

Report on the Panel Discussion on “University Approach to Widening Access: Opportunities in Community Colleges”

Chandigarh’ Punjab

6th March’ 2014

***“The purpose of higher education should be the preparation of active, purposive and good citizens, who are able to think not only in their interest, but the good of the society as a whole.”
Dr Rajesh Tandon, UNESCO Chair.***

“The Chandigarh Administration is open to new ideas, and looks to keenly contribute to improving the quality of higher education in the country.” Sh. K K Sharma, Advisor to the Chandigarh Administration.

A panel discussion on “*University Approach to Widening Access: Opportunities in Community Colleges*”, was held in Chandigarh’ Punjab, on the 06th of March’ 2014. The main purpose of the discussion was to explore university approaches to widening access of higher education, primarily through the channel of “Community Colleges”.



Picture 1: Esteemed delegates at the Panel Discussion.

The panel for the discussion included Dr Arun Kumar Grover, Vice Chancellor, Punjab University, Mr. Ajay Mohan Goel, Wadhvani Foundation, Dr Michael Osborne, Chair and Professor, University of Glasgow, UK. The session was chaired by Dr Rajesh Tandon, Co-Chair, UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education. The chief guest of the event was Sh K K Sharma, Advisor to the Chandigarh Administration. The event was hosted by the Ms. Manjula Rao, Assistant Director, Internationalizing Higher Education, British Council.

Introduction: Ms. Manjula Rao, British Council

Ms. Rao gave the introductory note to the event, by giving the British Council’s perspective on Higher Education and its objective of working for mutual benefits.

Ms. Rao questioned that *“Today, we need to ask ourselves that whether education is meant only for providing employability or does it have relevance for the greater good of the society.”*

She also said that *“The need of the hour was to focus attention bridging the skill gaps and on building an inclusive and skilled work force, in the wake of continuously increasing unemployed graduates in our country. In this regard, the scheme of community colleges has the potential to open a sea of opportunities.”*



Picture 2: Ms. Manjula Rao, British Council, delivering the inaugural address

Chief guest's address: Sh K K Sharma, Advisor to the Chandigarh Administration

“The pattern seen emerging today within the students is that they do not choose the education, from the point of view of their likes and interests, but its employability quotient”

Sh Sharma gave the perspective within the Chandigarh administration, with respect to higher education and the concept of community colleges. He quoted an international newspaper as saying that *“Arts education if pursued, will give no returns in the long run, as it does not contribute to the job market, and was therefore unproductive”*. Sh Sharma therefore called to look at subjects as noble as the Arts discipline, not from a skewed point of view, but through a more balanced approach. However, Sh Sharma accepted that the fact in today's time most of the colleges graduates failed in getting jobs.

Other pointers put forth by him were:

- Under the new mission of the Government of India, pertaining to higher education, the Chandigarh administration has started a number of new colleges.
- A lot of interest has also been shown by the college management and the department of education for the same.
- Along with this, an agreement has also been signed with the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD), Government of India (GoI), with respect to implementation schemes such as the Rashtriya Uchha Shiksha Abhiyaan (RUSA) etc.



Picture 3: Delegates in the Panel Discussion, Chandigarh' Punjab

Prof Arun Kumar Grover, Vice Chancellor, Punjab University

“The new experiment of the Government of India is to have community colleges embedded within the traditional colleges, who in addition to providing the usual education, would also be involved in delivering concurrent sub-skill development.”

“What excites me regarding the concept of community colleges is the possibility that people pay for their education on their own, rather than depending on their parents, which can play an immense role in improving the quality of the people passing out from such colleges.”

“If the experiment of community colleges is to be made a success, then the Union Territory of Chandigarh, provides a good laboratory for it.”

“The city administration should also look to outsource the jobs to the young population, in an attempt to use their skills, while they are still studying.”

Professor Grover saw bright chances of a place like Chandigarh succeeding in the implementation of this initiative, being a geographically small, but a well-endowed space. Also, having a committed cadre of the administration, and no political influences, Chandigarh can pose as a successful example in this regard. Also, as the stake of the UT administration in the college education in the city is high, the quality of education is well taken care of. Other points put forward by Dr Grover are:

- Higher Education means that ‘one needs to be engaged in it for about 8-10 years. Community colleges provide a great opportunity in this regard.
- A major benefit in this regard is that the CBSE schools are in a majority in the city. They have already adopted ‘skill development’ as a part of their curriculum, as part of the syllabus from the 9th to the 12th grade.. This is advantageous, by way of such students entering the college, having a prior experience in this area. Earlier, when the students had no such exposure in school, they often showed disinterest towards such initiatives.
- Now, efforts need to be focused on detailing out the microscopics of the initiative, in an attempt to make it successful, which is a major challenge at the present.
- The first step is to target those skills which are desired to be present in young people (in the 18-21 age group).
- Appropriate and adequate budget needs to be earmarked for the same.



Picture 4: On the dias, panelists for the session, Sh Ajay Mohan Goel, Wadhvani Foundation, Dr Rajesh Tandon, UNESCO Chair, Dr Michael Osborne, University of Glasgow, and Dr Arun Kumar Grover, Vice-Chancellor, Punjab University (from left to right).

Mr. Ajay Mohan Goel, Wadhvani Foundation

“We have 9.3 million students studying in the 12th grade in schools, while only 4.5 million go into Higher Education. Therefore, more than 4.5 million children drop out from the formal education system after the 12th standard. Along with this, there are skill gaps and only about 15-20% of the graduates are considered as being employable.” - Arguments put forth at the MHRD on the concept of Community Colleges about 3 year ago.

“When we look at community colleges today, it is extremely necessary to devise the size and shape it will take over the next few years in our country.”

“The basic objective of such an idea is to create employment opportunities, and not employability. For this, the courses taught in such colleges, need to be aligned according to the requirements of the market forces.”

Mr Goel put forth the above reflections as he started his note. He also cited the example of the USA, UK, Germany and Australia, having community colleges functioning in their respective countries, successfully. On the idea of community colleges, Mr Goel was of the view that they need to be hosted and embedded within the existing colleges. The rationale behind this idea is to cut short the expenses incurred on infrastructure. Along with this, if it is hosting within the existing colleges, it provides a good rub off opportunity with the academic leadership of the

colleges. This would also open avenues for some traditional courses to align with the courses being offered under the community college section.

Regarding the features of the community colleges, Mr Goel put forth the following points:

- It can offer upto a two year program post the 12th standard, and have multiple entry and exit levels.
- It needs to be credit based rather than based on percentage or marks. This would mean that if a student so wishes, he can exit the college with a diploma degree, and after gathering the requisite work experience, can always come back a year later or so to pursue an advance diploma program. Obtaining such degrees becomes all the more important, since our societal norms necessitate the obtaining of such degrees by the students, if they are to be considered for suitable job roles. Working on similar lines, the UGC on the 27th of February' 2014 has cleared a scheme for a bachelor's degree in vocational education for different subjects.
- The course curriculum in such colleges would be designed in close consultation with the local industry/employers. Along with this, the community college would necessarily have one partner from the local industry, as a member of the governing board, playing a part in curriculum design, organization of guest lectures, etc. This is promoted with the idea of preparing the students for more industry relevant jobs.
- There must also be an occupational mapping along with the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC). This is essential, keeping in mind that most jobs don't need a graduate degree at the entry level. Along with this, courses in health care and retail management need to be developed, which can offer students an array of job opportunities, along with pursuing their studies.
- Therefore, 60-70% of the curriculum should be devised as per the job market requirements (confirming to university standards), while the rest 30-40% can pertain to the traditional knowledge. Some examples of such fusion may be having a subject of retail management for the psychology students, logistic management for algorithm students.
- The qualification criteria for the teachers in such colleges need to be relaxed and be flexible enough in order to give an opportunity to seasoned practitioners to disseminate their knowledge to the students. For example, an 8th grade passed automotive technician, but having years of practical experience may be invited as taking guest lectures for the students of the concerned discipline.
- Under the broad funding framework for such colleges, with the UGC giving a grant of Rs 1 crore per year for running this scheme, the local industry partners may be roped in for setting up laboratories and for fulfilling other infrastructural requirements.

Dr Michael Osborne, University of Glasgow, UK

“The idea of widening access to higher education started in the UK, about 32 years ago, by way of opportunities to disadvantage groups, who did not have access to higher education.”

“One of my early experiences was in the year 1984, when I worked with a group in order to prepare them for a career in technical education.”

“We need to create opportunities for people who have not had access to higher education, through devising vocationally oriented courses, which can help them advance their knowledge and careers.”

Dr Osborne classified the term ‘Access’, in 3 ways:

(i) *Inreach*

This dealt with finding new ways for an individual to access new provisions.

(ii) *Outreach*

This is related to the preparatory courses being run by practitioners having no higher education degrees.

(iii) *Flexibility*

This prescribed moving away from supply driven to a demand driven mode, whereby the community is approached and provisions are developed in accordance to their needs. The flexibility is sought in time, space and in logistically recognized knowledge and pertains to changing the structure of higher education on a fundamental basis.

He added that in the UK, the community colleges offered a mixture of advanced and non-advanced vocational education. The courses at the advanced level were manifested through a foundation degree, which was developed in consultation with the local industry. An example in this regard included the *Bachelor’s degree in Community Development*, being offered by the *University of Glasgow*.

As regards the other issues related to the provision, Dr Osborne added that:

- It is an agreed fact that many jobs do not require graduate skills. This is evident from the data that about 50% graduates do not get into graduate jobs. The dearth of employment opportunities is aggravated by the fact that there is an oversupply of graduates in the present scenario.
- Other features of the community colleges included having a huge amount of flexibility, by way of a 1 or a 2 year course, linked to the industry requirements, and having multiple entry and exit points.
- However, Dr Osborne pointed out to the caveat that the autonomy of the universities in the UK, resulted into not many appreciating this idea, which posed a major challenge.
- He also encouraged the participants of the discussion to follow some good practices being followed across the world, under the similar agenda. He gave the example of Australia, which has “*dual sector institutions*”, who offer both community college education and higher education in one premise/structure. Such universities can create huge opportunities for success, in comparison to those who made a distinction between the two.



Picture 5: Participants at the Panel Discussion

Comments from the Chair: Dr Rajesh Tandon, UNESCO

“Today, the biggest question that needs to be answered is about the barriers to access to higher education. Also, attention needs to be paid to the barriers which have social implications, in addition to the implications on employability. However, it is easier to take literacy to the people, and difficult vice-versa.”

“If we are serious about taking the question of access to higher education further, then we need to find the social relevance of this type of education.”

“Keeping in mind the idea of community colleges, it is important to mention that herein, community knowledge as a building block, would play a big role in enhancing overall knowledge and skills.”

Dr Tandon summed up the panel discussion of the evening by providing his concluding remarks. He added that most of the times, vocational education such as the polytechnics; serve as a matter of skill of the hand. However, equally important was the skill of the heart and the mind. Therefore, all learners in such colleges should have the opportunity to learn through the hand, heart and mind alike. It is here that the importance of pedagogy of teaching comes into play, as being able to effectively facilitate the integration of such a learning process.