

Essay No. 29. November 27, 2020

# REIMAGINING HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA SOME INSIGHTS

**HEMA RAGHAVAN**  
Former Dean  
Students' Welfare  
University of Delhi  
Delhi



**ASSOCIATION OF INDIAN UNIVERSITIES  
NEW DELHI (INDIA)**

Scholarly Article from the book *REIMAGINING INDIAN UNIVERSITIES*,  
Editors: Pankaj Mittal and Sistla Rama Devi Pani,  
Publisher: Association of Indian Universities, New Delhi (India), 2020.

ISBN No. 81-7520-154-1

# REIMAGINING HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

## SOME INSIGHTS

HEMA RAGHAVAN

*The fact that higher education is on a downward slope is indicative of the failure of redoing or reinventing earlier attempts to raise the declining standards. Colleges and universities as well as all higher post secondary institutions must change from 'we offer, you take it' to 'you seek, (what you want/what you are capable of using) we give it'. The rigid division between college study and online study should be erased. Teachers have to be trained in the use of student data right from the time of admission till his/her completion of graduate degree. Colleges and universities should use the data to find the students' intellectual capability and their interest areas, and give admission in accordance with their potential and inclination. Since students' capability and interests, have to be factored in while structuring the courses, the next step is to reimagine where the student will be three/five years hence. What kind of employment the student can seek with the degree/s he has received from college/university? How to make the degree job worthy? Reimagining is not about getting Harvard and other top class universities to open universities here, but to make our own Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford by investing heavily in education, giving the right funding, fillip and encouragement for quality research in our institutions.*

### PRELUDE

Re-imagining higher education is uniquely different from many discussions that have taken place to find ways and solutions to constrict the steady and steep decline of the tertiary education in India. The prefix 're' of Latin origin has two meanings: (i) 'again' or 'again and again' to indicate repetition; and (ii) 'back' or 'backward' to indicate withdrawal or backward motion. The term 'reimagining' has set in motion a new approach to higher education in India, as it steers clear of terms like 're-inventing', which means re-making something already invented, such as 'reinventing the wheel' or 'trying to do something that has already been done successfully.

The fact that higher education is on a downward slope is indicative of the failure of redoing or reinventing the earlier attempts to raise the declining standards. The need of the times is to reimagine — to form new concepts and create strategies afresh to meet the challenges of higher education.

## CAUSES OF DECLINE IN OUR UNIVERSITIES

One need not reiterate the causes of decline in our universities and colleges since they have been listed a zillion times by academicians and experts on education. The most visible and universally accepted cause for the decline is the exponential increase in the number of admission seekers to tertiary education. Colleges are the only refuge of all school leaving youngsters today. At 18 or 18+, when students finish school, the question arises, ‘what next?’, for there is nothing for them to do except seek admission in a college. School education at the end of twelve years of study cannot and does not equip them with skills needed for employment. Since we are focusing here on higher education, this is not the forum to talk about reforms needed in school education. What is to be borne in mind is the same dilemma of what to do repeats itself after completion of three years of graduate study.

## SOME INSIGHTS FOR REIMAGINING

We have to reimagine, i.e., formulate new concepts to meet the requirements of this vast teeming population of 18+ and help them to discover the path they should traverse, which will (a) fulfill their desire and aspirations; and (b) ensure them financial stability for the rest of their lives. In other words, policymakers have to imagine where and what these youngsters will be like three to five years hence or a decade from today. *Capability Approach*, as articulated by the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen is a possible starting point for mooted changes in our higher education system.

*Capability Approach* is defined by its choice of focus upon what individuals are actually capable of achieving. Using Prof. Sen’s analogy on the distinction between bicycling and possessing a bike, education that is to be offered is to be in terms of the student’s ability to learn that is distinct from giving or shoving education on her/him. What is the use of possessing a bicycle if one is lame or physically challenged to ride a bicycle? Instead of thrusting education uniformly on all students, it is necessary to examine if he has the capability to use such education. Colleges and universities as well as all higher post

secondary institutions must change from 'we offer, you take it' to 'you seek, (what you want/what you are capable of using) we give it'. Today, students have no alternative except seek admission in any college in any course irrespective of their capability to study that course and later turn job worthy. The mad rush to be in any college directs them to take admission in courses for which they do not in the least possess the functioning capability.

The questions that follow as a corollary are: (a) whether young people can assess their own capability and decide what to choose and what to reject; and (b) how to provide courses that cater to every individual's capability and requirement. The answer to the first query is without doubt in the affirmative. By 18, currently the age when the youth has the right to vote, which presumes that he possesses the discernment to elect the right representative, he must also possess the ability to make an honest assessment of what he is capable of, what he is good at, where lies his natural talent and how college education will enable him to get employment. For the academicians and policymakers to deny the youth her/his capability is more of an excuse to hide behind their lethargy so as not to devise new curriculum that will meet the aspirations and interests of a large number of students.

The answer to the second query contains the kernel of this article, 'Reimagining Indian Higher Education'. With a humungous number wanting to get into colleges, it certainly poses the problem of how to cater to them on the basis of their individual inclination. As it is in practice today, graduation i.e. the first degree, requires studying four disciplines and getting examined in them. While English and Hindi or any regional language are mandatory courses, the choice of the other two is limited to prescribed options given by the institutions. In this process, degree courses do not factor in the interest and potential of the student. While a few universities and degree awarding autonomous colleges have switched to credit system, many others follow the old system of giving marks.

There has to be a uniform change from marks to credits whereby on completion of 96 credits stretched over three years, the student gets his degree. The credits can be from any course of the student's choice and not necessarily from packaged courses currently offered. It can be as varied as music and mathematics, psychology and philosophy, environment and education ... what was offered in one year need not be carried over to the second and the third year, except for the course in which the student wants his/her specialisation, such as BA

in Economics or Political Science, Literature etc. The student has to have a minimum of 36 credits in the subject of specialisation; 12 per year for three years. 24 credits are to be assigned for each one of the language courses and the rest of the 32 credits from courses of her/his choice. This needs tweaking of timetables to enable students to attend courses of their choice. Students can go for online study of these optional courses if they are not available in the college in person. The rigid division between college study and online study should be erased. At the end of every year, the student can assess whether or not his choice of courses serves his capability and increases his employability worth. The optional courses need not be studied all through the three years. Credits have to be accumulated and the student must be given the freedom to choose courses for which he/she has the talent and inclination.

What is sadly missing in our system is the absence of student data, leave aside making use of that data responsibly. We are in the digital age. We have digital service providers to help students submit their assignments online, provide them with platforms for discussion amongst themselves as a group, and also interact with the faculty that makes face-to-face interaction possible from anywhere. Such measures facilitate improvement in student outcomes. Martin Kurzveil and Mitchell Stevenson<sup>1</sup> have written about responsible use of student data. They have stated four core premises about student data that will be useful to frame institutional policies:

1. 'Education is fundamentally a human endeavour', supported and enhanced by the use of technology;
2. Education is 'a civic act: the practice of shaping people, communities, and societies and of transmitting cultural inheritance across generations';
3. The preservation of the civic character of education has to be a continuous effort; and
4. Digital data of students' requirement, potential, achievement has to be the responsibility of educators. The continuous monitoring and measurement of students' potential, their efforts and attainment is needed for qualitative improvement of learning.

Teachers have to be trained in the use of student data right from the time of admission till his/her completion of graduate degree. The first use of digital data is for admissions. Colleges and universities

should use the data to find each student's intellectual capability and their interest areas and give admission in accordance with their potential and inclination. The data analysis is a tool to predict who will succeed in which course. It also helps to identify areas where the student performance is poor and provide remedial and supplemental instruction for improvement

Martin Kurzveil and Mitchell Stevenson write: "Other innovations fall under the umbrella of an *adaptive courseware*. These systems are digital platforms that collect information on student activity—time spent on task, task performance, and level of engagement, for example—to create 'personalized learning paths' for students."

This entails a different orientation for teachers; college/university teachers have to be trained to use student data from pre-admission to completion of graduate study. Today, in accordance with the UGC prescriptions, tutorials form a major chunk of every teacher's timetable. The tutorials unfortunately do not serve the purpose for which they are mandated. If teachers use the digital system, assignments can be submitted online. Discussions can be had online so that students can improve the assignments and online evaluation ensures transparency. Thus, online digital assistance can supplement the traditional delivery of classroom lectures. Faculty should make use of educational technology and upgrade their communicative skills in teaching and writing lessons. It may sound dismal and lugubrious to make a factual point that a majority of teachers after getting a faculty position do not keep up their academic interests. They hardly write good quality academic papers for reputed journals and upgrade their knowledge. Maybe the present system of education makes little demands on them to do so and they rest content with whatever knowledge they had received during their student days. No academic worth the name can remain a frog in the well. One cannot dole out soup from an empty pot. Barring a few who have taken to the teaching profession because of their academic interest and academic bent of mind, our colleges and universities cannot boast of quality faculty who keep up with today's knowledge explosion taking place at an incredibly rapid pace. Hence, it is important to re-imagine what it will be for the teachers to be students today and refresh their knowledge and work out new strategies that involves use of technology as teaching aid. It will not be inappropriate to recall what the Delhi government did in sending government school teachers abroad for an exposure to new pedagogical methods and principles. On similar lines, training programmes within India must be organised for faculty members initially after their recruitment similar

to what is being done for the Indian Administrative Service recruits. All selections to faculty positions should be over by December and the next six months from January to July, before the start of the new academic session, must be the duration of the training programme. This training should include both discipline specific advance research in new areas and an interdisciplinary programme that will give them an insight into what we call, 'the Web of Knowledge'. Liberal Arts' study must be a part of this training programme. We know for a fact that all those who have had post-graduate/doctoral/post-doctoral studies abroad have a much enlarged openness towards learning and imparting new knowledge in keeping with the times. Such exposure is necessary to enable teachers to realise that what they had learnt and practiced all these years have been enhanced and enlarged by advanced research taking place all over the world.

Since students' capability and interests have to be factored in while structuring courses, the next step is to reimagine where the student will be 3-5 years hence. What kind of employment can the student seek with the degree/s he/she have received from college/university? How to make the degree job worthy? The colleges today boast of placement cells mainly to improve the NAAC score. But there exists no dialogue between the college and the placement cell to find out how the courses taught in the college/university have relevance to the employer who will hire them. No college keeps the data of a student with respect to her/his talent, potential, achievements and his job worthiness during their three years' stay.

Colleges and universities and all professional institutions have to follow a two-pronged strategy. (i) The present content heavy curriculum has to be given up and courses have to be tailored to suit industry/business/and the service sectors. This can be done only after a dialogue with prospective employers who must be invited to come to the institution for recruitment. A good example is that of a premier college in the Delhi University which invites school Principals/Heads/Academic Advisors annually in the month of March to interview students who study for the four year B.Ed degree. The course training is given as per the requirements of the schools and the CBSE courses. The recruitment is done on the basis of interview and the students' grades in the earlier three years with the proviso that they complete their degree with requisite grades in the final examinations. (ii) The academic schedule in colleges and institutions should be limited to the first half of the day and the second half must be given to hands-

on training in any sector that the student wishes to get into. This factors in both the student's aptitude and capability and makes her/him job worthy. Classroom lectures must focus on giving the concepts and theories so that the students learn to apply them in the relevant sectors. The faculty has to be trained to deliver lectures more in capsule form with the time reduced to just one half of the day rather than the current long drawn classroom lectures stretched over the entire day (from 9 in the morning till 5.30 in the evening). This has resulted in boredom and listlessness in most students. This double shift between college and the training centre will enthuse students as they get hands on training and learn to practically apply theoretical knowledge learnt in the classroom. If the mode of teaching is changed from spoon feeding to capsule lectures, it will encourage self-study—something that is totally absent among a large majority of students.

While the above suggestions are meant for a large number of students who do not have an academic bent of mind, universities and colleges must focus on research that has a direct and beneficial impact on society. It is a misconceived theory that research cannot be done in colleges and it can be done only at the universities. On the contrary, research methodology and basic research fundamentals such as review of literature, and data collection and analysis have to be introduced to the group of students with academic interest and who wish to pursue an academic career, while in college itself. Research laboratories on a smaller scale will give the college students an exposure to topics that go well beyond their syllabus. It is this that perks up their interest to go for advanced research of higher degrees. These students should also be attached to premier research centres for the second half of the day just as the other students go to manufacturing centres, industries and all other units where there is a prospect of getting a job after their graduation.

Higher educational institutions must focus on research that will have a direct and beneficial impact on society. All researches have to be inter disciplinary and the present day water tight compartments that stand-alone disciplines limit themselves into should become passé. The institutions have to create industry ready workforce that will apply fundamental research done at the universities. The American system of freedom given to the professor to migrate from one university to another, taking with him/her the laboratory as well as students working with their mentor is what our universities should follow. Today, research in different disciplines is done in specialised centres set up



individually for Physics, Chemistry, Technology, Molecular Biology, History, Economics, Philosophy, Engineering, Information technology, Environmental Sciences, etc, while universities are given step-motherly treatment in terms of getting funds for advanced research. It is time to make advanced research integral to universities.

The new policy to invite FDI in to education has its advantage as well as a downside. This is a welcome move, provided the investment is in line with collaborative ventures, whereby a school or a department from a prestigious foreign university runs its courses in our public institutions. It will be sad if FDI is to promote foreign university business and is out of reach for millions of our students who cannot afford their high fees. What we need is more investment in our public institutions that can benefit a large majority of students. There are quite a few private universities in India where the wealthy and high income families send their wards to study. Most private universities are beyond the reach of millions of students who are far below the top rung on the social ladder. FDI should come into the public institutions so that a large majority of students can have a share of the FDI pie. It is stated that nearly 94 per cent of the education cess that was collected last year has remained unspent. So, FDI is welcome if it is used to promote high quality research in our public universities, but it cannot bring scholars, researchers and faculty members. Today, many thousands of faculty positions are vacant. Since the government does not have enough resources, attempts at cost cutting are being made by withholding recruitment or hiring guest faculty who have neither a commitment to the institution or to the students except for the honorarium. If the FDI is used for improvement of institutions, and the national budgetary allotment is used for hiring top class faculty with attractive remuneration, universities will be able to get outstanding persons to join and contribute to quality teaching and research to raise the universities to be one among the top.

## CONCLUSION

Antonio Garcia Cubas in 1893 said: “Public education is the foundation of the prosperity of the nation.” Let us reimagine our universities to attain glory like our ancient universities, such as *Takshashila (Taxila)* and *Nalanda* where students from across the world used to come to attain specialisation in over 64 different fields of study that include the Vedas, Philosophy, Medicine (Ayurveda) and Surgery, Sciences (agriculture and astronomy), Politics, Warfare, Commerce, Futurology, Music, Dance, besides Martial Arts. *Nalanda*,

a residential university, had the largest library of the ancient world and had thousands of volumes of manuscripts on various subjects like grammar, logic, literature, astrology, astronomy, and medicine. These universities were known for their excellence in teaching and research and attracted scholars and students both from within and outside India. Our public universities need to be strengthened on these lines by improving the infrastructure, quality of faculty and teaching that extends beyond classrooms. Reimagining higher education is to make efforts to establish our universities as the global hub of education on the lines of *Nalanda* and *Taxila*.

Re-imagining is not about getting Harvard and other top class universities to open universities here, but to make our own Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford by investing heavily in education, giving the right funding, fillip and encouragement for quality research in our institutions. Student data and the responsible use of it, faculty training, investing in quality research, meshing of institutional study with online study, capsule lectures, and hands-on training should be integral parts of the course are a few possible strategies to be put in motion.

## Reference

Kurzveil, Martin and Stevenson, Mitchell (2018). Responsible Use of Student Data in Higher Education. *Educause Review*.

# Hema Raghavan

Hema Raghavan is a renowned educationist. She was Dean of Students' welfare, University of Delhi and Principal, Gargi College, University of Delhi. She is an orator and litterateur of eminence. Her popular publications include 'Frontier Concepts in Higher Education', 'Re-thinking Higher Education', 'To Deny Religion Our Nothingness', 'The Grotesque as Style in the plays of Samuel Beckett Rebels and Exiles: A Study of Samuel Beckett's plays'. She is the co-editor of 'Critical Essays in Indian English Poetry' and is presently working on 'Shaping of the Image of Man in Literature and Art'.