

Roadmap for educational innovation in institutions of higher learning: Towards inter-university centre for innovation

Abstract

It is ironic that while searching for models that promote excellence, we have not made the outstanding teachers and researchers the hub of future reforms. The fact that in any field of social investigation or higher education, the top few ranks are always occupied by public institutions has not influenced the advocacy for private institutions in the name of improving quality. Surely, mere ownership cannot influence quality. But, having achieved quality, public institutions need to be supported. The roadmap for educational innovations looks at the initiatives taken at the level of students and faculty. The concept of faculty governance has been diluted in many institutions of higher learning. The bureaucratic structures have sapped lot of energy of the students as well as faculty. It does not matter whether people perform because meritocracy itself has suffered a great deal in appointments to various positions, consultation for policy and institutional changes and for creating future vision. Time has come to arrest these tendencies and rebuild the educational edifice. A proposal for establishing an inter-university centre on innovation is made to operationalize various suggestions.

Roadmap for educational innovation in institutions of higher learning: Towards inter-university centre for innovation¹

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There are several vectors available to policy makers for exploiting innovative potential of the institutions of higher learning. At the outset, it must be conceded that majority of the outstanding teachers and researchers are present in public institutions. While many private institutions have come up, the fact remains that majority of the ones which rank among the top five or ten in any field of educational or indeed the public institutions, be it natural or social sciences. Having said that, it is also true that large scale transformation cannot take place without improving the quality in private institutions as well which have come up in a big way in the last couple of decades. So far as students are concerned, many private institutions do attract very good students. However, the innovations roadmap will require appreciating the merit where it exists and creating role models of institutional excellence but also platform excellence. The concept of platform excellence implies the ability to create cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional collaborative consortia in which innovations are nurtured, encouraged regardless of the origin. Unless the students become the fulcrum, the teachers will not be able to achieve much. Among the teachers, unless outstanding teachers become the hub, the excellence will not be nurtured. The tragedy is that even in some of the institutions of excellence, mediocre leadership gets instituted through various acts of political and administrative collisions. Once you put a mediocre person at the top, the tolerance for excellence inevitably goes down and academic freedom and administrative transparency get discounted. A mediocre leader is afraid of excellence at all levels and therefore seeks the company of conformists, compliant and congruent followers. The heart of the academic excellence lies in the promotion of dissent, diversity and decentralized management.

The rise of authoritarian leadership styles in many institutions is not an accidental development. Around the world, academics have resisted the attempts of such kind of introverted leadership. However, when stakes are high and spoilt systems are pervasive, buying out the peace and order is not very difficult. In spite of all what I have said, there is a hope and let us look at how can signs of these hopes be amplified.

My concrete suggestions are:

Students:

1. Given the widespread popularity of social media, it is amazing that not many academics have used it to teach beyond the class and learn from the students beyond the walls. As experimented by posing questions on Face Book and LinkedIn and have found very interesting quality and quantity of response, sometimes this response help me to moderate

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my class even better. It will be useful to create social media platforms for generating learning opportunities.

2. Time has come for replacing national social service scheme with national innovation promotion scheme to nip the institutional inertia. The students have to be encouraged to benchmark the global standards in each field, identify knowledge tool or institutional gap and create pressure on the faculty to discuss and debate the creative ways of bridging the gap.
3. The public institutions are supposed to serve public purpose. But private institutions driving upon public resources must also service public purpose. There is an extraordinary commercialization which has taken place in the last two decades and one cannot be sure that accountability of institutions is being pursued in a transparent manner. Students deserve better and they should be able to evaluate the course, the quality of faculty preparation and degree of feedback given by the faculty. Many leading institutions do it, many more needs to do it. It is not my argument that judgments of the students can always be final but students' voice should matter. The feedback of high performing students should be given higher weightage.
4. The students should have opportunity to learn from the best teachers even if they are outside the institution and new platforms have to be generated for such learning to take place. I taught an online doctoral course with students from different countries participating in it and one of them has joined me for work from a European country.

Faculty:

5. Online courses have become a powerful way of democratizing knowledge. Some of the leading universities have been offering courses online mobilizing thousands of students from more than hundred countries. In mid 90's when worldwide web was not around the way we know it and one has to use ftp to transfer files, I had taught an online course on which a doctoral student from Cornell University did the research. I had students of all ages from northern America to Pacific and extremely experience professional to young people. We must encourage faculty members teaching more and more course online. In some cases, even if institutional certificates cannot be given, faculty should be empowered to issue a personal certificate depending upon the performance of the students and their proficiency. Coursera, Udacity and MITX are some of the initiatives which are going to transform the educational environment around the world. India cannot lag behind. We must encourage all institutions of excellence to put all the content of their courses in multiple formats online. If MIT can do it, there is no reason why IITs and IIMs cannot do it.
6. Linking sectoral industries with the regional and sectoral institutional development - how come despite billions of dollars invested in mining, not one gram of forest produce is valorised *in situ*. The CSR has become a phony exercise in most of the cases. It should be obligatory in every industry to invest in sectoral and regional, academic-social interactions with clear identifiable outputs in picture. Just we have environmental clearance, there must be an educational clearance which should not be bureaucratic in nature but be given by a

collegium of institutions. In the absence of such accountability, the hinterland of large projects will continue to be catchment of low skill labour and widespread poverty. In this regard, the public sector is no exception in neglecting educational responsibility for the youth in the hinterland.

7. All the technical institutions involve a final year project by the students which often remains disconnected from the problems of society. A platform created by SRISTI viz., techpedia.in, recently supported in a small by DST has experimented with forging such partnerships in academia and informal sector. A small team of young mavericks has persuaded the faculty members to encourage the students to take up real life problems. Some of the initial results are extremely encouraging. Such an experiment deserves to be replicated all over the country with location and institutional specific variations. With more than a million students solving just about ten thousands of problems in a year is not a big deal. There can be both IP protection as well as open source dissemination of these projects. The pity is that the country does not have any resource allocation for investing even in those projects which are found to be good by an eminent jury for further product development and entrepreneurship. On one hand, platform like techpedia.in promote originality and make a cut and paste job more difficult if not possible, on the other hand, there is a great possibility of ideas being taken up for further development in a kho-kho or relay mode.
8. Creating role models in every institution must be one of the urgent goals.
9. Identifying the top teachers in each discipline and creating open source library of at least 50000 lectures in one year and creating social media platforms for learning. Asking top researchers and educationists to lead innovation agenda.
10. Challenging students of higher education, counseling school children through local language education help lines and creating open source content in multiple languages and formats by the elite students - at least 100,000 modules of five to fifteen minutes in different formats in one year.
11. Outstanding practitioners from industry, administration and social development sector to be invited as adjunct faculty by all the universities to provide high quality real life insights in each subject as well as for more meaningful search of larger than life purpose in life.
12. Creating flexibility for students to take break for starting social, economic and political enterprises and come back if they wish to complete their education.
13. Recognizing continuing education programme for MLAs and MPs so that they understand the difficulties of the educational institutions and appreciate the need for high quality attention, resource allocation and depoliticisation of the institutions.
14. Making accreditation and quality delivery of education an open and transparent process to overcome corruption and distortion of values.

The innovations are required in policy making and agenda setting platforms. Instead of assuming that Directors or heads of various institutions represent the wisdom of those institutions, one should mobilize expertise on the basis of academic reputation and amplify their voice in agenda setting process. In some cases, it is done but in most cases it may not be happening. UK has created outstanding confluence of academic excellence and entrepreneurial upsurge in places like Cambridge. There is no reason why similar attempt cannot be made in India. The diversity in admissions is an accepted policy in most institutions of excellence world over. Unfortunately, the disciplinary diversity has gone down in the last decade in most management institutions in the country with more 90 per cent inductees being engineers. The proportion of girls continues to be around 15 per cent. There is a need for radical departure in this regard. We need public funded proprietary programmes to create a large pool of students from disadvantaged economic background so as to select best among them for the elite institutions. Just as doctors have to spend necessary internship before being qualified to practice, there is no reason why management and technology students should not be required to serve MSME and village and slum communities before being qualified to practice. Every skill requires ground to think and the society has to decide the involvement of student in nation building process. If all the students are required to teach in schools for one year before being given degree of their discipline, we can make this country 100 per cent literate in one year and raise the quality of education in an unprecedented manner.

Inclusive society requires inclusive approaches for education and institution building. Some of the most outstanding institutions have also had some of the weakest social connection. Excellence and relevance can be connected and must be connected. The research on innovative approaches for problem solving deserves much greater attention. The societal expectations from the academic world must be raised. One of the best ways of institutionalizing mediocrity at individual or institutional level is to reduce the expectation from oneself. We must ask ourselves “are we really expecting enough from the power of youth in one of the youngest countries”.

Continuing education is a hallmark of a knowledge society. Twenty million people travel by train every day. Should not there be a possibility to register for courses of varying durations from few hours to upto fifty hours in long distance trains and get assessed for them. Education does not have to take place only in the class room. People should be able to pursue education vigorously, autonomously and joyfully. The linkage between Open University and other existing institutions must be strengthened. Indian renaissance will then not be too far away.