

Management of Collegiate Education in the 21st Century: Some Insights

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COMMENTARY

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It is a popular perception in the minds of both educated laymen and distinguished academicians that the quality of higher education in our country is on a declining course since Independence. The 'quality' that everybody is referring to is not defined precisely. The global rankings published by a couple of international agencies in which no Indian university figures anywhere in the top hundred, added to the confusion. The opening statement also implies that Indian institutions of higher education (HEI) were better off before we attained political independence compared to the post-independent period, particularly in the sphere of science education and training. There was never any confusion about the University-Society interaction dynamics. Socio-economic-cultural milieu kept changing in the last one hundred years and accordingly what kept changing was the public understanding and expectation of what a University is and what it should be. The Government of India appointed many commissions and committees to assess the Indian education system from primary through secondary and tertiary stages to suggest appropriate reforms. Voluminous reports were also submitted and new organizations like University Grants Commission (UGC), National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), etc., were also floated to put into action some of the well-meaning suggestions. The growth of institutions of higher learning in terms of numbers, funding, administrative framework, infrastructure, etc., did not stop in the same period. Why then this common perception? We need a comprehensive study, and an analysis of the educational system to diagnose the problem. We also need tangible plans of action and clear recommendations on how to restore quality.

The book titled 'Management of Collegiate Education in the 21st century: Some Insights' edited by Srinivas Saidapur and published by Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi is a partial attempt at that goal. Aptly titled 'Management of Collegiate Education in the 21st century: Some Insights,' this collection of articles by highly distinguished academicians is timely, authoritative but provocative, comprehensive in coverage and also prescriptive on the management of higher education to meet 21st century demands. Srinivas Saidapur, an eminent Biologist, distinguished educationist and innovative administrator has done yeomen service to the academic community in editing and bringing out this wonderful and highly readable book. The cover page and the introductory Chapter 1 by Saidapur essentially summarize the contents of this book. A book review would appear redundant. Nevertheless, a review of the ideas/opinions expressed in this book in the form of a critique is still required and I have ventured to offer one.

The Preface by Srinivas Saidapur says it all. It bemoans the 'declining quality of higher education' in post-independent India. Indices to perceive this declining quality have been spelt out. They are varied like performances in National Eligibility Test, job interviews, etc. These are only symptoms. Unfortunately, some of these parameters do not correlate with research capabilities, and the least to the quality of higher education. The root cause is the lack of quality teachers in critical numbers to keep the institutions running. A distinction should be made between general education which includes humanities and social sciences, and science education. Moreover, the performance of educational institutions and that of research institutions should be assessed on different frames of reference. Policymakers add to the confusion by changing the goalpost in terms of the primary aim of higher education. If the goal post is changed, the problem becomes more acute. For example, raising questions about the relevance of university products to fourth industrial revolution or wishing for value education or for an innovative/creative ambience adds to the problem. Further, equity and excellence are mutually exclusive. Perception of a problem is always contextual. What is perceived as a problem or undesirable in one context is not a problem but a solution in another context. Goals of higher education have been made diverse and that makes the task of quality assessment challenging. Problems and solutions to problems are relevant only in the context of goals of higher education set by policymakers. Students are diverse, teachers are diverse and assessment parameters are diverse, and all these add complexity to defining quality and hence drawing conclusions or making corrective suggestions. While each of the parameters can be assessed quantitatively, what is to be made of the meaning of the numerical average is not clear to me. If uninspiring teachers grab the majority of teaching jobs, if politicians grab the academic leadership positions (principals and vice-chancellors) and if incompetent scientists crowd the laboratories and classrooms, the quality of higher education, especially that of science educations takes a beating. An ethical perspective of the whole education system is the only way to provide solutions. Given the complexity of our country, what India has done and achieved in higher education is not bad. Of course, there is a scope for vast improvement. What we can say emphatically is India has not been able to realize its potential. Islands of excellence are getting submerged in a sea of mediocrity. We must first take a look at how Oxford and Harvard, as examples, function in every aspect of higher education. We must take cognizance of the social-cultural-economic diversity of the Indian student community. We must then design appropriate higher educational institutions. One

must also remember what Aldous Huxley said i.e., “ends do not justify means!” A proper understanding of the ethics of higher education will set things right in our country. There are no short cuts to success or quality or excellence.

In our country, education is translated as *vidya*. In ancient India *paraa vidya* (roughly higher education) was distinguished from *aparaa vidya* (roughly lower education). The latter represented training in skills. Horse riding, fencing, metallurgy, astrology and other skills constituted the *aparaa vidya*. All of these are employable to make a living. Higher education referred to the education of the ‘mind’ to enable it to reach its highest level of consciousness. More important, the student sought the teacher or *guru*. Today it is the other way. It is mostly a commercial activity now and hence, business models are discussed to attain success. All the stakeholders are tense and quite often suffer depression. Students are most vulnerable. The biggest casualty is the joy of learning or discovery.

In Chapter 2, Saidapur traces the history of Indian education system over 5000 years. He has identified the ills that plague the present system. There is a lot of overlap between this chapter and that by S P Thyagarajan (Chapter 3). He aptly says that the collapse of quality education system leads to the collapse of the nation. What Lord Macaulay did to India is still being debated in the context of values of higher education. Chapter 3 traces the history of the growth of the British (colonial) education system in India in the nineteenth century to the present date. It is reported as a matter of fact but without any value judgement or even comparison with the contemporary western universities in terms of ‘quality.’ If even a comparison, in terms of quality, of Banaras Hindu University, Mysore and Osmania Universities which were established more or less in the same period (in the 1920s) were made, it would have given a case study and parameters of study for the present book. It looks like most of the universities established around those times were modelled after either London or Oxbridge Universities. Even here, a comparison of our universities with the parental model universities in a timeframe of the next hundred years of their respective lives would have provided the much required ‘insight’ in the theme of the present book. No such thing was attempted. In terms of guiding philosophy of higher education, there appears to be a little confusion between PG departments (especially humanities) and undergraduate colleges. The philosophy guiding the establishment of universities at Calcutta, Banaras, Andhra, Mysore, Madras, Santiniketan or Gujarat Vidyapeet appears to be different but no comment or analysis is offered with respect to quality attained. Indeed, what were the parameters of quality among these diverse universities? Were the parameters same between humanities and say natural sciences? No critical analysis has been provided. Radhakrishnan commission report has been discussed after tracing the history of UGC. Historically this appears odd. It is interesting to notice that over 20 commissions/committees were formed and asked to write reports on selected aspects of higher education from 1947 to 2017. Nobody spoke about quality in globally recognizable terms. The focus was on growth targets in terms of a number of institutions, and social narratives like inclusive growth. Defining the quality of education, especially science education, is conspicuous by its absence. Parameters of the highest quality in science education/research are not the same as the parameters of the highest quality in say literature or history or even economics. There lies the problem. One, the focus was always on general education or on technical education. Fundamental natural science was not given that

much attention as it deserves. Two, all the eminent educationists and the 20-odd commissions and committees did not compare Indian institutions with western institutions in terms of universally acceptable parameters of quality in any period of time. One such parameter is a number of students from far and wide, even foreign countries, attending a given institution in India. Universities at Nalanda, Takshasila in India and Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka in medieval times attracted more number of foreign students than any of the present universities in India or South Asia (the colonies so to say). Does the problem then lie in the parameters chosen? It is true that great teachers have come out of the Indian universities and great researchers have come out of Indian research institutions that lack educational context. All leaders of Indian science and academics appear to get confused between these two different ecosystems. They demand excellent research from universities and quality education from research institutions!

In Chapter 4, Shanbhag gives a comprehensive history of the growth of Indian educational institutions in post-independent India. Details of reports of Radhakrishnan commission, Kothari commission, and Yash Pal committee and of Sam Pitroda's National Knowledge Commission are given. All the reports again talk of desirable structural organization and other features of HEL. The author neither analyses the impact of these reports, nor provides any data on the status of the colleges, centers and departments in different universities. There is no mention about the great personalities that came out of these institutions. Are there no quantitative and qualitative indices of excellence/quality in higher education especially science education? A few successful stories of growth like the Department of Chemical Technology, Mumbai University; the School of Biophysics of Madras University; the Departments of Botany, Natural Products Chemistry, Physics and Zoology of the University of Delhi; the schools of cytogenetics at Calcutta, Banaras, Mysore, Ahmedabad and Delhi Universities; the school of Entomology at Agra College and Madras Christian College; the schools of Marine Biology at Andhra and Annamalai Universities and many more could have been mentioned on a positive note to prove that Indian science education is not that bad and in fact very good by global standards.

In Chapter 5, Deshpande takes cudgels on behalf of education in social sciences but gives the impression of a sectarian battle. The author only talks of lack of focus on social science education in educational policies, the disintegration of social sciences into subdomains and the consequent absence of 'holistic science of society.' Déjà vu! I see a parallel in the growth of teaching biology at school and undergraduate levels. Instead of integrating other disciplines in terms of unifying concepts, it has disintegrated into ten teaching departments for short-term gains. How will any of them get to understand biology as a single discipline!

The most interesting and inspiring article in the book comes from Sohan Modak in Chapter 6. Using anecdotal experience from his own professional career, he has with great insight, brought out what it means to be an inspiring teacher and what inspires the learner. All good teachers will resonate with these ideas. This is the only article that partially answers the question, what is hurting educational institutions most? Rightly implied by the author, it is the absence of inspiring teachers in sufficient numbers. Professor Modak speaks from his heart! The most important activity to ensure quality education is the selection of teachers. Quality will automatically follow. All other factors are needed but are not sufficient to guarantee excellence in education. Most of the articles are not explicit in stating what the problem is in

higher education; instead, they focus on addressing the solutions they suggest. An opening statement at the beginning would make it easy for the reader to know what to look for in the article. Modak's article is one of the exceptions. The title says it all.

In Chapter 7, Mulimani and Tanannavan take a look at the careers and sayings of many highly successful and visible scientists to illustrate what excellence means. One feels the absence of concrete suggestions to nurture excellence in the majority of colleges and universities as the title suggests. The content inside does not relate to this aspect of the title. Again, if a comparison were to be made between excellent institutions and average institutions using subjective and objective parameters, readers will get the message. A discerning reader, on the other hand, would notice that hero worship, characteristic of the Indian socio-cultural mindset and an irreverent attitude demanded great scientists are mutually exclusive. The correct solution is to develop 'institutional arrogance' and not individual ego or reverential attitude!

Chapter 8 is a very lucid article on the duties, responsibilities and leadership nature of college Principals. In minute detail, Saidapur has successfully enumerated all these. It is a textbook lesson for all in-service training programs for teachers aspiring to become principals.

Patagundi, in Chapter 9, has penned the most satisfying article on the implications of good governance in promoting and sustaining excellence in HEI. He has explained the six functions of governance as originally stated by Linda Bourne. He has hit the nail on the head. The goals of excellent institutions have to be very clear to all stakeholders i.e., teachers, students, administrators and funding agencies. If there is no conviction in those goals and only lip sympathy is given, institutions will only be architectural wonders where poor quality of education is transacted and actually, excellence/quality is buried.

Sivasubramanian, in Chapter 11, has tried to define quality higher education in abstract terms like good citizenry, ethics and values as desirable goals. He has suggested certain approaches/solutions to attain these. What is not conveyed explicitly is the correlation of these action programs to the terms defining quality higher education. Does quality education in technical subjects like science, engineering and medicine also mean the same parameters? He leaves the readers dissatisfied.

In Chapter 12, Ranganath, a former Director of NAAC, has held the bull by its horns. He raises a pertinent question – why don't our HEIs figure in the global rankings in the top 100? Our problem is in defining quality in quantifiable parameters. Further, this article, like many others, appears more relevant to humanities and social sciences. When it comes to natural sciences, the parameters of quality are not those that are enumerated here. In fact, we are not clear. Ranganath has discussed the dimensions of quality assessment in great detail. However what is missing is a discussion of the impact of HEI on general society in which it is not only embedded but is also being supported. Sundar Sarukkai, our philosopher of Science, has remarked somewhere that excellence in science education will be possible only in societies which exhibit excellence in culture and civilizational parameters like architecture, literature, performing arts and other creative pursuits. This essentially means excellent science institutions cannot afford to be ivory towers. Spreading scientific temper is an excellent activity but assessment bodies do not give much importance to this activity. Any institution is

excellent only to that extent, limited by the state of an excellent mindset of the general society. Nobody has discussed the diversity of the student population and how it affects excellence in HEI. Chapters 12, 13 and 14 deal with quality assurance procedures both by NAAC and by host institutions. Ranganath writes eloquently about the NAAC philosophy and mechanisms it has put in for assessment and accreditation of HEI. Kasinath very lucidly explains the role of internal quality assurance cells in promoting, managing and sustaining quality education. Saidapur has written an advisory capacity about what colleges should do to be 'ever ready' for NAAC team visit. This is a training manual for all institutions hoping to become excellent. Once again, I wonder, if 'best practices' as good as those followed globally, are prescribed and followed in our country why do our HEIs not figure in global rankings? Does this mean assessments and examinations can only maintain procedures for quality but cannot assure quality in the global sense? Something is missing. Readers can recall the rankings of research journals suggested by the National Academy of Agriculture, which is relative and not absolute. Are our NAAC procedures also like that? I realize that all these procedures help in the management of quality institutions without producing quality. This is like in sports, where world-class sportspersons have come out in spite of the system but not due to the system. Venki Ramakrishnan, the Nobel Laureate and currently the President of the British Royal Society remarked somewhere that a nation should first produce breakthrough research and then only is it on the pathway to excellence at the global level. Like innovation or creativity, one can maintain conditions promoting creativity but cannot train people to become creative! How true!

The next three chapters i.e., 15, 16 and 17 deal with libraries as very important sources of learning for students and teachers. The importance of libraries (both conventional and digital) in enabling attainment of excellence for all stakeholders is realized by all. Three excellent articles by Sathyanarayana, Anupama Joshi and J S Bhat educate the readers about not just the need for a good library but also about how a good library should be and its role in building a quality institution. In this age of information, researchers have to know what is being published elsewhere. It is not enough if libraries provide a means to seek information. Libraries should also be proactive in providing updates on different areas of research to the learner. I wish there was a chapter on Eugene Garfield and S Ranganathan and their contribution to information analysis and library movement respectively. The easiest and best way to attain quality is to ape, unabashedly, what the acknowledged leaders of quality do.

Chapters 18, 19 and 20 are grouped together. The first two are meant for the prospective employee and the already employed. These are not for learners but for the management teams that run institutions. There lies the dilemma. The continuing debate whether higher education is meant to generate employable skilled personnel or create excellent minds for future is inconclusive. Perhaps both the ends have to be realized. It is for the policymakers to give directions to achieve a balance. It is much easier to associate the goal of excellence to general education and the goal of employability or wealth creation to professional educational institutions. The only article written with compassion for the learner is Chapter 20 by Manika Ghosh. It is easy to talk about, assess and demand excellence. It is more difficult to produce excellence. In this game, the 'not-so-excellent' student coming from the socio-economic-culturally weaker sections of the society is the one who gets hurt. Student counselling is the most important activity of a truly excellent institution. Indeed the ethics of excellence

demands that we carry everybody along. The bright, the not-so-bright, the indifferent and the downright insecure students, all should be taken along in this national journey. Nobody should be left behind or allowed to feel bitter. The fruits of development should reach everybody. The learning and the discovery of TRUTH is a journey of joy. Nobody should be denied this journey. The life and teachings of Shri Ramanujacharya, the 11th century philosopher who gave us Vishistadvaita should be remembered always and should become a guideline for the management of HEL.

The most useful part of this book is the group of Chapters 21, 22 and 23. These chapters deal with resource (finance) mobilization, resource (energy, water, etc.) conservation, and resource generation with the help of the alumni. These three should form the core guidelines for how to plan and build quality institutions. The relevance of the term 21st century in the title of the book comes alive and draws our attention in Chapter 23.

The impatient reader will have to wait till Chapter 25 to get the 'take home' lesson. Saidapur poignantly brings out the ills plaguing the present HEIs and also what we should do to rectify these deficiencies. He calls for redesigning higher education system. He lucidly enumerates the important spheres like the appointment of faculty, women empowerment through access to higher education, nurturing reading habits, etc., where major action has to be taken. In essence, he wishes to have institutions not just compatible with Industrial revolution 4.0 but also future ready. In one line, the products of our HEIs should not have frozen minds (in technical content, attitude to learning and values) but dynamic and open-minded. Teachers must be flexible enough to absorb new knowledge and wisdom and competent enough to be critical of any irrelevant old practice and which is detrimental to attaining excellence. The last section is an excellent curriculum for orientation courses in academic staff colleges. Each teacher should become an institute for *lifelong learning*.

At the risk of sounding repetitive, I once again raise the problem. The book discusses how to manage the educational institutions by focusing on the components of excellence like the library, sports, teaching-learning process, accreditation etc. It does not discuss how to select a good student, a good teacher and a good academic leader. The book explains what is expected in a good quality institution but does not spell out how to achieve those desired goals. It also does not discuss in detail about supportive administration in both civil and finance matters. It is time we change the audit rules for educational and research institutions. It should not be like gutter inspectors nor even an accreditation team for inspection and assessment. It should be sympathetic, understanding and suggestive. Excellence is not a destination but the journey. Management cannot demand this and that but should suggest ways to enable walking on the road of excellence. The last chapter in a way serves as an executive summary.

This book is a must read for all teachers, administrators and senior students. All public and private libraries should have it. The last chapter, in a pdf format, should be circulated to all stakeholders. The book, if read carefully and understood, will bring in the required changes in our educational system. It is no exaggeration to say this book is a mini-education commission report in a sense. All of us should be indebted to Professor Saidapur for planning, editing and

bringing out this landmark book in the educational history of our country. It is an excellent reading material, thought-provoking yet implementable.