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5 steps to revitalize India's higher education system

By C Raj Kumar

The Indian higher education system commanded awe and respect in the ancient world. Important seats of learning like Nalanda and Takshashila attracted the best students and academics from across the globe.

Unfortunately, over a period of time, our higher education system lost its global competitiveness. This is exemplified by the fact that not many Indian higher education institutions feature in the annual world university rankings like the Times Higher Education World University Rankings or the QS World University Rankings.

This gradual decline in global competitiveness can be attributed to a multitude of factors. Let me list some of the more important concerns and the way to redress them.

First is the lack of incentives for research. The amount of funding that is currently available for research in Indian universities is meagre by global standards. Apart from increasing the quantum of funds---- and promoting specific research on the state of the Indian higher education system itself -- there is a need for significant reform in the overall policy and management framework of disbursing research grants.

For example, the existing framework to disburse grants is a multilayered and complex, leading to inordinate delays, frustration and loss of research focus among faculty members who are trying to secure these grants. A proactive regulatory mechanism set up by ministries like MHRD can help mitigate these concerns.

Further, there is need to attract and retain faculty with good research skills. This will require a review of the current system of faculty recruitment,

appraisal, assessment, promotions and rewards based on performance as measured through research contributions and publications.

Secondly, we do not have world class training programmes for academic administrators. High quality education administration is one of the seriously ignored aspects of the Indian higher education system. As providers of relevant educational support services, academic administrators form the backbone of any educational institution, especially one that aspires to constantly improve the academic experience of its students and teachers.

Indeed, a world-class university requires world-class faculty supported by a world-class administration. Unfortunately, there are no comprehensive training programmes for academic administrators in India who deal with different nuances of our higher education system.

Specifically, the lack of managerial training programmes for higher authorities in education administration has compromised the evolution of generic best practices in the sector. Institution-building has suffered and creativity has been stifled as the Indian higher education system continues to be driven by individual persona and the charm of education administrators instead of adherence to sustainable and institution-driven quality assurance mechanisms and innovative processes.

Thirdly, we need a more outward-looking approach. One of the strongest critiques of Indian higher education institutions is that they tend to get complacent with little success. Unique socio-political contexts cannot be used to justify the lack of sustained global competitiveness. There is a need for a renaissance in our attitude toward higher education. There is also a need to understand and contextualise global best practices for Indian conditions, for instance, in course design and pedagogy.

Indeed, international collaborations in the form of student exchanges, faculty exchanges, joint teaching, joint research, joint conferences, joint publications, joint executive education programmes, summer and winter schools and study-abroad programmes are ways to promote the global engagement of Indian higher education institutions.

Fourth, we have failed to appreciate inter-disciplinarity in higher education. There is a dearth of courses and programmes in India that offer

inter-disciplinary perspectives. Considering the fact that most of our societal problems cannot be solved by experts from a single academic discipline, there is a need for better coordination and synergy between experts from different academic disciplines to find sustainable solutions to the challenging problems faced by our country.

This will make higher education relevant to both Indian and global society. Thus, specialised training in a particular academic discipline must be complemented by generic inter-disciplinary courses. The government should play a pro-active role in setting up and promoting universities offering inter-disciplinary courses in India.

Fifth, we seem to have greater tolerance for mediocre institutional standards. A lot needs to be done by our institutions and regulators to restore transparency, coherence and confidence in the higher education system. At the institutional level, a code of self-regulation and self-restraint has to be adopted. Institutions have to lead by example, not only by promoting best-practices but also by curbing malpractices. Higher standards of data-sharing and transparency have to be mandated at the policy level, along with empowering prospective and current students to compare institutions.

As rightly asserted by President Pranab Mukherjee, no country can aspire to become a sustainable superpower without becoming a knowledge powerhouse. Although a few stand-alone institutes like the newly-established International Institute for Higher Education Research & Capacity Building (IIHed) at O.P. Jindal Global University can play an important role in this arena, there is a need for more such institutes in the higher education sector, which provide constructive thought-leadership, policy inputs and subsequent action plans to implement them.

Indeed, there is a need to create a vibrant policy eco-system on higher education in India. Only then can our higher education system be revitalised.

(Professor C Raj Kumar, a Rhodes Scholar, is founding vice chancellor of O P Jindal Global University [JGU] and director of IIHed. The views expressed are personal. He can be contacted at VC@jgu.edu.in)