

Indian universities need an international outlook

Author: C. Raj Kumar

The Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2012-13 was released this week and once again, India does not have even one university in the top 200 of the world. This year's rankings demonstrate the rise of Asian universities in a significant manner, with China (2), Taiwan (2), Hong Kong (4); Japan (5), Singapore (2), and the Republic of Korea (4) prominently figuring in the list. These 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%).

I would like to address some of the challenges facing the Indian universities:

Public versus Private: India should overcome its biases and prejudices primarily because of the fact that the universities are private or public institutions. There is a need to assess them on the basis of objective standards relating to the quality of teaching, faculty, research, and capacity building. Some of the world's top universities are private—Harvard, Yale, Stanford and MIT—while some of the oldest and most reputed continue to be public universities: Oxford, Cambridge and London. Higher education in India cannot be reformed if we are not able to develop strong private universities that are truly non-profit, philanthropic and committed to promoting academic freedom. This should go hand in hand with efforts to strengthen and develop our public universities, which are suffering from problems relating to lack of faculty, poor infrastructure, inadequate funding and resources, and lack of autonomy in curriculum development and course administration.

Teaching versus Research: We need to recognise that universities are institutions where research needs to be the priority, unlike high schools and to some extent, undergraduate colleges. Research does inform teaching and teaching should contribute to research. The pedagogy of teaching that ought to take place in universities requires a certain degree of threshold knowledge and perspectives on the part of the students. We have not yet envisaged our universities to be embarking on the larger goals of nation building through knowledge creation and research. The emphasis continues to be on teaching, leading to the best of the researchers across disciplines having little or no motivation to work in Indian universities. Many prefer to work in think-tanks, research institutions, scientific and professional organisations, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations.

Regulation versus Autonomy: The existing legal framework of the governance of Indian universities is based upon a lack of trust on the part of our institutions to be able to do the right thing. Unfortunately, our laws and regulations have reinforced the belief that regulatory control of universities can only ensure quality and maintain high academic standards. But we ought to learn from the past experience of regulating higher education that the more we try to regulate, the more avenues it creates for corruption, nepotism, abuse of powers and other forms of vested interests. The laws and regulations should be transparently enforced with a proper procedure for obtaining the status of a university. But once universities are established, they should be governed independently with academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

National versus International: Time and again, it has been asserted that we need to focus in our higher education agenda the need for dealing with the problems of India. While there is no disagreement on this issue, it needs to be recognised that many countries, including most parts of the developing world, are looking to India for leadership, inspiration and institution building. Indian universities will have to provide opportunities for students not only in India, but also in South Asia, Africa, Middle East and Latin America. This means that our outlook ought to be international and we cannot be having parochial views, outdated perspectives and a myopic vision that does not take into account global realities.

Our vision for our universities should be to make them inspiring and the learning experiences, truly transformative for the students. VC@jgu.edu.in

C. Raj Kumar is the founding Vice-Chancellor of O. P. Jindal Global University in Sonapat, Haryana