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A new imagination for Indian universities

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“The agenda of universities needs to be established by the faculty and students, keeping in mind the needs and aspirations of everyone.” Picture shows engineering students in Hyderabad. on February 06, 2009.

Indian universities need a transformational change for them to become relevant in the context of global rankings of educational institutions

The [Times Higher Education BRICS and Emerging Economies Rankings 2015](#), which gives new insights into the performance and contribution of universities in BRICS and emerging economies, demonstrates a stronger and sharper attention to issues of quality and excellence to be paid by India.

These rankings give comprehensive data on 100 universities in 18 emerging economies of the world. The results have shown that out of the top 10 universities, three are from China, three are from Turkey, one is from Taiwan, one is from Russia, one from Brazil and one from South Africa. There is not a single Indian university in the top 20 universities. Only the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, ranks 25 on the list. This year's rankings have once again shown the extraordinary progress achieved by Chinese universities. Turkey is another great example of a strong performer in this year's rankings; besides the three mentioned, eight institutions figure in the top 100.

Besides China, another performer has been Russia (seven Russian universities can be found in the top 100). There is a substantial focus on the importance of international rankings of universities among Russian universities and policymakers. There is also a significant impetus for capacity building to improve quality of education and to promoting excellence in all aspects of university governance.

In this context, Russia has embarked on an ambitious initiative called "Project on Competitiveness Enhancement of Leading Russian Universities Among Global Research and Education Centres." This is expected to be a transformational initiative for Russian universities to seek a stronger presence in global rankings.

Project 5-100 is a new initiative of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation government in order to support the best universities in the country. Its vision, says Alexander Povalko, Deputy Minister of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, is to "...support the best universities in Russia, with a desire to see at least five of them enter the top 100 of the leading global university rankings by 2020...Project 5-100 is a comprehensive academic excellence initiative that unites top-tier Russian universities behind the goal of deep transformation of the institutions according to the best international models and practices." There is a collective consciousness emerging

within many universities to seek excellence that will ultimately help them fare well in international rankings.

The way forward for India

While India has 11 universities in the top 100, most of them have actually climbed down in this year's rankings. Indian universities need a transformational change for them to become relevant in the context of global rankings of universities. The last two decades have witnessed extraordinary changes in university systems around the world. India needs to take into account these developments and how they are affecting and impacting the nature of higher education around the world. The higher education system in India, including the university governance systems, needs to consider the following reforms and policy initiatives.

“Universities in India need to be made more autonomous; they need freedom from both government and regulatory bodies.”

First, there is an urgent need to recognise that not all universities need to be engaged in the same manner on different aspects of institution building. They need to be treated differently depending on the kind of contribution they are making. Indian universities should not be differentiated based on whether they are public or private; the differentiation instead should be based on quality, performance and contribution with more resources being made available for universities that are performing exceedingly well. We also need to recognise that not all universities in India need to be research focussed, but they need to excel in other areas and should be measured for their quality and excellence on those focal areas of university development.

Second, taking inspiration from the Project 5-100 initiative, India could consider empowering 50 of its top universities in every possible manner to seek global excellence. For this there needs to be a clear mandate, with funding and resources given to these 50 universities to augment their capacities. While choosing them, policymakers should choose as their

main selection criteria institutional diversity and the institutions' potential for achieving global excellence. Ten Central universities, 10 State universities, 10 private universities, 10 deemed universities and 10 institutions of national importance could be considered. This diversity will enable India to build strong capacity for establishing a few model institutions of excellence that can compete globally.

Third, the issue of regulatory reform has been the heart of policy reforms in higher education. There is an urgent need to seek a complete overhaul of the regulatory framework. Universities in India need to be made more autonomous; they need freedom, in every sense of the word, from both government and from regulatory bodies. The agenda of universities needs to be established by the faculty and students, keeping in mind the needs and aspirations of everyone in society.

Funding for research

Fourth, there is no doubt that world-class universities are built and nurtured with a strong focus on research. There is a need to substantially increase the amount of funding that is currently available for research in Indian universities. This aspect of policy seeks significant reform, both in terms of increasing the quantum of funding as well as in the policy and management framework of disbursing research grants. The existing framework to disburse grants is a multilayered and complex system and leads to frustration and inordinate delays among faculty members who are trying for grants. There is also a need to significantly incentivise research and publications among faculty members. The current system of faculty recruitment, appraisal, assessment, promotion and rewards is not necessarily based on performance as measured through research contributions and publications.

Fifth, it is important that we need to focus on internationalisation of faculty members and students within Indian universities. Almost all Indian universities have faculty members who are only Indian nationals. Universities in India are unlike most parts of the developed world and also many countries in the emerging economies, which hire faculty members from around the world. In a world that is globalised, knowledge creation and sharing cannot be limited because of nationality and place of origin. World-class universities have always attracted faculty and students from around the world. Indian universities need to learn

from the experiences from other countries in BRICS and emerging economies.

There has to be a new imagination for Indian universities — one which draws inspiration from the past, but will also have to look to the future. Transformational change needs to take place at every level of policymaking, regulation and governance in higher education if Indian universities are serious about seeking global excellence and achieving higher rankings.

(C. Raj Kumar is the Vice Chancellor of O.P. Jindal Global University. He delivered the keynote address at the Times Higher Education BRICS and Emerging Economies Universities Summit that was held in Moscow on December 3-4.)