

The Telegraph

CALCUTTA SATURDAY 22 MARCH 2014 Rs 3.00

Building world-class institutions in India: A roadmap for 2025

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WHENEVER the ranking of world-class universities and institutions is published, Indian institutions hardly find a place in such listings except in engineering and management. When universities from China, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan are listed in global ranking, it creates heartburning among the Indian policy makers and planners because these countries are rather recent entrants in landscape of higher education. India's higher education has a history of 155 years since the first three universities were set up at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857. Currently India has more than 660 universities and 45,000 colleges which makes India as the 3rd largest among higher education systems in the world.

Why doesn't our universities and institutions able to compete globally and to attract students and faculty around the world? In many world-class universities and institutions like Harvard, Wharton, Kellogg, Yale, MIT, INSEAD, LBS and Cambridge, one may find people of Indian origin doing well as faculty and also working as deans, deputy deans etc. Quite a few of them have been educated in Indian universities and institutions which validates that there is no dearth of talent in India.

Before elucidating the roadmap for building world-class institutions in India and identifying some of the obstacles being faced, it will be worthwhile to dwell up on what indeed is a world-class institution. A glance at methodologies followed by the Financial Times, SJTU and the Economist speak about the leadership, vision and mission, research focus and diversity in faculty and students as the main factors in the evaluation of a world-class University or institution. A world-class institution needs a good amount of autonomy to decide its long-term and short-term policies. This may not be possible unless these institutions are financially self sufficient. Harvard University is a good example of financial autonomy, since its endowment fund is valued around 35-billion dollars (around Rs. 192,500 crore).

Indian Higher Education is currently facing a dilemma of pursuing expansion and excellence together. There have been several political compulsions behind the exponential growth of higher education in India. In pursuit of improving the Gross Enrollment Ratio



Dr. H. Chaturvedi, alternate president, EPSI & director, BIMTECH

(GER), vital ingredients of quality and excellence have been overlooked.

World-class institutions and universities always require a grand vision about academic excellence, innovation and research. It can be nurtured and developed by a team of academic leaders who are led by a visionary and capable vice-chancellor or a dean. A vice-chancellor or a dean can function effectively only when he or she is empowered by owners (government in case of public university) with a relatively longer tenure, say, 5 to 10 years.

There are many institutions and universities in the country which are most suitable to be classified as world-class within a decade or so. Institutions like IIMs, IITs, ISC, ISB and universities like BHU, AMU, JNU, DU, BITS, Thapar, MAHE etc. have reached a level of maturity and can be developed in to world-class within a decade or so. What do they require? They require more funds, more autonomy and better linkages with the industry, who are the users of their passing out graduates and research output.

ROAD MAP - 2025

During the 12th and 13th Five Year Plans, lot of emphasis can be given to convert some of the reputed Indian institutions and universities into world-class institutions. For this herculean task, both the public and private sectors will have to work collaboratively because a collaborative approach is the only way. For creating world-class Institutions, we need aspirational leadership at all levels and also the requisite freedom of action for delivering results. Freedom of action to be given to VCs, rectors, deans and directors will require that critical decisions related to whom to teach, what to teach, how to teach, who will teach and from where to mobilise funds, which are to be taken by the academic leaders. Granting 'Freedom of Action' to the academic leaders will not be an easy process because 'owners' will not agree to it readily.

Building world-class institutions will

also require huge investments in higher education both by the government and the private sector. Currently, India spends 1.2 per cent of its GDP on higher education. Additionally, almost 1.8 per cent of GDP is spent by householders (mostly as tuition fees) and the private sector (mostly as capital investment) taken together. We need to spend at least 4 per cent of GDP on higher education for making some of the Indian Higher Education institutions as world-class.

For building world-class institutions, Indian Higher Education will also require some soul searching and introspection. During the last few decades, a large number of institutions have been set up by politicians, ex-bureaucrats, traders and entrepreneurs. For some of them, higher education is just like any other business. Instead of paying attention on quality and accountability, they try to recover their capital investment as early as possible by resorting to many undesirable activities. This kind of 'rent-seeking' and 'profiteering' should not be allowed. The Supreme Court of India in some of its landmark judgments has permitted 'reasonable-surplus' for educational institution which can be used for various development purposes.

Mr. Kapil Sibal, during his tenure as Minister of HRD has proposed 11 bills aiming various kinds of reforms. 'Prohibition of Unfair Practices by Technical Education Institutions, Medical Education Institutions and Universities Bill - 2010' was an attempt to curb various kinds of malpractices like capitation fee and the like. There has been strident opposition to these bills because of the fear of centralisation and giving enormous discretionary powers to the bureaucracy. Many state governments are also not in favour of these bills because their powers in higher education are likely be usurped by the Union Government.

Philip G. Altbach, who has devoted 50 years on doing researching about the Indian Higher Education, has written a thought provoking article which is titled 'A World Class Country without World Class Higher Education: India's 21st Century Dilemma'. In this article he says - India cannot build internationally recognised research-oriented universities overnight, but the country has the key elements in place to begin and sustain the process. India will need to create a dozen or more universities that can compete internationally to fully participate in the new world economy. Without these universities, India is destined to remain a scientific backwater.*

*Source: 'A World Class Country without World Class Higher Education: India's 21st Century Dilemma: International Higher Education Vol. 40 (Fall), 2005 pp.18-20 by Philip G Altbach