

Higher education scenario – some observations

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In the background of the presently active discussions on the state of higher education in the country, especially in the context of the New Education Policy, I would like to make a few remarks from personal experience. Earlier in this forum, I have discussed the ‘ageing’ of Indian universities¹. The history of Indian universities – some based on indigenous Indian ‘values’, and most others modelled after the British system, their decay and the concomitant prominence of research institutions – but how ageing has afflicted even the latter – have all been the subject of the previous essay. I had also dwelt on the issue of politicization, the victim of which has particularly been the university system. I had also extolled the virtue of interdisciplinarity and how that attribute can be inculcated among young students by an effective synergy between teaching and research². I have no hesitation in admitting that there is no alternative to universities as places for higher learning. All other efforts to create smaller and more focused institutions can only be complementary to our existing State and Central Universities. If the universities perish, so will higher education.

Given this preamble, I turn to the present effort to champion the cause of what is phrased as ‘research universities’. I am baffled by this terminology. To me, the meaning of a university is where teaching and research are intertwined – the two faculties are just two sides of the same coin. Even in the acronym of the newly developed and overall successful experiment of the Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research, the epithet ‘education’ precedes ‘research’^{3,4}. In all reputed West-

ern universities, teaching is equally emphasized. In my experience in the US system, all the accomplished researchers are also good teachers and vice versa.

All the top universities of the world have thriving undergraduate curricula. In fact, in my own field of physics, many journals have a marked presence of undergraduates as authors. Several reputed universities have facilities that engage in undergraduate teaching and also carry out frontline research concurrently. Yet, many of these universities have yielded innumerable Nobel laureates and Fields medalists (in mathematics).

Some of the State Universities in our country have had exemplary tradition in both teaching and research. Over the years, however, they have been victims of politicization, sometimes mirroring the antagonism between State and Central leadership. As long as education remains a ‘concurrent subject’ of the Constitution, one does not see how this problem can be resolved.

In this context, the role of the University Grants Commission (UGC) needs scrutiny. The university system reflects the pluralistic character and varied emphasis on education in the country at large. Hence, clubbing all universities under one uniform system is bound to stifle their creative growth.

Research institutions have an additional problem – the strict insistence on the retirement age of 60 years is leaving out many competent and active scientists. In a country where longevity has increased, we are losing the services of assiduously built-up scientific manpower. Surely, academics cannot be treated at par with bureaucrats in the Government as far as retirement age is concerned.

The need of the hour, in my opinion, is to have an effective integration of research institutions with the university system. Such a liaison would help efficient use of the resources and proper utilization of the experimental facilities that the research institutions are naturally endowed with. Besides, the discernible dearth of faculty in the universities can be mitigated by using the services of scientists in research institutions.

Keeping the importance of interdisciplinarity in mind, especially in the present context of heightened concern about environment and climate issues, we must dispense with the system of partitioning biological sciences, engineering sciences and physical sciences in our curricula. New courses would have to be designed, eliminating the archaic structure but bringing in new developments in both basic and applied sciences⁵.

In conclusion, this discussion is an effort to put into focus the state of higher education in India. I think there are many important, albeit complex, issues which are not being properly addressed.

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4. Rajan, M. S., *Curr. Sci.*, 2019, **116**(6), 1020–1021.
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