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Higher Education in India: Measures for Consolidating the Quality of Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines select micro-level considerations as it portrays the strategies for academic excellence in the country's higher education sector. What light does the etymology of the two words – 'university' and 'college' – throw on the soul of the respective jurisdictions? A "university" is by definition an entity of universalistic values: the term (university) traces its origin to the word "universe". Recourse to the internet in tracing the etymology of the word is an exciting exercise. One rudimentary hint one draws from this search is that a university is a community of masters and scholars who are devoted to the search for truth. Likewise, the word "college" which is, etymologically, a derivative of "collegial": in using the word "collegial" reference is in essence to that which involves shared responsibility, as among a group of colleagues. A college is thus an institution committed to the values of collegiality. The emphasis is that teachers and students, of the entity called college, relate with each other as peers, not superior and subordinate. This stresses 'horizontality', 'exchange' and 'give and take' between the two players: namely, the teacher and the student. This elevates teaching into a demand-driven process where the teacher tailors the inputs to suit the needs of the student. In other words, does not allow teaching to degenerate into a ritual. This pictures the teacher as a missionary in the domain of knowledge-creation and knowledge-dissemination. In that background, the paper focuses first on the matters that determine the quality of the teacher-student interface. Three issues warrant a specific mention as one looks for the means to underline what it takes to elevate the level. These are as under: 1. Topic-wise Reading-list, 2. Lecture-end Feedback, and 3. Tutorials, Home-Assignments and the availability of the course-instructor for consultation beyond the class-hours. The paper focuses next on the dire need to launch a country-wide campaign to translate the classics of the respective disciplines in the Hindi and Regional Languages.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the measures for the enhancement of the quality of teaching in the country's institutions of higher education. The ensuing discussion is necessarily no more than a short

introduction to what is a subject of much diversity and varied nuances. The micro-level considerations that will determine the quality of the teacher-student interface form in the main focus of the present article.

Significance of the Two Words

What light does the etymology of the two words – the university and the college – throw on the soul of the respective jurisdictions? The focus in what ensues is on the sources of the formation of the two terms rather than on the development of the meanings of the two words.

A university is by definition an entity of universalistic values. Love and respect for all constituents of the universe form its essence. The term "university" traces its origin to the word "universe". Recourse to the internet in tracing the etymology of the word is an exciting exercise. One rudimentary hint one draws from this search is that university is a community of masters and scholars devoted to the search for truth.

Likewise, the word "college" which is, etymologically, a derivative of "collegial": in using the word "collegial" reference is in essence to *that which involves shared responsibility*, as among a group of colleagues. A college is thus an institution committed to the values of collegiality. The emphasis is that teachers and students, of the entity called college, relate with each other as peers, *not superior and subordinate*. What this stresses is 'horizontality', 'exchange', and 'give and take' between the two players. This turns teaching into a demand-driven process where the teacher tailors the inputs to suit the needs of the student - does not allow teaching to degenerate into a ritual. This pictures the teacher as a missionary in the domain of knowledge-creation and knowledge-dissemination. There is here, thus, a loud and clear hint of piety and pride in what a teacher does.

The centrality of the teacher

Mention of the word "teacher", to carry the thought forward, conjures up on one's mental screen the image of a person who perseveres, who is tenacious, who is committed, who is not satisfied with anything less than the best, is a paragon of virtues, and so on. Committed, we said: who is a teacher committed to and what might such commitment culminate into? The commitment of the teacher is to the students who she or he relates with. This turns them (the teachers) into persons who would ceaselessly research so that they will grasp and absorb the intricacies and nuances that mark the concepts and the issues which might be under discussion at a given point of time.

It must be in the same breath stressed that teacher, the tireless researcher, is also a communicator par excellence: they must communicate with elegance the subject-matter that their research has

brought to the fore. Such a formulation carries with it the assertion that universities and colleges are the creators and disseminators of knowledge.

The two VIPs

If the teacher forms the soul of a university or the college the student is the VIP of the system. More accurate it would be to say that *if there are two VIPs on a university or the college campus* these are respectively the student and the teacher. For, it is only when the two will team up that the entity called the university/college acquires meaning.

It is stating the obvious to say that the influence of the teacher extends much beyond the four walls of the classroom. The student will in countless ways carry the influence of a teacher. If the teacher's presentations in the classroom had a stamp of class – a stamp of excellence - and if the teacher was persuasive in answering the queries (satisfying the intellectual curiosity) of the student when approached outside the class, the teacher can rest assured that they will forever live in the persona of their students: the students will carry the influence of such a teacher for their entire life span. Three issues warrant a specific mention as one looks for the means to underline what it will take to elevate the level.

Quality Enhancement: Three Dimensions

Topic-wise reading-list

It will be of help to take recourse to the practice of preparing a topic-wise reading-list in respect of the course a particular teacher is handling. Two to four readings per topic – with page-numbers duly noted against each - may be entered in the suggested reading list. Illustratively, if the course in question was composed of ten discrete topics the corresponding reading-list shall contain between twenty and forty readings.

A brief diversion at this stage to stress that there is no sanctity about the numbers. For instance, those of us who may be new to the practice could start with, maybe, one reading per topic. The point to emphasize is that introduction of the practice is a must. And, in the same breath, one may add that internet will doubtlessly supplement it but it is not a substitute for the reading list.

 Now, to resume the discussion on the subject of reading-list, teachers of the universities of any stature in the world will not stop merely at preparing and circulating the list. The concerned teacher actually ensures that the recommended readings - from within the books, journals and whatever other sources - are actually available for the students' use in the university/college library in multiple copies.

Reading-list is a composite document

Every student enrolled in the course receives, individually, a copy of the reading list on the opening day of the semester. And upon the circulation of the reading-list there follows a meticulous presentation, by the course-instructor, of the course-outline. As may be anticipated, a statement of the milestones or highlights of the course (drawn from the syllabus) precedes the reading-list segment. In other words, what has above been referred to above as reading-list is actually a composite document: the first section carries a statement of the course (the highlights of the course) whereas the second section shall contain the topic-wise reading- list per se.

Reading-list is an enhancer and a motivator. The precise guidance on vital matters that it supplies enhances the students' confidence level as well as drives them towards further exploration: motivates them to do more. A teacher who had supplied this degree of effort to their academic preparation shall be brimming with confidence; will be a role model. And a student who observes perseverance of this order in their teacher will miss the class only under the gravest of compulsions; and will be anxious to personally communicate the reason to the teacher. Recourse to the reading-list device is designed merely to underline the professional obligation of the teacher to deliver precise guidance and clues to the student. When this happens the teacher becomes a motivator and the student turns into an explorer.

Lecture-end Feedback

Lecture-end feedback will be of immense help to the concerned teacher; this enables the teacher to assess their own effectiveness on a day-to-day basis. It seems that a teacher who is happy with nothing but the best will, as a matter of fact, be anxious to know how what they delivered was actually received by the students. And what it will take to further enhance the quality of what they do. They have a TQM protagonist's mindset; they believe that there is infinite scope for improvement in every human endeavour. A person with an insatiable appetite for performance will view the lecture-end feedback as a welcome input for performance enhancement. It is for them a returns-maximizing exercise; an investment at no cost into an undertaking of an inestimable value: because the lecture-end feedback delivers the clues which shall emanate from no other source.

A lurking doubt

Some of us have been inclined to reject the idea of lecture-end feedback on the ground that it consumes time that may as well be devoted to teaching. The advocates, however, contend – as was brought out above - that the lecture-end feedback saves teaching from degenerating into a

ritual. Not merely this. It is, they maintain, an enabler that guarantees quality; in fact, ensures an on-going quality enhancement. That, therefore, for a teacher committed to quality there is no substitute for the lecture-end feedback. In conclusion, we wish to state the following: the ingenious (teachers) will devise the means to see that even as they yoked in the lecture-end feedback to sustain and enhance quality that, at the same time, this did not derail the substantive task of teaching. The exercise of obtaining feedback, when the numbers are large, shall be so tailored as to ensure that over a stretch of time all students participated.

The substantive content

And in any case what does that what has been referred to as the lecture-end feedback above entail. What is the substantive content of the process? The lecture-end feedback, in the final analysis, does not extend much beyond encouraging the students to emerge with their reactions to, debate the issues concerning, and raise questions on the subject-matter that was laid bare in the course of the teacher's presentation in the class.

The university system is the end-gainer on the way. Its credibility is enhanced. And said lecture-end exercise delivers an immensely useful feedback to the front-line performer: the teacher; it enhances the efficacy of their teaching as well as the quality of teacher-student interface.

Tutorials, Home-Assignments and the Availability of the Course-Instructor for Consultation outside the Class

Weekly tutorials, home-assignments, and the practice under which the teacher shall remain available to the students for outside-the-class consultation - at a specified time on given days of the week - have been found to be of immense help. These are popular props to solidify the learning process.

Tutorials

A student or a group of students makes the presentation on a previously announced topic. This is followed by a comprehensive discussion. The idea, in essence, is to enable an in-depth understanding of the diverse dimensions and nuances of the topic or subject on which the teacher concerned has concluded discussion in the class. Learning is reinforced and written and oral articulation is strengthened. The exercise of presentation before a compact group of the fellow-students, in the presence of the teacher, builds the student's confidence. And a sense of empowerment begins to arise.

Home assignments

Home assignments are a means to gain the writing practice (read "gain mastery over the grammatical and linguistic dimensions of the presentation"). Equally importantly, the research that precedes the writing builds perseverance and conceptual clarity. To add to this, feedback from the teacher builds rare insights; and the teacher-student rapport gains a yet further dimension. The students' sense of empowerment witnesses further gains. And the teacher gains an added sense of achievement and self-esteem.

Translation of the Classics in the Hindi and Regional Languages

The non-availability of the classics, in the Hindi and regional languages, has emerged as an issue of concern. That is because it is gravely hindering the quality of teaching as well as research in the universities and colleges. The fact of the matter is that an overwhelming majority of the teachers and students in the different social science disciplines, as much as those in education and law, are unable to achieve access to the standard text-books and reference books because these are available only in the English language.

A systemic failure

This, one might say, is a case of systemic failure. Why the system should turn a blind eye to such a vital need? Why the system should marginalize such an overwhelming majority remains unclear. Why what is obvious may be obscure to the university and college fraternities? Namely, that an overwhelming majority of the students in the country's university system consists of those who had their schooling in the Hindi and regional languages. And that, at the same time, the subject-specific textbooks and reference books of the requisite level are available only in English. Why should these lie beyond the reach of the Hindi and Regional language-medium students?

The Hindi Granth academies

The Hindi Granth academies and their regional-language counterparts have failed to evince interest in translating the classics in Hindi or regional languages. Speaking specifically of the Hindi Granth academies (HGAs), while they are happy to sponsor the publication of the subject-specific books in Hindi, they are not keen on undertaking the translation of the English language classics of the different social science subjects into Hindi.

To the extent that this has encouraged the expansion of the Hindi language literature in the concerned subjects, it is a welcome development.

But the fact of the matter is that it does not take us very far. This is so for the reason that the HGA-sponsored Hindi language authors of the specific disciplines lacked access to the English language classics of the different subjects, in the first place. For the same reason, and this is what we seek to underline, the subject-specific books based on research that excluded the original sources can scarcely be expected to match in substance, form, style and rigour the classics themselves.

For this reason, the stock of the Hindi language-books that has grown under the patronage of the HGAs, while important in its own way, does not supply an argument against the translation of the classics themselves. This, surely, is not a reflection on the Hindi language book-authors. It is instead a reflection on the country's university system that failed to gear itself to the requirements of the Hindi medium teachers and students, who would obviously form the pool for the supply of the authors of the Hindi-language textbooks and reference books within the country's academia.

When we seek to build an inclusive and equitable higher education sector that will make the higher education accessible to the aspirants from across all the social groups there would naturally be a sharp rise in the number of those from the remote regions who are comfortable with the Hindi and regional language books alone.

Networking is the need of the hour

This basic fact, inexplicably, eluded the academia. But it's never too late, as they say. The universities must assume a proactive stance in the matter henceforth. They will, obviously, need to network with the MHRD, UGC, AIU, ICSSR and NIEPA and the other national-level players as much as with the Hindi Granth academies and their regional-language counterparts to see that the translation project will receive, now on, the priority that it deserves and that it has thus far been inexplicably denied.
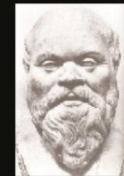
CONCLUSION

There is no room for bluff within the sacred precincts of academia; this is what the author seeks to stress in this brief introduction to the subject. Those unable to cultivate the integrity and patience needed to relate with the students with the requisite degree of seriousness are unworthy of the exalted label that the word "TEACHER" is.

AUTHOR SELF ARCHIVING POLICY

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