

Academic excellence in Indian Universities

Universities are primarily places of learning; preferably, with universal access (inclusivity) and access to universal knowledge (broad spectrum of areas). Being places of learning, Universities should attract and retain scholars to take up teaching & research positions as faculty; attract outstanding students who can benefit immensely from the scholarly teachers; and, a learning environment – physical, intellectual and organizational – that fosters a learning culture, the focus of this article.

In the recent past, with excessive focus on rankings – often dubious – academic excellence is confused with success of the graduates in the job market, that too measured by the “compensation” offered to the graduates, a very poor measure of quality. Placement opportunities are very important. University education does impart knowledge and skills that are valued by corporations the world over. In a globalized world where there is “talent war”, exceptionally gifted students are compensated exceptionally well; yet, academic excellence is much deeper and must be cultivated and nurtured all through the years and decades, if not centuries of Universities’ existence.

The three components – faculty, students and the supporting environment – must strive for excellence together.

Getting the right mix of faculty is perhaps the most important component of academic excellence.

- First, the process of recruitment must be transparent so that the best talent feels “at home”
- Second, there is academic freedom to pursue teaching & research that suits the individual teacher / researcher within the overall framework of accountability to the system – students, other faculty members and the organization.
- Third, the benefits – salary, perquisites and access to grants – are consistent with the qualifications and experience of the individual.
- Fourth, a supporting physical environment - office space, classrooms and laboratories - that is conducive for excellence.

Once these are met, the individual faculty member must be accountable to the system for further promotion and see the growth of the University through her / his growth. That is precisely “institution building” at the level of the individual teacher. In the process, there will be contribution to both knowledge discovery (research) and knowledge dissemination (teaching), along with building a community of researchers through publications – both high-quality journals and conferences.

Students flock Institutions that are well known to attract and retain faculty; in turn, the best of the teachers and researchers settle down in Institutions that attract exceptionally good students. Getting the right set of students is equally important for academic excellence.

- First, the admission process must be fair and transparent so that the students feel that they stand a good chance of admission based on their merit, in spite of stiff competition.
- Second, the teaching / learning processes must be exciting – innovative to keep the process interesting, rigorous to demand the best efforts of the students, open-ended so that the exceptional students can reach further heights, yet, inclusive enough so that even marginal deficient students are not pushed into despair
- Third, the process of assessment must be fair and transparent so that there is confidence for everyone – from the student with the highest grade to the one with the lowest grade – that they got “the grade they earned” and not the “grade the Instructor decided to give”

Finally, the environment must ensure that the students and faculty have the right platform to pursue excellence. This includes

- A physical environment that includes workspace (office, classrooms, laboratories for faculty and hostel rooms, playgrounds for students) that is well maintained and safe
- An intellectual environment that fosters excellence – open to debate, healthy criticism, peer interest based and community interest based decisions, rather than only authority based decisions and most importantly, an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect
- An organizational environment that fosters excellence, and not mere adherence to authority and power. Equally important is an organizational climate that commands respect based on scholarship, contributions to the community and impact on peer community of scholars both inside the Institution and outside.

The points outlined above are fairly simple and straightforward, yet a majority of the Indian Universities are unable to excel. Their challenges include

Lack of autonomy: Government Institutions suffer from political interference and private Universities suffer from the promoters’ knowledge / appreciation of scholarship. In turn, it impacts teacher / student quality and the quality of support system. Delayed salary payment of salary due to funds delay from Governments in Government Institutions and non-payment of salary due to funds diversion in private Universities are “not unheard of”, in Indian Universities in the recent past.

Lack of funds: In today’s globally competitive situation supporting research costs money – for laboratories, computers, software, conference travel etc.,

Government Institutions are better off, but only those in the real Top Tier; private Institutions do not invest enough. Artificial cap on fee - often on grounds of uniformity, with no appreciation of cost variation across geography, subject areas, age of the Institution etc., - hurts both Government Institutions and private Institutions

Lack of prestige: Over the years, University teachers' jobs have lost the prestige due to a combination of factors – poor salary due to lack of funds and poor working conditions in Government Institutions and lack of governance in many private Universities. The younger generation often mixes up things, best conveyed by one of my student recently “Sir, good things are expensive; unfortunately, we the current generation of Indian students often think that if some thing is not expensive it is NOT good! The same logic applies to salary; just because teachers are not well paid we tend to NOT respect the profession as well. We know we are not correct; but it IS our view”

In summary, academic excellence translates to the excellence of teachers / researchers, students and the supporting environment - both physical and intellectual. It is not that complex to understand yet few understand and appreciate. Lack of autonomy and lack of funds are the main culprits. With lots of talks of “globally well-ranked Institutions”, “re-structuring of regulators – UGC & AICTE” and “autonomy” these days by the “powers that be”, one hopes Indian Universities will achieve more success in their pursuit of excellence in this decade.

—
Professor Sowmyanarayanan SADAGOPAN is the Director of IIIT-Bangalore. These are his personal views, He can be reached at ss@iiitb.ac.in
