

COMMENT

Temples of critical thinking and debate

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To be among the best in the world, Indian universities must be freed from excessive interference and politicisation



In the recent subject-wise ranking of world universities by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Indian institutions improved with 26 departments or schools placed in the top 100 of their respective disciplines. Science, technology and business studies were the fields in which our universities showed their mettle. While this is a reason to celebrate, not even a single Indian university features in the QS ranking of the world's top 150 in overall parameters. The Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) of Bombay and Delhi are at the 152nd and 182nd places in the overall rankings, while IISc Bangalore appears at the 184th position. There is much for India to learn from those who are miles ahead of us.

QS's top 10 in overall terms include five American universities (MIT, Stanford, Harvard, Caltech and Chicago), four British universities (Oxford, Cambridge, UCL and Imperial College) and one Swiss university (ETH Zurich). All the five American names in this list are private universities, while the British and Swiss institutions are public universities which have nonetheless enjoyed significant autonomy from governmental control over decades.

One common factor behind the success of the topmost universities is the freedom with which they operate. They have been major centres of innovation in teaching and research thanks to independence from bureaucratic or corporate meddling and political intervention by parties of the day. They could remain centres of extraordinary excellence in a sustained way by according primacy to matters of the mind, i.e. intellectual ideas and solutions to problems, and avoiding becoming hostage to dogmatic thought.

All the great universities of the world are ideologically pluralistic, with a mix of right, left and centre among their faculty and students. There is no institutional line or official position on any issue. Professors and students are free to choose whatever opinion they prefer. No one is penalised for holding a pro- or anti- view on social, economic, political, cultural or scientific matters.

The top universities are also excellent at attracting and retaining talent. They hire professors very selectively, based on outstanding scholarly abilities. They reject a large number of candidates for admission as students, and admit only the brightest and the most meritorious. This ruthless streak comes at the expense of social inclusion and access considerations, but some institutions must be allowed to generate knowledge as an end in itself so that they reach the summit of intellectual endeavour. Top universities incentivise publication and citation of research in an unforgivingly rigorous way. If an Assistant Professor does not produce brilliant publications in the most reputed journals of her field, she may lose her job and not get tenured as an Associate Professor. By insisting on tough standards which are never lowered or relaxed, these universities promote a meritocratic culture as a habit.

Big universities also inculcate critical thinking, debating and writing abilities in their students. They encourage students to look at issues through interdisciplinary lenses and to challenge their own professors. They award grades to students who are argumentative and who question conventional wisdom in the classroom and in assignments. This type of interactive pedagogy produces champion graduates who have a reputation for cutting-edge skills and knowledge in the job market compared to peers from second- or third-tier universities.

The world's best universities are known for involving their own alumni in governance and reforms. Top global universities are also super-smart financial managers. Many of them, especially the U.S. universities, have sophisticated alumni offices through which they raise funding, which can exceed the revenue from student tuition fees. By 2019, the total endowment of Harvard was worth \$40 billion, which is made up of over 13,000 individual funds. Harvard invests this money in a variety of financial instruments and generates phenomenal income from it.

Since the top Anglo-American universities go back centuries, it is arguable whether such type of elite institutions can be quickly and easily replicated outside the U.S. and the U.K. These big universities are products of historical circumstances which relied on private philanthropy,

The China example

Still, a muscular push from the government of China with massive state funding has propelled Chinese universities into the top tiers in barely two decades. In the QS world rankings on overall basis, Tsinghua University is ranked number 16, Peking University is at 22, Fudan University is at 40, and Zhejiang University is at 54. This is a miraculous leap forward.

In India, as the government is cash-strapped and lacks the kind of resources which the Chinese state deployed to pump-prime Chinese universities, our only viable path to world class universities is in the form of enlightened private philanthropy and borrowing best practices from established iconic universities.

Avoiding politicisation, ideological rigidity and nepotism, and freeing our universities from excessive interference and over-regulation, are prerequisites for success. Most importantly, our universities must have the drive to excel and compete with Chinese or Western universities. Insularity and self-congratulatory frog-in-the-well attitudes have held us back for long.

Ingrained mediocrity and laid-back culture which result in inadequate training of students in theories and methodologies have to be overcome. A nationalistic passion for India to be recognised as a top educational hub must underpin the strategies and activities of our universities.

The government's decision to identify 20 Institutes of Eminence (IOEs) which will get maximum autonomy from bureaucracy in order to climb up the world rankings is a step in the right direction. The selected IOEs must innovate with new degree programmes, expanded variety of faculty members and digital learning platforms.

India has miles to go in higher education. Unlike in authoritarian and top-down China, there is little likelihood of a meteoric breakout of multiple Indian universities into the top 100 of the world at a rapid clip. India's democratic and contested character renders change evolutionary and cumulative. Still, with long-term vision and selfless leadership, our universities can eventually make it.

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