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TOWARDS MAKING INDIAN UNIVERSITIES RELEVANT AND FUTURE READY

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India has the world's largest higher education system with over 50,000 Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) primarily triggered due to a massive expansion in the higher education sector leading to a four-fold increase since 2001. Higher education is instrumental for public aspirations, developmental priorities and societal values which time and again needs to be assessed, nurtured and refined. Change and innovation would be required and so is the understanding of that change, which will be critical. This great responsibility of how we are going to bring about this change is on our shoulders and it is only possible by reimagining and reinventing, and by drawing a new roadmap for the HEIs in India, if we have to stay relevant and future ready.

Prelude

The next society will be a knowledge society in which knowledge will be the resource and knowledge workers will be the dominant work force. — Peter Drucker

Nowadays, in India, there are less restrictions on universities' characteristic slant towards internationalism. Students now have more control over where they get taught and that gives millions of youths a chance to spend abroad their formative years. This explosion of global universities is developing institutions which can teach managerial and technical skills and is relinking academics with the broader knowledge economy though the most important validation of all is that it is freeing resources for academic activity. This has ultimately led to filling libraries with books and stocking laboratories with equipment, thus giving more chance than ever before to researchers for making order out of chaos. Nevertheless, the policymakers need to endeavour more than merely supporting the developed country models.

Michelangelo was once asked, "How do you produce statues that are so full of life?" He replied, "The rough marble already contains the statues; it is a matter of extracting them." Amongst all the students of our institutions of higher learning we have fine professionals already present and the job of the universities is to mould and bring them out not only as highly capable and skilled professionals, but also as good human beings.

Status of Higher Education in India

India has the world's largest higher education system with over 50,000 higher educational institutions (HEI) primarily triggered due to a massive expansion in the

higher education sector leading to a four-fold increase since 2001. However, various challenges like deficient funding, lower employability of graduates, poor standards of teaching, feeble governance, and complex regulatory processes continue to plague the education sector in India. It is estimated that by the year 2027, India would have the world's largest workforce. In this context, we must not forget the famous words of Winston Churchill, "The empires of the future will be empires of the mind," when we are preparing our youth to join this large workforce.

India's demographic trend is such that it will soon overtake China as the world's largest population, and so will the demand for higher education over the next few years. The Indian higher education system, designed originally to serve the privileged few, must be made ready to serve the vast number of people. Change and innovation would be required and so is the understanding of that change, which will be critical.

Higher education has been on a steep trajectory of growth during the last decade. In terms of number of institutions, India now has the world's largest higher education system and the second largest in terms of number of students.

Reshaping of Higher Education in India

Education being a vital investment in building human capital that drives technological and economic growth can be possible only by improving the educational status of the society enabling the multi-faceted development of its people. Through education, a nation establishes an intellectual repository of human capital, which is critical to address its present and future needs. Higher education is instrumental for public aspirations, developmental priorities and societal values which time and again needs to be assessed, nurtured and refined.

The number of universities in India at present is 1044 which can be briefly categorised into 54 Central universities, 412 State universities, 95 Institutes of National Importance, 127 Deemed to be universities and 356 Private universities. Meanwhile, these numbers are still growing. We cannot undermine the fact that by 2027, India would have the largest populace enrolling for collegiate and other higher institutions and by 2030 it is expected to be one of the top youngest nations in the world with the largest population in the tertiary education age bracket.

Problems Faced by HEIs in India

The higher education sector in India is one of the largest systems in the world imparting good edification. On the other hand, the present system of higher education faces innumerable challenges; be it quality concerns, public-private partnerships, potential entry of foreign institutions of higher learning, augmenting research capacity, research funding, innovations in teaching and learning, increasing internationalisation of education, changing demands of a globalised economy, or collaboration with the industry ... the list goes on. Though substantial efforts have been made in the last

two decades to satisfactorily meet the growing demands in the higher education sector, newer challenges continuously emerge often through actions of an increasingly informed and demanding population as discussed below.

The Demand-Supply Gap

India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) as per All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) is 26.3 percent (AISHE, 2018-19). This is way far lower than the global average of 36.7 percent. Apart from this, there is a severe disconnect between education imparted in colleges and the skills required in the workplace. This is primarily due to lack of quality as well as negligence of skill curriculum and internships in HEIs. There is a need to expand capacity at all levels of higher education, incentivise postgraduate education and research and diversify course offerings at undergraduate level in all HEIs.

Paucity of Faculty

In fact, the biggest challenge facing higher education in India is the acute shortage of faculty. Various reports suggest that 30-40 percent of faculty positions remain unfilled in higher educational institutions of India, which also include elite institutions such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Managements (IIMs). It is estimated that about 50 percent posts of various categories of the teachers in the central universities have not been filled due to various reasons. Another problem is that of faculty training vis a vis availability of trained faculty. This creates imbalance in student-teacher ratio. There is a need to increase staff strength in HEIs for bringing balance in student-teacher ratio.

There is no provision for formal pre-service training for higher education faculty. So, the faculty at higher education levels are generally those who come into profession after postgraduation or Ph.D. degrees. This, many a time decreases the confidence level of the faculty, particularly when he or she has newly joined the position. The shortage of well-trained faculty also adds to the strain of quality teaching which lead to gaps in the teaching learning process. Measures need to be initiated to provide pre-service training or orientation to the faculty in pedagogy and teaching practices. Technology can help by leaps and bounds to promote higher education and can arrest the creeping rust in the learning process.

Dearth of Financial, Administrative and Academic Autonomy

India's higher education sector is plagued by a lack of financial, academic and administrative autonomy granted to HEIs. This has led to the degradation of quality in institutions as well as education. In the system of affiliating universities, the supervisory authority for most of the colleges is the university or a government authority, and both lack the capacity and the wherewithal to regulate their colleges and make them accountable. In comparison to the affiliating university model and the autonomous institutions, the standalone HEIs are at higher advantage as they have the authority to constitute their own academic councils and make independent decisions on academic matters.

As far as financial autonomy is concerned, it is almost negligible in every kind of institution. Moreover, in last few decades, funding for government and government-aided HEIs is skewed in favour of central universities. This is the biggest cause for discrepancy in quality of different types of institutions.

Quality of Teaching and Learning

It is startling that though India has one of the largest education systems in the world, we find no place in the top 100 universities ranked in the world. There is a need to strengthen quality assurance systems which is apt with a sense of responsibility to the stakeholders and ensures accountability. This will result in output of graduates with better employability, a dire need of higher education throughout India and South Asia, provide sufficient basis for elevating to higher levels of study and research; and also a top place in global ranking. Appropriate effort is required to separate research and teaching which could give fillip to early stage research experience. There is an urgent necessity to have flexible curricula in tune with the changing times with further employer engagement in course content and development of skills. Further, interdisciplinary learning opportunities must be provided.

The shortage of well-trained faculty has also added to the strain of quality teaching, outdated material and pedagogy. Pedagogies and its assessment must not merely be focused on input, rote learning; students must be given ample opening to develop a broader array of transversal skills, including analytical reasoning, critical thinking, problem-solving and collaborative working.

Research Capacity and Innovation

Limited uptake of quality independent research in HEIs across various disciplines is amplified due to the faculty shortage and the low inputs available for research as well as insufficient industry linkages. There is a dearth of quality researchers both in sciences and social sciences, due to inadequate opportunities for multi-disciplinary research; this has also curtailed effective interaction with industry. Continuing systemic segregation of research and teaching is the need of the hour. Institutions must not only remain engaged in teaching but also have to provide a healthy atmosphere for promoting serious research.

Uneven Growth and Access to Opportunity

The enrolment percentages vary significantly between the states and between rural and urban areas. The disadvantaged sections of society including women suffer from much lower enrolments rates than the national average. There remains accusation of elitism among existing institutions of higher education. Excessive focus on selective areas such as engineering, management etc. to the exclusion on others, particularly basic sciences and social sciences is weakening the foundations of Indian higher education.

Efforts Needed to Reimagine Indian Universities

Meeting the various challenges faced by higher educational institutions require innovative and out-of-the-box thinking. As individuals in charge of temples of learning, we must continuously strive to make our institutions socially relevant by imparting accessible, affordable and high quality education. We must attempt to develop students who are professionally competent, technically sound, socially relevant and committed to justice, social, political, and economic.

Given the context, urgent efforts must be made to ensure:

- a. internationalisation of higher education with improved quality of teaching and research;
- b. devising methods and strategies for better training and equipping of faculty;
- c. better industry collaboration in curricula design and capacity building; and
- d. improve the ecosystem for innovation in Indian research institutions with greater focus on strengthening capacity through intensive international collaborations.

There is a growing need to further strengthen the Higher Education system by ensuring focus on the following:

Excellence

The key priority areas include:

- improvements in the method of teaching and learning with a special focus on learning outcomes;
- regular faculty development programs to improve teaching;
- better amalgamation of research and teaching;
- strong international collaborations in teaching and research;
- faculty and student exchange programmes; and
- more emphasis on research stimulation, innovation and connecting institutions through networks, alliances and consortia.

Equity

- promote efforts keeping in mind the special needs of underprivileged, differently-abled and disadvantaged sections of the society, keeping in mind the demography.

Expansion

- Capacity building in existing institutions, instead of merely focusing on creating new institutions;

- diminishing the barriers across the board enabling diverse discipline, squeezing the slanted growth in the direction of engineering and other technical subjects; and
- promoting skill development and entrepreneurship-specific learning penetrating the ignored parts of the country, which shall align with the requirements of the country and boost private investment.

Recognising the above and acknowledging that universities play a vital role in determining the direction of development of higher education, the Government, the apex institutions of higher education including the Association of Indian Universities, University Grants Commission, etc and regulatory councils should strive to provide all round support to its member institutions in their many endeavours to achieve excellence. The global competencies need to be a part of every education and the endeavour should be to see to it that bottlenecks are erased, then only can we expect to provide the Young India an environment of world class education and research.

The time has come to address the challenges of delivering the best quality education which should be a role model for other developing economies with a clear and committed vision of a strong leadership and not merely showcase a pipe dream of the vision for the future generations, as its the future we will stand to forfeit unless we don't act now. In this context, we must remember the famous words of Nelson Mandela: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

This great responsibility of how we are going to bring about this change is on our shoulders and it is only possible by reimagining and reinventing, and by drawing a new roadmap for the HEIs in India, if we have to be relevant at the international level.

At the same time, HEIs have to prepare themselves to meet the challenges thrown by artificial intelligence and disruptive technologies, which is a new wave of revolution across the globe, if the universities have to play a significant role and remain relevant to the society, they must be future ready.

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The Biography of the Author

Ranbir Singh

Prof Ranbir Singh is the Vice Chancellor of National Law University, Delhi. He is a Professor of Law and has been founder Vice Chancellor of different Law Universities of India at Bangalore, Hyderabad and Delhi. He is the senior most Vice Chancellor of the country with 22 years of service as vice chancellor so far. He was the past President of Association of Indian Universities and Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute (SICI). He is the Member of various national and international institutions like Association of Commonwealth Universities (COL), International Association of Universities (IAU), Asian Law Institute, (ASLI), SAARCLAW India; Competition Commission of India. He has been assisting the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India in preparing the India's National Report on Human Rights and was a part of the High Level Indian Delegation which presented the First, Second and Third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at United Nations Human Rights Council, Geneva held in 2008, 2012 and 2017, respectively.

His legal writings span the areas of Jurisprudence, Human Rights, Legal Education, Legal Aid, Personal Laws and Justice Education and has more than 50 research publications to his credit. He has edited two publications one on 'Human Rights Education, Law and Society' and the other on 'Cyber Space and the Law – Issues and Challenges. He has also co-authored two scholarly publications one on 'Fiscal Federalism – Constitutional Conspectus' and the other on 'Constitutional Law'.

He is the recipient of many awards and distinctions which include 'Alumnus of Distinction' in 2007 conferred upon him by Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, the then Hon'ble President of India; 'Professor N R Madhava Menon Best Law Teacher' Award – 2011; 'Ambassador for Peace' award for promoting peace and harmony by Universal Peace Federation - 2019; 'Symbiosis-IALS Life Time Achievement Award for Excellence in Legal and Justice Education' by International Association of Law Schools, USA & Symbiosis University, Pune - 2017; 'Life Time Achievement Award' in recognition of the exemplary contribution towards Legal Education by Saveetha University - 2015; 'Karmayogi Samman' by Haryana Institute of Fine Arts - 2012. Lex Witness recognized him in the 'Hall of Fame: Top 50', as an individual who has helped in shaping the legal landscape of modern India.