

Attaining Global Standards in our Universities

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Universities are change-makers of change-makers, reforming, enlightening, galvanizing, and often creating entirely new worlds. With wisdom and energy (the WE factor) they are beacons that radiate light to the far outreaches of human endeavors to help push the limits of knowledge. Deep in their spirit of discovery, minds bloom, hearts throb, souls stir. That is one picture of the ideal university.

The ideal university provides thought leadership, discovers new knowledge, perfects the science of knowledge delivery, empowers stakeholders and builds enlightened citizenry. It promotes many intrinsic values: freedom of thought, equity and social justice, ethical responsibility, team work, innovation, and service to society. As one university promises: “We will transform lives and improve the human condition.”

Where are our universities on the global-ideal scale? What is it that we ought to deliver in this new age – of the 4th Industrial Revolution, the Exponential Age, the Age of

Disruption? In a tumultuous world of rapid change, they must be visionary, pulsating with ideas, imagination, and innovations aplenty. While the present indolence of the higher education sector is palpable, there are signs of new beginnings. To stay the course and reach global standards, however, there is much work ahead.

A basic need in our universities is a strategic alignment of five essential components:

- High quality faculty
- Quality students
- Trained and supportive administrative teams
- Innovative and challenging programs
- Sufficiency of resources and modern facilities

Quality Faculty

The centerpiece of a university is its faculty, the main focus of this article. Whatever the balance sought by individual institutions, the faculty must be equipped with two methodologies: of teaching and research. In

both, there is much distance to be traversed to meet global standards.

How to teach is vital

The methodology of teaching has evolved. Pedagogy – or more correctly, andragogy (i.e., how adults learn) – has moved on to new dimensions from its earlier avatar. It is seen by many as “the new art and science of teaching.” Based on research and evidence, “Young people don’t want to be passive learners: They are content producers, not just consumers. They communicate in different ways than older generations, in shorter bursts, and they are used to being a part of large networks that allow them instant feedback on their thoughts and ideas.” According to one researcher, “pedagogy is the process of accompanying learners; caring for and about them; and bringing learning into life.” The focus has shifted sharply – from teacher to learner.

In fact, an international body espouses, “What we teach our children – and how we teach them – will impact almost every aspect of society, from the quality of healthcare to industrial output; from technological advances to financial services.”

Unfortunately, many teachers in our higher education system are still stuck in an old groove. To this day, students suffer harrowing experiences as evidenced by statements made by fresh graduates aspiring to become teachers themselves. Here is a mere sampling of what they still suffer that must be vigorously uprooted:

- Teacher does not take classes regularly and has many excuses to be busy.
- Could not make the class interactive.
- Used the traditional lecture method and taught straight from the book.
- Did not have a clear idea of either content or materials.
- Course outline was not up-to-date.
- Not approachable or friendly.
- Assessment system was questionable.
- Went through the slides without explaining the subject matter.
- Lectures were disorganized; no clear expectations were set.
- Not available during office hours.
- The exams required rote memorization of mundane/trivial facts.

As a teacher myself, I emphasize discovery as a fundamental process of learning.

Employing this mode, however, requires a

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different style of knowledge dissemination, acquisition and exchange. Many of us will have to transform our styles from the traditional mode of lecturing, especially the comfort associated with it. Deeper engagement will certainly increase

faculty workloads; but that is what global standards demand.

Discovery as a mode of learning means that teachers and students will have to abandon the rote learning route and become much more interactive, where assessment is multidimensional and imaginative.

The new rage is critical thinking, flipped classrooms, group discussions, problem-solving, computer simulations, role playing, case analyses, introspective paragraphs,

writing questions (not answers), research, and much more. These approaches have been shown to be most effective in “reaching” students, not teaching them. Dovetailing the above methods with students’ new learning

options, styles and expectations, especially in the context of new technology, social media, and alternate learning sources, means that the teaching-learning environment must change dramatically.

The new teaching-learning paradigm may be perceived by teachers as painful and requiring much extra effort. This will cause substantial initial resistance; in fact, sadly, many faculty resist joining workshops to learn about these new approaches to embellish their teaching styles.

Applying the new methods incorrectly, it may be cautioned, can cause serious damage to the learner. Consequently, teachers can become quite unpopular. Such risks further decrease the chances that faculty will embrace the spirit of discovery and adopt the new methods with enthusiasm. Training—hard training—is what it will take to scale the resistance hump. Appropriate incentives are also needed to help teachers break the mold and transition into a new world of teaching and learning.

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Administrators may find the new modes of learning disconcerting for a number of reasons. It is often heard, especially in the private universities, that even a few

disgruntled students can make the administration nervous and anxious about future enrollments. Thus, support for faculty members and their seeming experimentation with new techniques can be quickly withdrawn.

Furthermore, in the mode of discovery, it will

not be conducive for faculty to work with large class sizes that the traditional mode can accommodate. Reduced class sizes will inevitably boil down to a contentious discussion of revenues and costs. While universities have to pay their bills, it will be important to harness the imagination of both faculty and administrators to find additional revenue sources -- grants, endowments, foundations, philanthropists and other partners.

Content is also important

Knowledge is not static; it continues to grow, often exponentially. Unless the curriculums are updated – regularly – students will be equipped with dated and obsolete knowledge and rendered non-competitive. Every academic unit must bear the responsibility of updating the curriculum, which must be crisp and relevant for the times.

Content selection also requires a collective conviction of key stakeholders. In the end the curriculum must be vibrant, pragmatic,

pro-nation, and contemporary. In fact, in today's technology-driven world, it may be emphasized that the smart student has access to the world's knowledge systems. Teachers relying on outdated and outmoded content will only make themselves look foolish. Apparently, some still do!

Disruptive innovations in education that combine methodology, technology, and organizational format for knowledge delivery are also on the rise and will challenge or may even replace university education in future. Imaginative organizations, by meeting the needs of specific target groups, could potentially draw "customers" away from academia. Even accreditation systems may change to enable creative knowledge producers to package knowledge in innovative and demand-driven ways (e.g., distance education), thus bypassing academia. Lest academia is caught sleeping, it must also innovate.

Knowledge generation imperative

Research is another area in which the faculty must demonstrate methodological competence. For lack of space, I shall refer to a quote from Kitamura: "Many of the faculty members in Bangladeshi universities appear unmotivated to conduct their own academic research due to such problems as lack of research funding, absence of a staff development program, heavy teaching

load, and an unclear system of recruitment and promotion. At a majority of the universities, many faculty members do not hold doctorates, and those who have finished their master's program are generally hired as new teaching staff." These and other challenges that plague research in higher education must be confronted head on.

Quality of students

The importance of quality students entering a university is indisputable. At a university of

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repute overseas, students are seen not only as consumers but also as producers of knowledge, creativity, and impact. In Bangladesh, sadly, students are seen as empty vessels to be filled. Perhaps this derives from evidence that real learning at students' early stages of schooling

reflects "enrollment rate at 91 percent (in Bangladesh)" but "falls flat in the low completion rate."

In fact, there is evidence that "only 2 in 1000 children achieve prescribed competencies by the end of grade 5 and 70 percent who complete primary education are unable to read, write or count properly." When these students appear at the doorsteps of higher education, one can imagine the dismay and predicament of university administrators. It is vital to strengthen K-12 programs and connect them with higher education as a smooth supply chain operation. Disjointed as things now stand, universities feel the

need for a steady supply of quality students who can then be elevated to higher levels of competence and consciousness.

Quality of administration

A university is a complex web of people, programs, policies, processes and resources; their coordination and management is the central role of the administration. Analyzing, planning, organizing, implementing, and controlling (using actual metrics) are keys to managing this web. In such matters, unfortunately, there's a singular lack of research or training.

For many top executives in academia, the job is simply a power trip mired in little things that are collectively unsubstantial. The core team of the Vice Chancellor, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Treasurer, and Registrar sometimes often forget they are managers whose job is to run the ship efficiently and flawlessly. Often they vie for power and accolade and get in each other's way, without clearly delineated roles and tasks. And this phenomenon cascades downwards, ending with the deans and department heads some of whom are simply not fit for the task. In many cases seniority is a poor criterion to use for such leadership roles: Training and administrative capacity is much more important.

Unfortunately, many universities are run at different levels by those who seem to have very little managerial experience or training. They run these systems in arcane and archaic ways. Some learn on-the-job; others can be destructive, a problem with grave consequences.

Then there are the interactions with other stakeholders. These interactions can be very fruitful and provide a plethora of innovative insights. They can also be divisive and dysfunctional, especially when the line between interaction and interference becomes thin. Such interactions can be within the

university, as well as with external bodies including political elements, bureaucracy, experts, associations, accreditation bodies, the legal system, and more.

The overall evidence points to the need to establish an academic discipline or program – academic administration – for those who vie for administrative positions. Without training, it is perilous to hand over the reins of management to them. On this matter there is much research to be done and key issues debated.

Academic programs

Rather than just a mere pathway for fulfilling degree requirements, innovative academic programs must engage students to explore new ideas and challenging problems. Duke University's students are not only encouraged to think about future career opportunities; they are also given the tools necessary for a lifetime of learning and global citizenship. In Bangladesh, too, we need vibrant programs, exciting curriculums, and student engagement with the real world to bring alive what they learn in the classroom. Providing students with a mere certificate at the end of a four-year program does not a university make!

Resources and facilities

The growth of any system can be constrained by the amount of resources available to it. Overall, financial allocations to the education system in Bangladesh has been pitiful. According to World Development Indicator (WDI) data, Bangladesh has an education budget of only 1.9 per cent of GDP (roughly for the last 14 years) compared to Afghanistan: 4.6 per cent, Bhutan: 5.6 per cent, Nepal: 4.1 per cent, India: 3.9 per cent, and Pakistan: 2.5 per cent. One study indicates that the percentage of “university” allocation from the education budget is less than 10%. Of this, private universities get nothing – nada!

As for facilities, in a study we recently concluded, students indicated the role and importance of adequate facilities such as a permanent campus to give them freedom, dignity, identity and friendships. Facilities that facilitate are thus vital to the functioning of a high quality university.

Conclusions

Global standards are not attained overnight. There is much to be done on “effective management,” especially realigning roles and responsibilities without which the universities will always run on a crisis mode. The structure of a university also must not be imposed from outside. As an example, at MacQuarie University, the Vice Chancellor is supported by “five” Deputy Vice Chancellors and a Chief Operating Officer, each in turn supported by their own substantive teams. In Bangladesh, the structure, laid down by external bodies, is inflexible and significantly constrains managerial responsiveness. There must also be significant and continuing capacity building efforts at various levels.

At another level, there must be a collective will among the key stakeholders to strive for global standards. A leadership role must evolve from this collectivity to guide the effort. To these conditions is the need for relevant stakeholders to work painstakingly on the five-factor holistic model. Only then can we make serious progress towards attaining global standards in higher education and strive for Vision 2021. That’s when we will be creating human assets of high value. ■

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Source: This article draws upon previous writings of the author on higher education. This article is reprinted with written permission from The Daily Star, Bangladesh, March 2017. <http://www.thedailystar.net/education-employment/attaining-global-standards-our-universities-1366516>;