

Meta University: a student-centric model

H. A. Ranganath

The landscape as well terrain of our higher education ecosystem is known for its unevenness with huge diversity of institutions, which brings in challenges to deliver quality education. Qualitatively, it is a heterogeneous assemblage of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), with wide disparity in the academic ambience, infrastructural, administrative and other systems, which support teaching, learning and research. As of now, a student admitted to a college or a university has to make do with the available facilities, as students registered at one university cannot attend classes or courses offered at another HEIs.

Over the years, the importance of inter- and trans-disciplinary teaching and research is being recognized. Implementation of this demands a shift in the development of curricula, a shift from the traditional way of dealing with disciplines in isolation.

The challenge therefore is regarding how these concerns must be addressed.

Genesis of Meta University

To deal with these concerns and limitations of the higher education system, during 2011–12, the policy makers, namely Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) (now renamed as Ministry of Education (MOE)) and University Grants Commission (UGC) conceived the concept of Meta University, which centred around developing ‘joint programmes’ between universities. Initially, it was decided by the policy makers and the core committee that Jamia Millia Islamia University (JMI), Delhi University (DU), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and IIT Delhi (IITD) would be part of the Meta University and provide a ‘joint degree’ for a few select courses. Further, to start with, it was agreed upon to introduce an innovative M.Sc. programme in mathematics education, diploma as well as a joint Master’s degree programme in public health by JMI, DU, JNU and IITD. Subsequently, in the meeting of the core committee on Meta University held on 3 April 2012, the Vice Chancellor of JNU and Director of IITD mentioned that as they are yet to get approvals from their respective institutions, it is not possible for them to participate in the joint programme. JMI took the initia-

tive to introduce a jointly designed P.G. Diploma in public health (cf. minutes of JMI E.C. 23.04.2012), but it never took off. Subsequently, DU and JMI started a ‘joint degree’, namely the two-year M.Sc. programme in ‘mathematics education’ in 2012 (DU, EC resolution dated 22 July 2012), and this course is still continuing (correspondence with Prof. Madan Chaturvedi, Former Director, Cluster Innovation Centre, DU). Similarly, in 2012, three prominent institutions of higher education in West Bengal, namely Jadavpur University, Calcutta University and the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, were reported to be testing the feasibility of collaboration for setting up a Meta University to introduce ‘joint degree programmes’. However, it did not take-off (correspondence with Prof. Suranjan Das, former Vice-Chancellor, Calcutta University, and Present Vice-Chancellor, Jadavpur University).

Students admitted to the joint degree programme, namely M.Sc. (mathematics education), are crediting the predetermined and structured courses offered at DU and JMI. Therefore, there is ‘no choice’ for students either for courses or to opt for courses offered by faculty of their choice. Further, as envisaged for a joint programme, by considering the credits earned at DU and JMI, the degree is being awarded jointly by both institutions. As such, there are ‘no credit transfers’ between universities. To the best of the knowledge of the present author, this is the only joint degree programme which is being sustained. It appears that there was no coherent roadmap for implementation of a Meta University across other subjects as well across the country.

The present author strongly believes that the concept of a Meta University has to go beyond joint degree programmes and has to embrace many more innovative futuristic provisions to meet the demands of current trends in the higher education scenario.

Evolution of the concept of a Meta University

The existing concept of a Meta University, as presented above, is proposed to be modified and expanded with more provisions to serve the interests of students as well as to

do justice to the holistic acquisition of knowledge of related disciplines. The rest of the note narrates the scope as well as the advantages to the students in particular and the higher education system in general. As a student-centric model, a student while pursuing a degree at one university, can reach out to the expertise of faculty, teaching, learning and research facilities of other institutions and register for relevant courses and earn credits. The system has to have provisions to facilitate students enrolled in a college or a university to be able to pursue courses in other universities and colleges, and earn the approved required number of credits.

Students will be part of a credit transfer system between participating universities/colleges. This will bring in cooperation and collaboration among participating HEIs. Students will be free from the constraints of jurisdiction of institutions, with mobility and flexibility to design their own curriculum and combine subjects of their choice, available at different HEIs. Mobility of students is one of the objectives of the present model. Only those who succeed in getting admission (selection based on competition among aspiring students) for courses in other HEIs deserve financial support (scholarship).

Of course the implementation of a Meta University would require all participating institutions to have a similar credit and grading system. Therefore, it needs a robust template with guidelines and norms. The provisions envisaged in credit-based choice system (CBCS) and academic bank of credits (ABC), as proposed by UGC, provide the required mechanism to translate the expected provisions of the proposed ‘Meta University model’.

Credit-based choice system

Almost a decade back, UGC came up with the CBCS proposal. Broadly, the courses are classified as core, elective, minor, or soft skill courses. The backbone of this is that the students can choose from the prescribed courses for a particular programme of study.

CBCS offers flexibility and freedom to students to opt for intra-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and even trans-disciplinary

courses according to their learning needs, interests and aptitude. It also allows students to enrol in approved courses in different HEIs, which facilitates mobility across various educational institutions with the facility of transfer of credits earned by them, and this is the foundation of a Meta University.

Further, students have the privilege of arranging the sequence of courses according to their requirements, to fit into their progress in related courses. They will have the flexibility to learn and acquire credits at their own pace. The entire assessment is grade-based on a credit system. UGC has provided the guidelines for teaching, awarding credits and grades as well for the overall semester-based assessments.

All the partnering HEIs have to provide information on the programmes with due mention of compulsory as well as optional courses of different types core, elective, foundation, etc., credits for these courses, along with the schedule of the faculty offering the courses. This will facilitate students of other HEIs to seek admission for select courses. With this the students are empowered to design their own timetable for the semester and register for courses. This results in establishing the learner-centric/student-centric learning platform.

To promote inter-institutional mobility of students and credit transfers, the system needs appropriate regulations. In 2020, UGC had conceived the novel strategy of ABC. The Commission has already approved the regulations and provisions of this scheme.

Academic bank of credits

ABC will digitally store the academic credits earned by students from various recognized HEIs. This will be an academic service mechanism as a digital/virtual/online entity established and managed by MOE, Government of India (GoI)/UGC. This service will be available to students of all universities, autonomous colleges and non-autonomous colleges affiliated to them. Universities and autonomous colleges which are accredited by either National Assessment and Accreditation Council with minimum 'A' Grade, or by the National Board of Accreditation for at least

three programmes with a minimum score of 675 individually (however, if the number of programmes being run by the institution is less than three, then each of the programmes should secure 675 or more marks); or top 100 National Institutional Ranking Framework or similar assessment and accreditation bodies to be established by GoI from time to time or those Indian HEIs appearing in the top 1000 world ranking of Quacquarelli Symonds (QS)/Times Higher Education (THE); Institutions of Eminence or Institutions of National Importance as declared by GoI are eligible to register with ABC (The Gazette of India, 29072021-228549; CG-DL-E-29072021-228549; PART III—Section 4; No. 302; NEW DELHI, WEDNESDAY, JULY 28, 2021/SHRAVANA 6, 1943).

ABC is a national-level facility to promote flexibility of curriculum framework and interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary academic mobility of students across HEIs in the country with appropriate credit transfer mechanism. This facilitates students to choose their own learning path to attain a degree or diploma or postgraduate diploma or academic qualification. This is in tune with the recommendations of National Education Policy (NEP)-2020, namely multiple entry–multiple exit as well as anytime, anywhere, and any level learning.

Major functions of ABC are registration of HEIs under the scheme; opening, closure and validation of academic accounts of students; credit verification; credit accumulation and transfer/redemption of credits. ABC shall deposit credits awarded by approved HEIs, for courses pursued therein, in the academic account of a student. The validity of credits for award of degree/diploma, etc. would be according to UGC/MOE, GoI, guidelines and norms defined from time to time.

Students will be academic account-holders, and this is expected to pave the way for seamless student mobility, and promote distributed and flexible teaching/learning. The fundamental principle of the ABC scheme is to promote multi-/interdisciplinary higher education.

The participating HEIs will enable eligible students to earn their degrees according to their choice across the country, but certainly within the limitations of the regi-

stered university's overall/broad curriculum and credit structure. The registered students have to secure a minimum 50% of credits from courses taken at the parent/enrolled institution. Therefore, students have the option and flexibility of enrolling for the required courses in other institutions for the remaining 50% of credits. Based on the sufficiency of the overall total credits earned and type of credit earned, a student can become eligible for the award of the specified degree/diploma/PG diploma/certificate, according to the approved norms of the HEI from where the student seeks the award of the degree.

The HEIs registered under ABC would be required to give admission (a) to full degree programmes and (b) to individual courses for eligible students of other institutions during semesters. Equivalence of courses and credits will be a challenge. Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) between participating institutions/regulators have to define this. With the National Educational Technology Forum as mentioned in NEP-2020, the internet will provide communication infrastructure, while a network of universities will offer courses in various disciplines, facilitating more collaborative and multidisciplinary learning.

Outcome

Here we have proposed a restructured version of an existing concept of a 'Meta University: a student-centric model' with provisions for students to take up courses and earn credits from other institutions, and get degrees/diplomas from the parent university. According to the proposal, sharing the expertise, infrastructure and other facilities with students of other HEIs should be an important benchmark and criterion for review processes like ranking, accreditation, etc. and funding. Holistic implementation of the provisions of a Meta University, a CBCS and ABC will bring in a student-centric, discipline-centric flavour and is well within the vision and framework of NEP-2020.

H. A. Ranganath is in the Centre for Human Genetics, Bengaluru 560 100, India. e-mail: haranganath@gmail.com