



Interview

'Collegial system gives the best governance'

CMA Dr. Asish K. Bhattacharyya

Advisor, Advanced Studies, Institute of Cost Accountants of India;
Professor and Head, School of Corporate Governance & Public Policy,
IICA; former Professor at IIM-Calcutta and former Director at IMI Kolkata

MA What have been the major initiatives taken during your tenure with this institution?

This question is not relevant for me at this stage.

During my tenure as the Director of the International Management Institute Kolkata (IMI Kolkata), which was the startup at that point in time, I focused on the recruitment of the right individuals in faculty, admission of students that meet the minimum threshold without setting a target for the batch size, and building the library. Of course, I was provided with excellent infrastructure. Right faculty members are those who are inclined towards research and have some research experience. Research is the hallmark of a good academic institution. Excellence is achieved through regular interactions between good students and good faculty and strong peer review of teaching and research.

MA How do you look at the ranking of Indian universities done by international agencies? How relevant are their parameters for Indian institutions?

Ranking of Indian universities by international agencies should neither be ignored totally nor should guide policy formulations for higher educations. Methodologies adopted by those

agencies are not exactly suitable for ranking Indian universities. Different international agencies use different parameters for ranking universities. Parameters include research (e.g., volume and citations), teaching environment (e.g., student-teacher ratio and ratio of doctoral students to total number of students), internationalization (e.g., collaboration with international faculty and institutions and presence of international students and faculty in the campus) and reputation (usually through survey among academicians and therefore subjective in nature). Different agencies (for examples, Times and QS) give different weights to each parameter. In addition to those basic parameters, different agencies use additional parameters, which differ among agencies. India specific rankings should not exclude the basic parameters because research, international collaboration and teaching environment are the corner stones of a good university. However, additional parameters should include infrastructure (e.g., library, IT and classrooms), opportunities provided to members of marginalized groups to access university facilities, university-industry collaboration, and contribution of the university in developing good teaching material (e.g., text books) in Indian languages. Weights to parameters should also be calibrated taking into account Indian circumstances.

MA What are your views about the recent trend of adopting performance management system in education sector in India? Does NAAC play an important role in this regard?

Performance management systems have been introduced at two levels: at the individual faculty level and another at the university level. The point system introduced by UGC is appropriate at the broad level but it has a serious drawback. It has been made watertight at sub-component level and thus, has withdrawn the faculty's autonomy to decide the work portfolio within the broad categories. This might have dysfunctional effect on faculty motivation and productivity. Workload norm is tilted towards teaching leading to inadequate allocation of faculty time to research. Inflexibility results in perverse outcome. For example, research volume has increased but research quality has deteriorated. There is a need for reforming performance management and incentive systems.

NAAC is doing a good job of rating universities. It evaluates universities in seven broad categories: Curricular Aspects, Teaching-Learning and Evaluation, Research, Consultancy and Extension, Infrastructure and Learning Resources, Student Support and Progression, Governance, Leadership and Management, Innovations and Best Practices. Universities that aspire to obtain highest rating focus on those areas resulting in the overall improvement in their academic functions.

MA In this competitive scenario cost effectiveness is a burning issue. How do you evaluate the education sector in India in this context?

Cost management results in appropriate allocation of resources to most productive uses. Therefore, although universities do not compete in the sense in which business enterprises compete in the product market, cost management is essential in the education sector for the optimal utilization of limited resources available in the sector. In a developing country like India, education sector competes with other social sectors for government funding. Funding from other sources is also limited. Best use of resources requires focus on cost management. It is true also for institutions coming up in the private sector. Unfortunately, cost management is yet to receive due attention in the education sector.

MA Indian government provides huge subsidy in education sector. Many students,

in spite of being financially sound, take the facility of subsidy. Do you believe an efficient and prudent pricing mechanism can solve this problem? Do you have any personal opinion on it?

India is a poor country. Therefore, if higher education is made accessible to everyone who is eligible for the same, the percentage of poor students will be so substantial that differential pricing will have almost no impact on university's financing. Moreover, investment in education is highly risky and therefore, as investment increases lesser number of students enroll for the same. This results in diminishing positive externalities that is created by providing higher education to large number of individuals. Higher education in a country like India should be subsidized. Differential taxation is better option than differential pricing in education at any level.

MA Please give a brief outline on governance and management system in education sector in India.

Collegial system of governance is the best governance system in higher education. Faculty should govern academics in an institution of higher learning. However, in recent times, UGC norms and governance of some top universities show signs of distrust between faculty and administration. Faculty is treated as a group of highly skilled workers and not even knowledge-workers. Consequently, the role of the faculty in governance is reducing over time. This will impact the academic quality adversely.

MA What are the basic differences you find in the teaching - learning environment under public and private education system?

Public institutions, in general provides better teaching-learning environment than private education system. This is primarily because of the approach of private promoters towards education. Most of them aim to generate surplus in a short-term, while the gestation period is generally very long. However, some private educational institutions (e.g. ISB and Shiv Nadar University) are providing better teaching-learning environment. Similarly, the teaching-learning environment in some public sector universities is quite poor. This is bound to happen with rapid expansion of higher education. UGC is making credible efforts to bridge the gap between the learning environment between a few top universities and the rest. The task is formidable.

MA How do you compare and benchmark the regulatory aspect and the teaching

- learning environment in India with that of the advanced countries?

As far as my knowledge goes the teaching-learning environment at undergraduate level in India is superior to that in advanced countries. However, the teaching-learning environment at the graduate level and at doctoral level in most universities in advanced countries is superior to that in most universities in India. This is so because India cannot match the resources that institutions of higher learning allocate to research and related activities and also their level of internationalization. There are India institutions (e.g., Indian Statistical Institute, Harish-Chandra Research Institute at Allahabad) that provide excellent teaching-learning environment in the area of Mathematics and Statistics, plausibly because research in those areas does not require high financial commitment.

MA Do you believe online education system can add value towards quality education in Indian scenario?

On-line education blended with classroom learning is the best solution to deliver high quality learning. Online education provides students to access top quality teachers and researchers across the country and across the globe. This adds tremendous learning value. However, element of classroom learning is requires to earn student's commitment and attention and to enable him to connect to the teacher. Online education also reduces cost because of lower investment and delivery cost. India does not have a large pool of high quality teachers and it aims to deliver education at affordable cost. Therefore, it should pay special attention to online education.

MA Do you think performance evaluation/appraisal of educational organizations is the need of the hour?

I agree with you that performance evaluation/appraisal is the need of the hour. Continuous improvement can be achieved only through a continuous review process. Accreditation systems and rating systems definitely helps peer review. As I have already said that NAAC is doing a good job.

MA How proper Cost Management system plays an important role in the overall growth of education sector in India?

Cost management is imperative for institutions that operate within resource constraint. India institutions of higher learning operate with resource constraint. Cost management helps to cut wastes and to appropriately allocate resources to different activities. I am not sure

whether cost management plays an important role in growth because the actual capacity in India falls short of demand. Therefore, there is always a space for new institutions. While saying so, I must mention that with cost management, institutions will be able to improve the quality of learning, and in some cases, to provide education at an affordable price.

MA Do you think present higher education system is effective for producing sensible and accomplished human being to build our nation?

Different people may define accomplishment in different ways and it may mean different things to different people. To me an accomplished person is one who holds high ethical standards and leads a happy life. Higher education cannot produce accomplished human beings in that sense. Ethical values are imbibed in early stages of life and not at the university level.

MA What are the infrastructural strengths and weakness of Indian education system?

The most important shortcoming is the lack of resources including faculty. This results in undue stress on resources and poor quality of education. In many universities, physical facilities are also inadequate. I do not see any infrastructural strength. Of-course, private universities are providing excellent brick and mortar infrastructure, but lack soft infrastructure.

MA How much change have you experienced in the Indian education scenario in past few decades? What is your opinion regarding the future panorama of education sector in India?

The higher education sector has achieved tremendous growth in the past few decades. This by itself is a great achievement as this has enabled a large segment of eligible individual to access higher education. However, the quality, on average, has deteriorated, while many institutions have maintained excellence. Next decade will see emergence of excellent universities sponsored by large industrial houses. I am sure that the emergence of those universities and continuous efforts by UGC and other regulators will enhance India's focus on research. Moreover, with increasing interest of foreign universities to collaborate with top class Indian universities, research will improve and internationalization will occur. I am quite optimistic about future.