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Q&A

'Regulatory and learning environments behind those of advanced countries'

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

Since I have been over the years connected with five Universities viz. Calcutta University, Jadavpur University, West Bengal University of Technology, West Bengal State University and Techno India University I am in a bulleted fashion talk about the initiatives taken in each of these. *Calcutta University.*

- I joined Department of Physics in 1977. We started a new Department of Biophysics, Molecular Biology and Genetics which achieved the distinction of getting 90% of the students clearing NET. The Department went on to achieve other heights in terms of publications and receiving Research Grants. The Department started operating the Distributed Information centre financed by Department of Biotechnology, GOI which provided the first major e-mail access to faculties of Calcutta University.
- We made a successful endeavour in terms of Inffibnet project which permitted the entire University with its various campuses to be networked with an Internet connectivity based in Rajabazar Science College with the help of a VSAT
- The Computer Centre was based on a firmer keele with an additional grant from UGC. It also started offering an MCA course.

Jadavpur University

- I was part of the team that successfully defended UGC potential for excellence scheme.
- During my tenure as Pro-Vice Chancellor Jadavpur became a SYLFF Project member.
- I was the coordinator of the first ever European Commission multi Institutional project between Brunel University, University of Vienna, IIT Bombay and Jadavpur University.
- The successful implementation of the first led to a second project involving Brunel University, Jadavpur University and BUET, Bangladesh.

West Bengal University of Technology

- We initiated an open source software library based on KOHA and D-Space.
- We connected 102 of our colleges all over West Bengal with EDUSAT dishes.
- We utilised 100 Phoenix boxes for low energy utilizing CPU units
- We used ExpEyes forerunners for our Physics Laboratory – an IUAC initiative.
- Set up first Technology Business Incubation Centre (EKTA) in University in West Bengal funded by DST

West Bengal State University

- Being the first Vice Chancellor in our recruitment for faculty we made all the interview data available on NET so that even though we recruited roughly 106 faculties after interviewing nearly 3000 candidates there was not a single RTI issue.
- We permitted faculties from abroad to phone in during the interview and participate with their Power Point presentation.
- We trained 35 of daily wage labourers in Computer Application so that the entire Administrative, Financial Accounting, Examination conduct could be completed for not only the Post Graduate students but also the undergraduate students which eventually numbered around 130 thousand.
- The Registration of students were done on a Unique Identification number comprising 18 digits which permitted us to issue bar coded picture carrying identity card for all the students.
- We also set up a digitised library and had set up 2 GBPS connectivity access under NKN programme.

Techno India University

- The entire teaching, learning module is based on Moodle.
- The Examination, especially the end of the term is conducted with Moodle, so that this University is fully utilising the technology enabled teaching learning modules.

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

This debate needs closer attention than is normally given. It is not a binary process. We need to pitch ourselves against the best of the standards set up by the Western Universities, however these should not make us move away from our goals of education: Excellence, Equity and Access.

Quite often a poor grade is confused with poor in excellence. However as it has been shown umpteen times that the evaluation process itself can lead to a skewed result where the imaginative, innovative and creative are overwhelmed by those who can learn by rote and excel in figuring out how to score.

There would always be different types of pupils. Some diligent enough to excel in a beaten track, some others being creative would try out their own path to growth. However in either case there needs to be a measurable quantity.

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?

I am in agreement with the notion that there should be a performance audit of Institutions. However I am in disagreement with the notion that some Institutions are so hallowed that they can choose to remain outside its purview. I was part of a six member Committee set up by the AICTE to reorganise NBA accreditation process so that it could be made compatible with requirements of Washington accord. I myself have been involved in the NBA accreditation process across the country. Similarly NAAC can play a similar role.

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

Cost effectiveness in education sector is certainly a major point of debate. It can only be answered in the context of what should the education offer. I am not one of those who believe in the Invisible Hand of Market guiding every aspect of our life. Like a majority of the economists who propound virtues of welfare economics, I too am convinced that the State has no business in abdicating its primary role in providing primary and secondary education to the children, otherwise the very necessity of the States existence may be questioned. However having said this, I do believe that the subsidisation of education and the right to education needs to be dealt with separately. Unfortunately in our country the amount invested by the Government so far has been poorly spent and those who are to be blamed for this are the very ones who have thrown up their hands and sung paens for privatisation. I am a strong believer in providing an education to young minds that is fun and provides them with an opportunity to do something in their life. But this does not necessarily mean that everyone needs to be straitjacketed into a vocational course and being made market ready. The need for young men and women to take up jobs that are becoming available is understood but that should come as a choice otherwise what we turn out would be labelled more as IT coolies rather than software developers.

MA The Indian government provides huge subsidies in education, but many students, inspite of being financially sound, take the subsidy. Do you believe an efficient and prudent pricing mechanism can solve this problem?

Since I was educated with a scholarship which I thought was handsome I actually never paid for my education, but I do believe that I had earned my scholarship. For others there should be an opportunity to attend education cost through merit scholarships/ loans which may be made available. Frankly speaking I see the kind of money needed to support our education system completely dwarfed by the kind of subsidy given to the Corporate Sector be it through Scams or through Gas price hikes etc. or the delayed payment by airlines of aviation fuel cost. Nonetheless I believe that the cost for education may be charged to those who can afford it. One of the mistaken notion touted is based on an assumption that the need for market based pricing is the only panacea. We forget that some of the most advanced economics like Germany, France, Nordic countries manage their economy as a welfare state providing basic amenities without copying United States.

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

I have had the opportunity to introduce a management system much leaner compared to that of Calcutta University.

- Calcutta University had a posse of nearly 130 officers and 3500 non-teaching staff managing the affairs of 10000 PG students and nearly 2-3 lakh undergraduate students.
- Jadavpur University had 32 Officers and nearly 700 odd non-teaching staff managing 10000 students in the campus.
- At West Bengal University of Technology we did with 7 Officers and 50 non-teaching Staff for 700 students in the University and nearly 1-2 lakh students in affiliated Institutions.
- At West Bengal State University we had 5 officers and 65 daily wage workers for 700 University students and nearly 1-1.5 lakh Undergraduate students.

The shrinkage in number has often been shown as a reason why the latter two Institutions is seen as a failure in terms of Governance. But

the last one did manage to get all its students registered, conduct and publish examination results in time and even when bereft of electricity published more than 200 papers in the first three years of its existence with an average Impact Factor of 1.5 and get Grants worth nearly 3 crore. I believe strongly when evaluating effective Governance and Management System of any Institution there should be an Input Output analysis in deciding how effective the two are.

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

I had an expectation that the Private systems would lean towards a more effective teaching-learning system since brand equity would be based on how quality is perceived. However with Private Institutions catering towards the more elite groups' education and since they get their numbers because of the burgeoning middle class, quite often instead of quality education it is flashy aspect of education that tends to predominate. In public institutions, it is the mindset problem that prevents implementation of available technology enabled processes even though they are legislated to be implemented.

There is also the issue of access and equity in the Private Institutions. These can certainly be addressed as it is done in the West through a network of scholarships and teaching assistantships that may be made available. However like the corporate social responsibility criteria there is more sound than actual delivery from the private sector inspite of the so called legislative measures that have been put in place. Finally philanthropy as practiced in Western Capitalism is yet to be matched in our country.

MA How do you compare and benchmark the regulatory aspects and the teaching-learning environment in India with that of the advanced countries?

We need to catch up a lot in terms of regulatory aspect and the teaching-learning environment as compared to advanced countries. In terms of regulatory aspect a lot of regulations practiced here is either they are a throw back to the regulations during the colonial period or they do not show flexibility required in a progressive system. In terms of learning environment the absence of flexibility often leads to a very dull education system that stifles creativity or broadness of vision.

MA Can the online education system add value to our education?

I do believe On-line education can add qualitatively to the furtherance of our academic quality. However the need for a F2F scene is not lost and only the role of the 'teacher' changes to that of a facilitator.

MA The Indian education market is gradually increasing due to the strong demand for quality education; as a result, many private operators including a few foreign universities are getting into this business. Do all these universities maintain the desired standard of quality education? What is your expectation from the Indian government in this context?

There are 173 private universities which are seeking recognition of UGC and barring a few which should be countable with our digits rest do not show the desirable standard of quality education. Our regulatory authorities have been under cloud not without reasons.

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

Absolutely.

MA How does Cost Management play an important role in the overall growth of the education sector in India?

As I have mentioned before, lack of proper cost management system being in place led to the general belief that our education system is poorly governed. I would hence strongly recommend that a proper Cost management system be put in place.

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

Those who swear by Shining India would do well to remember that the developments if any of this country was not brought about by the foreign educated only. There is robustness in our education system . However the need for constant improvement exists and upto now we have talked about these as well.

MA How do you evaluate your existing faculty quality and strength of your institution?

For the faculties there is a student feed back system. For the management there is regular meeting with faculties slated so that the system academic audit can progress. Ultimate goal is to provide a 360 degree Quality Improvement System.

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

Providing better equipped laboratory, ability to think independently and creatively. The strength of course lies in the intellectual ability of some of the students to overcome all these handicaps.

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

In terms of sheer number we have progressed a lot. We also have had a wider network of students who are ready to join and enjoy the fruits of education. However the constraints in terms of investment have forced a decline in the quality of education. More people are now comfortable with English as a language for communication than before. But the quality of understanding is certainly not good. The number of publications and the quality of publications have gone up but they still lag far behind what has been achieved by our competition. Jean Dreize and Amartya Sen in their book An Uncertain Glory hit the right chord when they said that India stands very poorly in social indicators even amongst the SAARC countries. A country of a billion and two hundred million can easily provide a burgeoning market of the size of Europe or United States only with the purchasing power of 30% middle class, but for the nation to survive one would do well to remember what Gurudev said .."Those whom you are leaving behind ..would be the ones who would hold you back" . Let us remember the bottom 30% and not forget to make our society an inclusive society.

The news that the Government is planning to give relief to nine lakh students' loan account shows how the expectation of the rising youth is unable to match the reality because of the sluggishness of job markets and quite often except for a handful, the jobs on the offer are not commensurate with the educational attainment of the incumbents but then let us not forget that this is a global phenomena. In Spain almost 50% of young job seekers leave the country. In Greece and other countries it is even grimmer. No matter how much we try to brush aside the fallout effect of global meltdown of 2008 on the prospects of the youth, they continue to be very severe.