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LEADER ARTICLE: Break The Shackles

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India is perhaps one of the few countries in the world that still has the model of centralised universities which design the syllabus, conduct exams and give degrees while the teaching is done in affiliated colleges that have no control on academic content or evaluation. Though there are many things that are wrong with our higher education set-up, removing this totally anachronistic model should be at the top of the agenda.

First, let us compare with the situation elsewhere in the world. The US never had anything close to this - their emphasis on individuality would not have allowed this model. The US does have four-year colleges, which, unlike the universities and like many of our colleges, do not have postgraduate programmes and focus mostly on bachelor-level teaching.

However, in these colleges the control of the programme rests entirely with them, and so does the evaluation of students. And the college also awards the degree. Countries like Australia, Germany and France do the same.

It seems that the Indian system was borrowed from the British, as many of our universities were set up during colonial rule. Earlier, in the UK, universities like Oxford and Cambridge indeed designed the curriculum, conducted exams, and granted degrees while the affiliated colleges were centres where students were only taught.

However, that model has long been discontinued. Though affiliated colleges do exist in name, they serve a social purpose. For the more vocational education programmes provided by polytechnics, till the 1980s there was a national body which approved the exams. However, from the 1980s the divide between the universities and polytechnics was abolished and each polytechnic became independent, giving degrees in its own name. The model of a university being an examining body is now followed by some institutes only for their overseas programmes.

So, it seems that we are almost unique with respect to higher education. While everywhere educators and the organisation where teaching is done are being empowered, we are spending our effort in centralising education and creating structures to control the expanding higher education set-up in the name of quality. There are good reasons why across the world this model is either not being followed or is being dismantled.

First, in the fast changing world of science and technology, even the thought that a centralised committee for syllabus setting, which has no responsibility of teaching it, can do a decent job is ludicrous. And changing anything when there are many colleges involved will be harder, leading to a static and outdated syllabus.

Second, this model takes away the initiative of the faculty and makes them passive players. It assumes that faculty members of a college are not capable of deciding what to teach and how to teach it. Such a system will strongly discourage bright people from joining as faculty, leading to a mediocre teaching staff with little sense of ownership, responsibility or initiative.

Third, such a model goes against the widely accepted notion of continuous evaluation in education. In places like IITs, and most universities in the world, a course lasts for a semester, during which there are at least two exams, a few quizzes, home assignments and projects that contribute to the final grade. In other words, the modern method of education calls for more frequent evaluation. This is simply not possible in a centralised model as a university clearly cannot conduct an exam every few months. The logistic problems lead to a once-a-year exam model, which is totally outdated.

Finally, such a model leads to a bureaucratic set-up in which there is never any clear responsibility and so no one can be blamed. A college can easily blame the university for a poor syllabus and

exams for lack of quality and the university can easily blame the poor teaching for the outcome. The net result is that no one takes the responsibility for the poor quality of higher education - just what we expect from a government-controlled system.

In education, where different philosophies and approaches exist, and where the content is dynamic and fast changing, it is imperative that a college that does the teaching takes complete and full ownership of the quality of education, and gives degrees under its own name. It must create its own brand, and live or die with it.

In our effort to prevent anyone from offering degrees due to the possibility of foul play, we seem to have mixed accreditation of programmes with absolute control. World over, accreditation is practised and is indeed needed. It ensures that some basic principles are followed by any teaching institute that is accredited. We, on the other hand, have gone to the extreme of micro management where everything from admission to syllabus to exams is centrally controlled.

It is essential that this model is done away with and colleges given full control and responsibility of their programmes and degrees. The universities can start by "regulating" only a few courses in the syllabus, allowing the colleges to have complete control over the other courses - their content, teaching, and evaluation and grading. Gradually, over a period of five years or so, the regulated and centralised content can be phased out, giving the college full control. This will give colleges time to plan to build their own structures for curriculum development and evaluation.

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