Academic Excellence

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ABSTRACT

A matter of timely concern facing the academia in India is the quality of education being offered by the private universities in India. From the inception of the HEI {Higher Education Institute}, quality is easily reflected in the types of faculties inducted, poor quality of student intakes, inadequate student services delivered, improper or poor infrastructure and equipment, very poor student-faculty ratios, the imparting curricula & syllabi, teaching and research methodologies, examination systems {valuations and moderations}, introducing / imparting a large number of skillsets suitable for further research or employment and other internships offered. Against this backdrop, the present paper discusses certain ways by which quality could be attained and measured in Private / Self-financing institutions.

KEYWORDS: HEI, Quality, stake-holders, hybrid courses, project laboratories, demographic dividend

I.   INTRODUCTION

The UGC {University Grants Commission} consolidated list of universities lists 430 private universities, as of date. As of December 2023, the UGC listed 128 institutes, which were granted deemed university status, the first Institute in this regard was the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru, which was granted this status in May 1958. Sikkim Manipal University, notified in 1995, is the oldest Private University in India. Though the "Deemed to be University {DU}" is a group of colleges or a single college, granted a status of autonomy by the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India under the suggestions / advice of the University Grants Commission.

Such DUs operate under full autonomy and are independent in offering admission, deciding courses, syllabi, conduct their own examinations, setting up of facilities and recruitment of faculties and charging fees from students. They could also offer degrees on their own, under the framework of the UGC.

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

A University heading towards Excellence would not hesitate to take serious steps towards growing. A model prescribed for growth in the 20th century would not fit in for the 21st century. Improvement is an everchanging process. The programme curricula, course outcomes, their locational advantages, faculty recruitments, academic procedures handled so far may need custom modernization, to suit the current needs of the society and the business requirements. There could be multiple options open for them to succeed by choosing their own methods to sustain in a competitive world. The best of universities was not built in a day, but by several years of constant good work! Let not the Universities compare themselves with the ones next door, but simply try to be the best.

There are no simple short cut methods to attain excellence, it must start in a principled die-hard way. Vision and Mission of a university must be altered every time, there is a need and, it would be a disaster if one holds on to the Vision and Mission set forth at the time of start of the university; because there is a need for change to adapt to the evolution of the environment around.

PATHWAYS TOWARDS EXCELLENCE

It was Aristotle who defined excellence as "*Excellence is never an accident. It is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, and intelligent execution; it represents the wise choice of many alternatives - choice, not chance, determines your destiny.*" Let's examine the several ways that a university could adopt towards being one of excellence!

One of the simplest yet easy way is to please your stakeholders – the student community, faculty members, parents/guardians, and the locale where the university exists. Concentrate on offering the best of services to the above diaspora, because they would turn to be best advertisers to create a brand image!
Secondly, in the world of spiralling costs, try to trim your costs and offer high quality education at an affordable price. This should not be higher than what is offered around the region in which your university stands. If

possible, look for certain methods to cut costs and offer better or something more within the offered pricing. Your university must deliver quality education at a convenient price slab, compared with others in the vicinity. Recourse to hybrid processes of teaching could perhaps help one to offer quality at a premium. On-line and Off-line teaching combinations could perhaps help. On-line courses could augment other subject titles of a program at cheaper costs and could help the learner understand the subject being taught better. This could also be after class hours as the student could earn something extra at home. Such programs could also help working people gain degrees without having to waste their regular work schedules. Compliment On-line teaching as they could perhaps substitute what is missed in the classroom.

Laboratory based teaching more than supplicates the classroom teaching systems. Hands-on and project / laboratory-based learning methodologies help maximise the learner's understanding of the subject. It is expected to be futuristic – with imported IOT systems – Hands-on, and On-line are bound to stay or grow in the near future. Building more project laboratories would definitely help the student community convert more of class room lectures into 'technological playfields', where they could appreciate difficult problems well. Going a step further, laboratories in universities could partner with nearby National Laboratories and well-established research centres. Treat students with utmost kindness and courtesy, so as to encourage them in their pursuits. Adopting On-line and Off-line teaching / learning processes, which are becoming to be regularly used by most of the universities for 'project-based learning'; seems to be the future, as time proceeds. Such systems are becoming widely popular, saves time and cost, provided it is maintained regularly. Such a system ensures all girls and boys have access to quality systems of education – an essential part of sustainable development – SDG4.

Most of the deemed to be universities, have a procedure of appointing retired professors from government universities or institutes for senior academic positions; reasons being they could be paid less. On the other hand, most of these retired Professors have lost touch with research and the latest developments in their subjects, and proclaim to have been heading organisations in the past. Unfortunately, they are supposed to be in charge of research at these deemed universities. This idea of recruiting should be dropped immediately, if the university is aiming to be in the path towards excellence! What is needed are more young full-time faculty members, Ph.Ds. in all disciplines, who are passionate about research. This is what is needed for a university's growth. On the other hand, senior academicians and Professors from abroad or other research institutions could be invited for short terms of four to six weeks to teach senior students, interact with senior faculty members and involve themselves in projects for short intervals. This could be another way of improving research programmes, and also the quality of the university departments!

Organizing more International / National web conferences jointly with other research groups in thrust areas. This overcomes several other factors, like not being able to attend due to non-availability of speakers, not having to spending much on on-site conferences in the campus. This helps such of those specialist speakers who cannot spare their time for travel. Innovations should be made a top priority. Mandatory situations are needed to grow the university to match the needs of the competition globally. A separate budget allocation towards innovation and publications is a must. Promising student projects should be funded.

Many of the deemed universities sign a large number of Memoranda of Understandings {MoUs} with universities abroad, but do not follow up with them seriously – but during accreditation processes exhibit an unusually long list of collaborations. In fact, it would have been better, if these MoUs could be project- based or faculty-exchange based tie-ups, or even jointly offer degree programs.

Every university could in fact, adapt open-source software, making it easy for the entire academia to contribute. Open-Source Software laboratories are very low in investment, except for investment in hardware and peripherals. Open Source and Application S/W are free of cost.

Every university should setup a separate section/cell, to offer entrepreneurship training, incubation cells in select businesses/trades. Innovations should aim at import substitutions. Workshops in the respective disciplines of select areas should be regularly well organised.

NEP 2020 {NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY}

NEP 2020 {National Education Policy} brings in reforms in the Indian higher education system overhauling the long-standing and established system which is long overdue! It would lead to standardising of the entire HEI operations across the whole of India while simultaneously focussing on improving the quality of education and formatting an effective regulatory procedure for the operation of the HEIs, which were hitherto fragmented. This also takes into the fact that there has been widespread commercialisation in the field of higher education in the country. This NEP 2020 would also to a large extent curb the rampant profiteering of educational institutions by the promoters / sponsors of such institutions

II. CONCLUSIONS

Universities must now concentrate towards innovations, publications and patents. It is rather unfortunate, that some universities and HEIs {Higher Educational Institutions} continue to engage agents or consultants who by '*some means*' promise or guarantee high assessment ratings at the accreditations and sponsored rankings elsewhere. This needs to be curbed. Instead, they could appoint some senior academics to offer guest lectures and other programmes for the development of the institute.

Therefore, the costs of education, quality deliverables, the average Indian diaspora, and improving the GER {gross enrollment ratio} need to be delicately balanced. The age of the adult population in the 2030s, the age group 15 to 64 would be around 68% of the total Indian population far exceeding those of Japan, China and the US, and if India is to be a beneficiary of the *Demographic Dividend* and also be rated amongst the top few countries, calls for an overall re-examination and re-visit to all the rules and regulations that have been passed so far. Efficient and transparent management systems need to be followed, right across all spectrums of higher education in this country, which calls for an urgent solution!

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