Editorial

SHIFTING PARADIGMS

The Indian higher education system is on the threshold of change with the government introducing a slew of reforms to chalk out the roadmap for the 21st century,.

India's continued economic success will depend on it providing educated and skilled labour, with this in mind the government has announced an ambitious plan to bring about modernisation in the higher education system.

What should be the roadmap for higher education in the 21st century? According to Balagangadhara Rao, director of the Research Centre Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap Ghent University, Belgium, higher education in the 21st century should focus on developing the ability to flourish in a world that is fundamentally diverse and irredeemably different . While MRS Rao, president, Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research (JNCASR), opines, 'Education in the 21st century should focus on knowledge creation. The government is thinking on the right lines that instead of a knowledge-absorbing society, India has to become a knowledge-generating society."

Besides, education, today, is without borders. BB Bhattacharya, vice-chancellor, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), asserts that 21st century education is global. 'Indian universities need to prepare themselves for this global system of education. Our universities need complete autonomy in terms of what to teach, how to teach and whom to teach. Currently, laws in India say a central university cannot appoint a foreign lecturer. If a professor from Bangladesh is an expert in SAARC and is willing to come to my university why can't I appoint him? Why should knowledge be restricted? Education should be free." Vivien Stewart, vice-president, Education, Asia Society, adds, "Globalisation poses questions about the excellence, equity and content of our education systems, which we must take into account if we are to adequately prepare our students for tomorrow."

Collaborative education is growing in importance across the globe, with an increased focus on innovation through R&D in order to advance towards a more 'knowledge-based ' economy . Also, today interdisciplinarity is being recognised to be essential for innovation and universities are unique environments where high academic standards and a vast range of disciplines meet and flourish.

According to M Anandakrishnan, chairman, Board of Governors, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)-Kanpur, "We need to go beyond multidisciplinary options to towards an interdisciplinary approach. All cutting edge developments in technologies occur at the interface of two or more disciplines." He further added, "In recent years, the spectacular growth of knowledge in science and technology has been made possible by the integrated efforts of scientists, engineers and social scientists, in addressing complex problems from the perspectives of different disciplines. Interdisciplinarity enables integration of concepts, theories, techniques and perspectives from two or more disciplines to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are beyond the scope of a single discipline."

Besides knowledge, students should also pick up transferable skills and it should be incorporated in the curriculum. "There was a time when a person would remain in one profession for a lifetime. Now a US survey has shown

that on an average a person changes at least 10 professions in his lifetime. Instead of preparing a career for life, we have to prepare a life of careers," says BVR Chawdari, professor, National University of Singapore (NUS).

Universities are becoming aware of the broader need for transferable skills in academic and non-academic environments. According to a survey by European University Association (EUA), the core transferable skills that a student should have, and these are quite independent of the field of knowledge, include social and communication skills, management, creative thinking, capacity of dealing with complex and multidisciplinary work and team.

Exposure to other cultures has become an important aspect of education today. Studying abroad remains a popular option in India, however, not everyone can enjoy the option. As Allan Goodman, president, Institute of International Education (IIE), says: 'Those of us who are involved in the field of international education tend to forget how unconnected most of our citizens are to the world.

Most people still do not travel and the majority of those who do are forced into it by adverse conditions and events. Of the nearly 150 million students in higher educational institutions around the world, less than two percent are studying abroad and in only 20 out of 200 countries." Christian Bode, secretary general, German Academic Exchange Service, advises "bring internationalisation to your campus through student/ faculty exchange, joint research programmes, and so on."

The emphasis placed on education has resulted in India having one of the largest higher education systems in the world, consisting of over 20,000 institutes enrolling more than 12 million students. However, as Amitabh Jhingan, partner, Ernst & Young, puts it, "growth in numbers has not been accompanied by an improvement in the delivery of higher education and consequent outcomes." The challenges facing the higher education system continue to be access, equity and quality. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) has grown but there still exists a wide disparity across regions and gender.

According to a Ernst&Young-FICCI report on 'Making the Indian Higher Education System Future Ready,' the five focus areas should be — financial innovation, innovative use of information and communication technologies (ICT), reinvigorating research, thrust on vocational education and training (VET) and regulatory reforms. The Yashpal Committee first appointed to look into the functioning of the University Grant's Commission (UGC) and All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), went beyond its mandate to chalk out a plan to revamp higher education in-sync with international standards.

The Yashpal Committee Report titled, 'Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education,' emphasises the need for flexibility. "Over the years we have followed policies of fragmenting our educational enterprise into cubicles. If a student of science wants to study music, s/he should be given an option to do so whereas our current education system does not give this flexibility," says NR Madhava Menon, a member of the committee. To achieve universal higher education India has a lot of ground to cover but with the new reforms it is steering in the right direction.

Thank you all for your continued support.

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