seminar

Building World-Class Universities in India

C. RAJ KUMAR, VICE CHANCELLOR, O.P. JINDAL GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

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THERE is today a serious debate on the need for Indian universities to be in the top 200 universities of the world and the urgency of seeking reforms that will pave way for promoting excellence in higher education and research. The issue of deterioration in the academic standards in most Indian universities is indeed a matter of concern. A more serious aspect of the problem facing the universities in India is in relation to the lack of availability of outstanding faculty members who are inspiring teachers and rigorous researchers.

In this context, there is a need to understand and reflect upon what is needed to build world-class universities in India. How are they established, nurtured and developed over the years, decades and centuries? What makes a university world class? What ought to be the parameters to assess the quality of universities and whether they should vary from society to society? What ought to be the internal governance structure of those universities? What should India do to build world-class universities?

World-class universities are built on the basis of a strong foundation that has an inspiring vision and a mission to fulfil the vision. The vision should reflect the ideals and aspirations of the university. Universities should be created with a strong vision that is built around the needs of a society. But these needs ought to be broad based and should reflect the collective imagination of a community. Universities are inherently pluralistic in nature, where there is diversity of disciplines and perspectives. The vision of a university should reflect that pluralism, while recognizing that there is no one model of a university.

Indian universities need to re-examine their founding vision on the basis of which they were established. It helps to articulate a vision of the university even after many years of its establishment, as the vision will help in galvanizing the academic consciousness among faculty, students and staff towards fulfilling a set of goals and objectives. The vision of the university should incorporate a far-sighted approach towards learning

and imagination among faculty and students, but be fully conscious of the reality of the university's existing challenges.

Universities don't become world-class institutions as soon as they are created, but evolve to become world-class through long years of work pursued by the commitment and dedication of students, faculty and staff. Even then, promoting excellence is an evolving project and that is why the vision of the university helps shape its present and future.

World-class universities around the world are established and developed through a great deal of commitment of resources. The question of funding of Indian universities is inevitably connected to the role of state and regulatory bodies. There is a crying need for major reforms that can address the crisis that prevails due to acute shortage of funding 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 one size fits all policy of funding and resource allocation on the basis of this classification of universities needs to be re-examined. The existing hierarchies of classifications for funding and resources have not been able to identify properly the true potentiality of Indian universities to become quality institutions. Every aspect of funding and resource allocation, ranging from tuition fee, scholarships for students, infrastructure in universities, faculty salaries, library development, research funding, including research infrastructure, endowments and philanthropy and many other issues for which sub-

stantial resources are required, needs a thorough re-examination.

There is not enough understanding and realization that the resources that are required to build world-class universities are significant. Arguably, the precious resources that need to be available for universities may not, and indeed, cannot come from the state. It is in this context that there is a need for promoting private universities in India. Deterioration in the academic standards of public universities in India is due to a number of factors, including, but not limited to poor infrastructure at our university campuses, lack of motivation among faculty to perform, inability of universities to create a research environment for faculty publications, absence of interdisciplinary programmes for the students, lack of innovation in curriculum and course design, inadequate compensation for faculty and faculty development initiatives, and a bureaucratic and hierarchical governance structure that does not motivate faculty members to perform.

The establishment of private universities in India did not lead to positive changes in the quality of education. Rather, private universities in general in India have been, unfortunately, equated with all the problems of the public universities. In addition, many private universities tend to be engaged in malpractices that have undermined the reputation of private university education. They have fostered a culture of mediocrity and dubiousness, both of which have led to adverse consequences for higher education.

There is thus, need for a paradigm shift in the availability of funding and resources. For example, resources for pursuing research, knowledge creation leading to publications should not be given on the basis of whether a university is public or private. It should

be based upon the nature of faculty and research capacities that prevail in the university and how best to augment those available resources with a view to advancing the research agendas.

The role of the government in higher education and university governance deserves a serious examination. At present, the role of the government in the case of state universities is significant and the higher education department of the state government is deeply involved in every aspect from the creation of the university to granting of approvals and permissions that need to be obtained for administering the university. This poses serious problems for university governance. The existing framework for the establishment of a university (public and private) in India requires legislation passed in the state legislative assembly or the national Parliament or through a decision of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

There are elaborate procedures in place led by the higher education departments within the state government that are involved in every aspect of institution building even before the creation of the university. While this is desirable, there is a need to recognize that once the university is established, the role of the government departments and agencies will have to undergo a significant change. They ought to become facilitators and ensure autonomy and independence of the universities, so that the institutions are able to grow on their own. The need for seeking approvals and permissions from government departments for starting new academic programmes or new disciplines should be dispensed with so that the internal governance mechanisms of the university are activated to work effectively.

A serious concern for the higher education policy makers and educationists is the need to maintain high academic standards. There is a fear that in the absence of external checks and balances, universities will exercise powers in an arbitrary manner and offer courses and programmes which are devoid of academic content. This argument is problematic at different levels: first, it distrusts the university as an academic institution which is expected to act with a sense of responsibility; second, it creates an atmosphere of suspicion and animosity where faculty members of a university, who are expected to take critical decisions relating to the academic programmes, are not in a position to drive the academic agenda; and third, it creates opportunities for vested interests and corruption at the level of government departments exercising such powers.

A better way to deal with this problem is to make the process of establishing a university more rigorous and transparent. The necessary conditions that need to be fulfilled to create a university should reflect the highest academic standards, availability of qualified faculty members and the necessary resources and objective measures to assess the bonafide intentions of the promoters of private universities. After the decision to establish a university is taken the government's role should be one of a facilitator and not that of a regulator. There is a need to empower departments, faculties and internal governance mechanisms within Indian universities so that they are able to take responsibility and are duly accountable for their decisions. Steadily, the role of government departments in the decision-making of the university should be negligible, if at all.

World-class universities are not developed through government departments exercising powers over institutions; they are nurtured only when faculty members, students, staff and other stakeholders of the university are able to take decisions about the university in an independent and transparent manner.

O ne of the significant challenges of Indian universities is the role and responsibilities of regulatory bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC), Bar Council of India (BCI), Medical Council of India (MCI), All Indian Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and such other bodies. On the one hand, there is a need to ensure quality in universities and higher education institutions for which some degree of regulatory assessment and external accountability is essential. On the other, if we don't achieve the right balance, there is a serious risk of regulatory capture where higher education policies will not be driven by innovation and creativity in institution building, but by bureaucratic timidity, archaic rules and regulations and callous indifference of the regulatory bodies, besides nepotism and outright corruption.

The current approach stifles innovation and creativity in the Indian university system where the regulatory bodies play a significant role in many aspects of university governance. Besides the more pivotal role that the regulatory bodies play in the inspection of universities to determine their suitability and worthiness for state funding, these bodies are also constantly involved in formulating policies that have a direct impact on the governance of universities. Given the fact that there are over 650 universities in India, there is little scope for any consultation whatsoever before any set of rules or regulations are drafted by the regulatory bodies and made uniformly applicable to all institutions.

A s a result, a good deal of the time of the vice-chancellors and registrars of Indian universities is devoted to ensuring that they are in compliance with these rules and regulations. Indian regulatory bodies tend to exercise enormous powers, often in an arbitrary manner. Arbitrariness in the exercise of regulatory powers of higher education regulators has adversely affected the public image and reputation of these bodies. Their role and responsibilities have been challenged, primarily because of the lack of trust in the ability of regulatory bodies to perform the tasks of a facilitator.

There is no doubt that there are serious instances of malpractice prevailing in the higher education sector. There are unscrupulous higher education providers who are engaged in illegal and unethical practices, which affect the interests of the students. But when regulatory bodies paint the general institutional culture of all universities and colleges in the same manner as they would of dysfunctional institutions, there is a problem. It not only affects the morale of good institutional endeavours, but also creates a cynical environment where innovation cannot occur. World-class universities need a free, liberal and facilitative environment.

Of all the significant inputs that go into the making a world-class university, it is necessary to recognize that the faculty is the most important and indeed the most significant. Outstanding faculty members who can make great substantive contributions to teaching and research create world-class universities. It is only by hiring and retaining inspiring teachers and rigorous researchers that we can hope to establish world-class universities in India. At best, most Indian universities are largely teaching institutions. The focus of the academic agenda is to be engaged in teaching and the faculty

members tend to teach a disproportionately higher number of hours in a week. This has undermined any possibility for the faculty members to be engaged in research and publication.

Indian aspirations to build world-class universities ought to centre around the hiring of faculty from India and overseas. Globalization has created new opportunities for Indian academics to be able to move around the world and India is not their only option to pursue serious academic careers. In fact, many graduates from universities in India seek higher education opportunities around the world and even if some of them choose to come into academia, they rarely decide to work in India. There are a number of reasons why Indian universities are not in a position to attract very bright graduates across disciplines to come into academia in India, but this situation is changing with new opportunities.

Generally, the Indian universities don't provide sufficient opportunities, both in terms of time and space for pursuing research; there is also a serious lack of funds and other forms of resources to pursue research and writing. This has to change. So long as we do not provide for research to be the central focus of higher education, at least in some of our premier universities, we will not be able to build world-class universities. Universities are expected to be knowledge creating institutions. Knowledge cannot be created in the absence of scholars who are prepared to read, think, reflect and write. The essence of a great university is its ability to influence change through research and the process of the discovery of truth leading to a rigorous analysis that creates knowledge and promotes innovation. This is true in the case of hard sciences, social sciences and humanities. Indian universities need to recognize this aspect of university education for them to develop higher standards in their pursuit of excellence.

Students are at the heart of a university community. Great institutions have attained a world-class status because of their alumni achieving distinction in various walks of life. Indian universities too have produced great alumni who have made outstanding contributions in India and around the world. Nevertheless, in recent times, questions have been raised as to what role Indian universities play to shape the education and learning process of the students. Access to the premier universities in India continues to be a luxury of the privileged few who have probably received sound quality education in their high school and are better equipped to do well in their examinations and standard tests which qualify them to be admitted into these universities. However, one fundamental aspect that needs to be carefully examined about Indian universities and students is the learning outcomes.

The existing framework of accountability of the university to the students needs to be revisited. Most Indian universities do not even have a rudimentary form for students to be able to provide a feedback on the teaching of the faculty. There are hardly any faculty development programmes with a view to enhancing the teaching abilities of the faculty. Students need to be given a holistic learning experience that will not only help them acquire substantive knowledge, but also develop their critical thinking and writing skills and their abilities to articulate effectively. The current paradigm of a significant number of students largely engaged in learning on their own without value additions from outstanding teachers has to change. Note that over the years, the students' own institutional expectations from most Indian universities have substantially reduced.

Teaching and research constitutes the centrality of pedagogy of learning and primacy of knowledge in a university. Almost all rankings use both these as benchmarks for assessing the quality of universities. The weightage given to research tends to be more in the rankings of universities recognizing the importance of research. Indian universities face the twin challenges of both teaching and research in their efforts to build institutions of excellence as there has been a serious shortage of faculty members, including in the most prestigious institutions.

Furthermore, our research capacities in general tend to be mediocre, primarily because the faculty expertise in most Indian universities lacks academic rigour. The debate over teaching versus research is old and insipid. Indian universities must ensure that teaching and research go hand in hand and there is a lot that they need to do to strike a balance between these equally important objectives.

A larger question that Indian universities need to address is about the importance of research and scholarship that can generate ideas for change. Research in every discipline, in the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences, can have a profound impact on our society and beyond. Indifference and complacency to research has led to the inability of universities in India to produce knowledge that can impact policy, produce innovation, or provide solutions to social, economic and political problems that affect India as a nation. Indian universities ought to become fertile avenues for generation of ideas through research and publications. Rigorous research in all fields is critical to India, as it will be expected to respond to new problems for which old solutions

and perspectives may not be helpful. Research produces knowledge that gives clarity on the basis of an informed and deeper understanding of the issues involved.

Indian universities have to carefully consider their policies for establishing global collaborations and activities that promote global interaction and provide for a global student experience. It is not useful to sign numerous memoranda of understanding that do not translate into concrete forms of collaboration among universities leading to implementation of programmes for students and scholars. Universities, as a part of their internal governance mechanisms, need to evolve policies that will guide them in establishing collaborations with other institutions.

We need to innovate on programmes that enable direct interaction between foreign teachers and Indian students, and a true collaboration that provides for a rich student experience as opposed to collaborations that remain only on paper. One important area in which global collaboration can revolutionize student experience relates to teaching and learning. Today's technologically advanced world provides scope for innovation in terms of promoting e-learning and virtual global classrooms based on meaningful international collaborations. Such methods can provide students the benefit of interacting with academics and experts from around the world and gain from their knowledge and pedagogical methodology.

If India is to create world-class universities, our focus needs to be on providing an experience of transnational education to the students. This will expose them to new and emerging frontiers of knowledge and perspectives. It will also introduce them to new cultures and people and help them to appreciate diversity in an increasingly cosmopolitan and interdependent world. Transnational education is no longer the luxury of a few, but a necessary aspect of educational and learning experiences around the world.

Establishing world-class universities in India is a goal worth pursuing. The Times Higher Education World University Rankings has underscored the importance of research and publications for rankings. The rankings assess the universities on the basis of the following criteria: teaching (30%); research (30%); citations (30%); international outlook (7.5%); and industry income (2.5%). The QS World University Ranking's methodology has further reinforced the importance of research and publications for universities to be globally recognized as institutions of excellence. The weightage for 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, the most significant indicator, is based on the views and perspectives of fellow academics around the world, which are producing the best research in their field of expertise. This essentially means that 60% of the weightage for these rankings are based on research contribution of universities.

India should overcome its biases and prejudices based on merely whether the universities are private or public institutions. There is a need to assess universities on the basis of objective and determinable standards relating to the quality of teaching, faculty, research and capacity building, rather than on the basis of it being public or private. It needs to be noted that some of the top universities in the world are private: Harvard, Yale, Stanford and MIT, just as some of the oldest and most reputed ones continue to be public universities: Oxford, Cambridge and London. At one level, we are aspiring to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) so that a larger proportion of eligible students can access the higher education system. At another level, we face the problem of institutionalized mediocrity across our universities, with even postgraduate degree holders unable to get suitable jobs for want of knowledge, expertise and skills. Higher education in India cannot be reformed unless we develop strong private universities that are truly non-profit, philanthropic and committed to promoting academic freedom and institutional excellence.

	QS World University Rankings (Top 200)			Times Higher Education World University Rankings (Top 200)			The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)/ Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Top 200)		
	2013	2012	2011	2013-14	2012-13	2011-12	2013	2012	2011
China	7	7	7	2	2	3	5	4	1
Hong Kong	5	5	5	3	4	4	1	4	1
India	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Japan	9	9	11	5	5	5	9	9	9
Malaysia	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Singapore	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1
South Korea	6	6	5	4	4	3	1	1	1
Taiwan	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Rankings of Asian Universities

The effort to promote private initiatives in higher education should go hand in hand with other equally committed efforts to strengthen and develop our public universities. Indian universities must re-examine their substantive role and contribution to promoting creativity and innovation. In the course of a quantitative leap resulting in the expansion of higher education in India, quality and excellence suffered significantly. Mediocrity has been institutionalized leading to a lack of creativity and innovation in our efforts to build world-class universities. The mere celebration of a few islands of excellence, mostly in the form of specialized single discipline institutions, is not going to address the larger problem of lack of creativity and innovation.

The quality of Indian universities has to be significantly enhanced and the best of the global good practices need to be brought into India, contextualizing them to our circumstances. We need to understand and appreciate the remarkable transformation in higher education that has taken place in countries in Asia, including but not limited to Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. The heart of this transformation in Asia is about creativity and innovation in curriculum, courses, programmes, teaching pedagogy, faculty recruitment, student admission and mobility, international collaborations, research and publications.

A committee constituted by the Planning Commission and headed by the then chief mentor of Infosys, Narayana Murthy submitted a report that focused on the role of the corporate sector in higher education. This committee acknowledged the importance of stronger private initiatives in the field of higher education and recommended path breaking measures such as free land for 999 years,

300 per cent deduction in taxable income to companies for contributions towards boosting higher education and 10 year multiple entry visas for foreign research scholars. It also suggested that mandatory accreditation be made essential for Indian universities.

To promote greater accessibility of higher education to the underprivileged, the committee recommended the establishment of a Rs 1000 crore scholarship fund with tax exemption for contributions made by the corporate sector. Innovative solutions need to be found in addressing the challenges of higher education. Corporate philanthropy needs to be significantly promoted as private wealth in India has not adequately contributed to the growth and development of not-for-profit higher education.

There is an urgent need in Indian universities to reflect upon the crisis of leadership and its inability to seek reforms relating to institution building. Leadership is central not only for providing an institutional vision that will garner and galvanize academic consciousness among faculty and students to fulfil the goals and aspirations of the university, but also to reflect upon the larger role and responsibilities of the Indian university that connects it with the professions, government, intergovernmental organizations, think tanks and NGOs. Leadership is also about taking responsibility and being accountable for one's decisions. Unfortunately, the existing model of governance of Indian university system does not recognise leadership as a critical aspect of building institutions of excellence.

India's aspiration to establish world-class universities will depend upon our commitment to create and nurture transformational institutions that will inspire the faculty and students with a spirit of enquiry and instill in them the flame of imagination.