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Incorporating 'Social Responsibility & Community Engagement' in Higher Education

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Recommendations from:

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Social Responsibility in Higher Education

Overview

Recent trends towards increasing global inter-connectedness have been creating a somewhat distinctive new social order. Aspects like global citizenship, blurring of distinction between public sphere and private space, universalization of social norms and values have contributed to this social order. In this sense, the future of humanity depends on how social responsibility is owned, practiced and accounted for by the various institutions of society. Among such institutions, higher education institutions emerge as a critical actor. They have a responsibility and a fundamental commitment to the goals and interests of a society that is moving towards a new profile. In the face of current global challenges, universities are well placed to work on issues of human and social development on the global and local level. The role of higher education will determine the place of knowledge in providing solutions to these challenges. Therefore, higher education must take a lead in society and promote the overall acquisition of knowledge to address global challenges, food security, climate change, etc. As such, continuous reflection regarding social commitment is the sign of the higher education systems of the future, where this commitment is understood as the service that education provides in terms of a public good. In this sense, the aim of universities is not to serve private capital, but rather to become a catalyst for individual and social development and a source of critical and independent thinking (Fuente and Didriksson, 2014).

The Final Communiqué from the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education of July 8, 2009 opens with a section on the "Social Responsibility in Higher Education".

> *"Item 1 notes: "Higher education is a public good and the responsibility of all stakeholders." Item 2 notes: "Higher education has the social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted issues...and our ability to respond to them... It should lead society in generating global knowledge to address global challenges, inter alia, food security, climate change, water management, intercultural dialogue, renewable energy and public health."*

Indian perspective

Coming to the Indian context, the *National Policy on Education*, formulated in 1986 aimed at not only developing not only developing human power for serving the economy but also at inculcating crucial values. The policy envisages education for equality and an understanding of the diverse socio- cultural systems of the people while motivating the younger generations towards international co- operation and peaceful co- existence. Further, the policy indicates a major thrust in higher education, incorporating aspects like expansion, improvement in quality and its *'increased relevance'*.

Aspects of social responsibility in higher education although does get articulated very categorically in this policy, it definitely mirrors the ideas that are being spoken about under the social responsibility banner. For instance, the policy proposes that *"Higher Education Programmes have to be redesigned to meet the growing demands of specialisation, to provide flexibility in the combination of courses, to facilitate mobility among courses, programmes and institutions, to update and modernise curricula, to integrate work/practical experience and participation in creative activities with the learning processes, and to facilitate reforms in the evaluation procedure. The present rigid structures do not permit these reforms"* (MHRD, 2016). Since NSS & NCC programs were the only kind of social outreach function being practiced then, the policy also advocated for awarding credits for such activities; an aspect we are pushing today, in all our capacities.

Government's commitment to take the engagement agenda forward was also reflected in the 11th five year plan, which prioritized education as a central instrument for achieving rapid and inclusive growth with specific emphasis on expansion, excellence and equity. This was evident from the budget proposed for education, which saw a five-fold increase over the 10th Plan. During the 11th Plan period, the Yash Pal Committee Report, Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education, was released in 2009. This report was an important addition to a completely new perspective on knowledge management (Singh & Tandon, 2015). It provided for the concept of a university which is suited to the production of universal knowledge that is of benefit to the society at large (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust [SAHMAT], 2009, p. 26). The report states: "We have overlooked that new knowledge and new insights have often originated at the boundaries of the disciplines. We have tended to imprison disciplinary studies in opaque walls. This has restricted flights of imagination and limited our creativity". (Yash Pal Committee, 2009, p.2). It further suggests that

> *"…it is important that the universities relate to the world outside and the walls of disciplines are porous enough to let other voices be heard. It would also be necessary that university education is seen in its totality and the subject areas are not designed in isolation".* (Yash Pal Committee, 2009, p. 13).

The report points towards the fact that universities in developing countries have the social responsibility for evolving strategies for meeting the different demands of a knowledge society (Narasimharao, 2010, p. 11).

Taking forward the similar thought process was the 12th five year plan (2012-2017). It proposes an innovative aspect of furthering the quality of higher education in the country in terms of strengthening community engagement and promoting social responsibility. It states:
> *"In the face of growing isolation of HEIs from the society, there is a need for renewed effort for HEIs for genuinely engaging with the community, conduct socially*

relevant research and education and foster social responsibility amongst students as part of their core mission. For this purpose, a National Initiative to Foster Social Responsibility in Higher Education would be launched. An alliance for community engagement, an independent association of practitioners, academics and community leaders would be created to support its implementation. "(Tandon, 2014)

A major push in this direction was provided by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) and UGC. In line with this, the Planning Commission set up a Sub-Committee called Strengthening Community Engagement in Higher Education. Its recommendations led to the UGC launching a scheme to foster community university engagement in HEIs in October' 2014. Under the 12th plan guidelines, the UGC rolled out a scheme for the establishment of Centre(s) for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement (CFSRCE) in universities. The main objectives of the scheme include promoting community-university partnerships to develop knowledge for improving the lives of the people, to encourage participatory research, and to promote alliances with community based organizations in planning and execution of projects.

Action points

Social Responsibility in Higher Education is manifested in a number of different ways both inside and outside the higher education institution. In some cases it involves partnerships with communities and programs geared towards engaging students with communities. In other cases it involves an orientation of curriculum or a general focus of academic programs towards the resolution of society's problems (Parsons, 2015). According to Hall and Tandon;

> *"Demand for public accountability and local relevance of higher, post-secondary education is growing rapidly in many societies; this demand is being responded to in many different ways by different types of institutions. Some respond through service learning and student internships; some by co-production of knowledge where local communities act as partners; some others bring in the experiences of communities and practitioners in designing curricula and teaching new problem and issue-centred courses. This social responsibility is expressed both inside and outside the institutions."* *(Parsons, 2015)*

This also reflects in the National Education Policy, 1986, which says that, *'The University system should be enabled to move centre-stage. It should have the freedom and responsibility to innovate in teaching and research'.* Further, it also proposes to, '*to modify curricula and methodologies of learning through appropriate research and development to incorporate elements of problem solving, creativity and relevance*'. This becomes a step forward in carrying out their responsibility function. Socially responsible higher education institutions carefully manage their relationships with communities and external stakeholders. In many cases, community engagement or engaging with the community is a requisite for being considered

socially responsible, while for others it is the quality and nature of these partnerships that determines the level of social responsibility being demonstrated.

Community university engagement is way more than the value it generates for students, communities. It has relevance for larger public good and contributes to broader goals of socio-economic development. It is generally understood, however, that both the higher education institution and the community should benefit from the interaction and that partnerships support social and economic development goals. Some crisp action points for realizing community university engagement in academia are:

- ✓ *Students should be given credit for undertaking field placements in communities, Panchayats and municipalities during senior years of Bachelor's and Master's course*

- ✓ *All researchers (students and faculty) must be given compulsory training in community-based participatory research methodology so that they can learn from local communities*

- ✓ *Research materials so generated should be included in curriculum to make it more locally relevant*

- ✓ *Performance of all faculty must be assessed on the criterion of promoting community engagement*

Therefore, the concept of social responsibility implies the relevance and contributions of the universities to the future development of individuals and societies; it implies that teaching and research as the core functions of the university are linked closely with the elaboration and promotion of shared societal visions and common public goods. Its fundamental objective is to promote the social usefulness of knowledge, and its relevance goes beyond responding to the needs of economic development. It requires mutually beneficial relationships between universities and society, which involves directly multiplying the critical uses of knowledge in society.

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