047 via video conferencing.(ANI)

Viksit Bharat@2047 has a direct and substantial correlation to India's aspirations for nurturing world-class universities.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047 last month with a focus on empowering the youth of India. He chose to do it during a workshop that was hosted by the governors of all states in the presence of the government's education establishment including ministers, secretaries of

education and the vice-chancellors of universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) from across the country. PM Modi was conscious that the Visions Bharat@2047 vision can only be fulfilled if we empower our universities and HEIs. For our universities and HEIs to fulfil the vision of Visions Bharat in 2047, when the country will celebrate the 100th anniversary of Independence, we need fundamental and radical changes in the governance of Indian universities and HEIs.

The top 10 countries ranked in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Human Development Index (HDI) are Switzerland, Iceland, Australia, Sweden, Germany, Finland, Belgium, Canada, Luxembourg, and Japan. The population of all these 10 countries put together is nearly 310 million. India's population is nearly five times more than the population of all these 10 countries. This is our biggest challenge and also our greatest opportunity.

The concept of development is evolutionary, as expressed in the declaration, 'Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'. The declaration says, "Sustainable development recognises that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, combating inequality within and among countries, preserving the planet, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and fostering social inclusion are linked to each other and are interdependent." Clearly, development in all its forms and manifestations is about people.

Visions Bharat@2047 is about the development of the people of India. Since more than 70% of India are people below the age of 35, the PM has focussed the government's attention on their education and empowerment. The

empowerment of youth will have to be undertaken by the universities and HEIs. It is in these institutions that the future of India is built: India's extraordinary demographic dividend is that it has a billion people who are less than 35 years of age and are seeking education and employment.

At the dawn of Indian Independence, our life expectancy was 32. Today, it is 72. The UN has estimated that by 2100, India's life expectancy will be 82. This means when most parts of the developed world, including the United States and Japan, get older, India will be young and will stay so for a long time. Young Indians will be shaping not just the future of India, but of the world. This requires tenacity, leadership and transformation of India's youth, all of which will depend upon how our universities and HEIs will shape their mindset.

The developed nations of the world have historically prioritised the development of their universities and HEIs. The leading universities of the developed world have been beacons of excellence in teaching, research and capacity building. They attract the finest minds to be faculty and students and have nurtured excellence for centuries. Indian history and civilisational heritage had Nalanda, Takshila, Vikramshila and other such institutions over 2,000 years ago, which played a leadership role in educational excellence.

No developed country in the world has achieved that status without a large number of world-class universities.

Viksit Bharat@2047 has a direct and substantial correlation to India's aspirations for nurturing world-class universities. Over 160 universities in the top 200 of the QS World University Rankings 2024, i.e. 80% of the universities, are located in

developed countries. Among the 10 developing countries whose universities are represented in these rankings, eight are from China; five from Malaysia and two from India.

Two major policy initiatives in the higher education sector in the last decade have a direct and inextricable link to the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047. The first major policy initiative is the National Education Policy 2020. NEP 2020 has provided the foundation for Viksit Bharat@2047 and will significantly help us work towards achieving these goals and aspirations. However, we need to significantly strengthen our institutional mechanisms for implementing NEP 2020. The second initiative is the idea of Institutions of Eminence (IoE).

The PM, while speaking at the centenary celebrations of Patna University in 2017, lamented that no Indian institution was ranked among the top leading institutions of the world and asked: “Isn’t it a slur on us? Shouldn’t the situation change in a country that has had an unmatched legacy in the field of education, with institutions like Nalanda, Vikramshila and many more?” He promised assistance to 10 private universities and an equal number of government ones if they demonstrated their potential to become world-class. Both these policy initiatives have the potential to help India nurture the establishment and development of world-class universities.

The developed nations have created a research ecosystem that helps them to address the big problems of our time. Research-driven economies and societies are better suited to address complex issues of our society. New technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics, and machine learning including Generative AI will fuel the future of education, employment and development. It is not just

the technology that needs upgradation, but the entire regulatory architecture, including laws, rules, regulations, ethics and compliance mechanisms associated with the role of technology calls for reimagination. Unfortunately, our universities are not adequately prepared to embrace this impending change.

A PM's Advisory Council on Universities with VCs of leading public and private universities, that reimagines universities as catalysts for change and impacting the future of India could facilitate the process.

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