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Private sector can help boost higher education quality in India: JGU VC

(IANS Interview)

With higher education institutions in India, barring a handful struggling to make a mark at the global level, Vice chancellor of O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU) in Sonapat, Haryana, Professor C. Raj Kumar, is vouching for greater engagement from the private sector to improve both quality and access to higher education in India.

Professor Kumar -- Rhodes scholar at the University of Oxford, where he obtained his Bachelor of Civil Law (B.C.L.) degree; and a Landon Gammon Fellow at the Harvard Law School -- became the founding VC of the university in 2009 and, in the nine years since, he has guided the institution to rank among the top 450 universities in Asia, as per the QS Asia University Rankings 2019.

In an email interview with IANS, he sheds light on how the higher education system is burdened by over-regulation and why more corporates and high net worth individuals should come forward to support the government in making India a preferred global destination for pursuing higher education and research.

Q: What is ailing India's higher education system? What kind of reforms, according to you, can improve the system?

A: The Indian higher education system is over-regulated and under-governed. This is evident in recent government policies that aim to reduce regulatory oversight through initiatives such as Graded Autonomy for well-performing

institutions, and the Institutions of Eminence project that will allow for selected institutions to self-regulate on key aspects such as recruitment, admissions and collaborations. However, given the gap in scale, access and relative quality of higher education in the country, further reforms are urgently needed to match the rapid expansion of the sector with performance and quality. We also need greater engagement from private actors, including from industry, to promote quality in higher education.

Q: What is stopping private universities in India from becoming world-class universities?

A: If one were to look at the parameters on which international ranking agencies such as THE (Times Higher Education), QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) and ARWU (Academic Ranking of World Universities) operate, one would notice common metrics such as research, reputation and internationalisation. Indian universities primarily focus on teaching and less on research. Secondly, functions of internationalisation (i.e. hiring of foreign faculty members, admitting foreign students and building student mobility programmes) within higher education institutions are currently over-regulated by the government. For private universities to flourish, there needs to be greater balance between government oversight, functional autonomy and a diversified funding ecosystem within the country for such institutions.

Q: How can Indian universities improve rankings in list of the world's top universities?

A: Indian universities need to prioritise research impact and outcomes. There is greater need for funding in Indian universities, which ought to come from both public and private sources. Secondly, the regulations that encumber the internationalisation efforts of universities need to be eased. Universities need to be encouraged to promote all forms of internationalisation. We need to create an ecosystem in which students from other parts of the world should desire to study in India just as we create opportunities for student mobility programmes where Indian students go abroad for various short- and long-term programmes. All of this will require greater support from the government and private actors.

Q: What measures should India put in place to improve access to higher education among the underprivileged?

A: While public universities now provide the broadest access to students from under-represented and disadvantaged communities, private higher education institutions need to play a far greater role in expanding access to quality higher education in India. The higher education sector is yet to see meaningful private participation in a not-for-profit mode where corporates and high net worth individuals support access to quality higher education. O.P. Jindal Global University is a stellar example of private, not-for-profit and corporate philanthropy in higher education. Unfortunately, for a large country like India, there are very few such examples and we need more of them.

Q: What role do you see for universities in shaping the future of the nation?

A: A nation is built on the basis of its people and, indeed, institutions. Visionaries who inspire others and change the way of doing things are critical in every effort to build a nation. In order for our citizens to dream, aspire and inspire, there needs to be greater imagination and efforts in creating enabling and inspiring environments in the form of university spaces where teaching, learning and research can happen. Institution-building is central to nation-building and that is how we can create an enabling environment for the future.