

Practicing Social Outreach in Higher Education

Reflections from FICCI HES 2017



Produced by: UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research & Social Responsibility in Higher Education

Introduction

In the current times, as our society faces a number of social, political and economic challenges, expectations from the public institutions are on the rise. The latter is expected to deliver in ways that help societies and communities which face these contemporary challenges and progress in a sustainable manner. In this context, particular emphasis is being placed on the 'roles and responsibilities' of our higher education institutions (HEIs). As public institutions, they are expected to further the objectives of public service, through its missions of teaching, research and service. Most Indian HEIs have responded to such demands through its 'extension' and 'extra-curricular' services, in which the students largely engage from a 'moral or charitable' perspective. This in their view forms their responsibilities towards public service. This perception of public service in eyes of our HEIs is what we need to change!

The recently released knowledge paper by the FICCI Taskforce on 'Social Outreach in Higher Education'¹ is an important step forward to this end. This paper articulates in great detail, the difference between what the Universities have been doing 'traditionally' in the name of outreach/service, and what it needs to do now, in light of the current challenges. This report outlines how continuing with the status-quo is an unsustainable practice as we stand at crossroads in terms of social challenges. As the higher education in the country now envisions an ambitious model of Education 4.0², it needs to be transformative and innovative in ways which helps it move towards this new model.



Pic 1: The knowledge paper on 'Social Outreach in Higher Education' being released at the FICCI HES 2017

¹ http://unescochair-cbrsr.org/pdf/resource/Social_Outreach_in_Higher_Education.pdf

² Education 4.0 is essentially a futuristic education model and focuses on individual student learning. This model pays attention to the 'learning process' that eventually defines the manner in which young students evolve into 'global citizens', with humanistic elements, values, beliefs and insights, and not merely learn to become a good workforce

With this background, the paper advocates crisp action points on how to move forward in this direction. In particular, it talks about how the universities can engage in ‘meaningful’ social outreach, through its ‘regular’ missions of teaching, research and service, but in a more ‘engaged’ manner. It is here that the paper introduces the concepts of *engaged teaching*, *engaged research* and *engaged service*. This new approach to higher education missions focuses on being more engaged with the real world -- inclusive, innovative and forward looking. While engaged teaching is one which is learner-centric, contextually relevant, and contributes to the enhancement of knowledge, awareness and skills; engaged research is critical in addressing societal challenges and the development needs of a society/nation. Engaged service seeks to inculcate in the students, civic values and a sense of responsible citizenship. The paper, through case studies of universities engaging in such practices, shares practical action-points on how to realize this in practice, while engaging in social outreach. It also makes a case for such practices by outlining the reinforcement and support provided for similar engagements by Indian higher education policy, and finally connects the discussions to the global debates on the role of HEIs in achieving SDGs.

This knowledge paper by the FICCI taskforce formed the basis of the discussions and conversations at the session on ‘Social Outreach in Higher Education’ at the FICCI Higher Education Summit 2017. The session witnessed speakers from across the world, sharing their thoughts, ideas and experiences on the theme. While the keynote of the session was given by Dr Abd’ Ala, Rector, UIN Sunam Ampel University, Surabaya, Indonesia; among other speakers were Dr Diptiman Das, Chairman & Managing Director, EdCIL; Dr Andrea Vargiu, Associate Professor, University of Sassari, Italy; Ms. Nandita Abraham, CEO, Pearl Academy; Dr Prasad Khandekar, Maharashtra Institute of Technology (MIT), Pune and Ms. Phinu Jose, Director, Centre for Social Action, Bengaluru. The session was moderated by Dr Rajesh Tandon, Founder-President, PRIA & Co-Chair, UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research & Social Responsibility in Higher Education.

The following section is an attempt to capture the essence of the conversations in the session, in the backdrop of the FICCI paper, and share with the readers not only the content, but also the implications for our current higher education system.

Experiences & Insights

- *Education is a ‘public good’*

Keywords in other FICCI panels resonated with this concept, with discussions on issues like accessibility, cooperative learning, equity, democracy, equal opportunities, inclusion, and emancipation. Dr Vargiu reiterated that *‘education is a public good, not an economic commodity. This implies that it is a non-rival good (if someone has it, someone else can have it at the same time); it is not exclusive (it can be reproduced at relatively low costs) and is generative (combinations and re-combinations of education and knowledge are empowering)*. Education should therefore, serve public interest in ways which is mutually beneficial, empowering and results in the creation of sustainable cities and communities.

- *Need to reconsider the ‘purpose’ of education and the ‘relevance’ of universities*

Education, in essence, should empower people. The primary responsibility for making this happen lies with the academics and universities. Being the sites of knowledge creation and as public institutions, universities have the obligation to use their knowledge for societal benefit, and thereby fulfil their social responsibilities. In the words of Dr Abd’ Ala, *‘as educationists, our purpose goes beyond teaching. Sharing our knowledge with the community for societal benefit should be our primary objective’*. This is the cornerstone of all activities at the UIN Sunam Ampel University which believes that, *‘the best of people are those who are most beneficial to people’*. On the relevance of universities in the contemporary times, Dr Vargiu shared two important points: firstly, as centres of learning, universities want to survive through tumultuous times. They can do so only if they not only adapt to the changing circumstances, but also become the drivers of the change. Secondly, as ‘public institutions’, universities cannot be exclusive. They need to combine different and alternative forms of knowledge in ways that generates collective value and one which can help in providing ‘new solutions’ to societal challenges. So, universities need to ‘combine, optimize, and align’ varying knowledge forms so that they can be used for mutual benefit.



Pic 2: Dr Abd’ Ala delivering the keynote address



Pic 3: Dr Andrea Vargiu sharing his experiences

- *Creating a balance between curricular learning objectives and community empowerment*

Ms. Nandita Abraham and Ms. Phinu Jose, through their experiences at Pearl Academy and Christ University, Bengaluru respectively, reflected on the importance of creating a balance between the curricular objectives and striving for community empowerment. Considering this, Ms. Abraham shared that the three-year course for design students at the Pearl Academy compulsorily includes “experiential learning” opportunities, which are as much a part of the curriculum as is other components. Similarly, Ms. Jose described how “service-learning” forms the basis of educational activities at Christ University, which helps achieve the dual objectives of theoretical learning and community development.

- *Limitless and diversified learning opportunities*

Dr Tandon shared that with 29 states and about 8000 cities in the country, and each of them having its own context and challenges, the opportunities for diversified 'learning opportunities' for students is 'limitless'. On similar lines, Dr Das suggested a fixed percentage of research students can be assigned research topics which are relevant in the local context, such as students in Rajasthan can research on deserts, students in Sikkim can explore the varied dimensions of landslides and other natural calamities impacting the north eastern region, students in Chhattisgarh may find useful to do a research on tribal culture and ethnic challenges. Dr Vargiu cited the example of the European Union's Horizon 2020 programme includes a component, called Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), and how it is contributing to meaningful research outcomes. RRI is a key action of the "*Science with and for Society*" (SWAFS) programme of Horizon 2020 (H2020). It implies that societal actors (researchers, citizens, policy makers, business, third sector organisations, etc.) work together during the whole research and innovation process in order to better align both the process and its outcomes with the values, needs and expectations of society.

- *Using social outreach to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*

Considering the diverse activities that can be undertaken under the social outreach function of the universities, there also lies a unique opportunity to align the latter to the "glocal" agenda of development, i.e., contributing to global SDG targets while addressing "local" issues through "engaged" social outreach functions. With the amount of resources at its disposal, the time is opportune for the Indian higher education sector to fulfil its responsibilities as public institutions, and contribute towards achieving SDG targets.

- *Simple, humble steps needed to realize meaningful social outreach*

Dr Das shared that for realizing meaningful social outreach, we do not require any exhaustive actions, funding, or change in the higher education structure; but only a vision to strive towards humble solutions to local societal challenges such as soil/water/health management, etc. Dr Tandon reiterated this point as he mentioned that all that the universities need to do is to '*approach their regular functions differently*'. If the HEIs re-orient their teaching, research and service function into being more 'engaged', by providing opportunities like reflective learning, service-learning, joint/collaborative research and nurturing values of 'responsible citizenship'; this is all that would be required.

- *Institutional embedding of social outreach activities*

Dr Vargiu shared that institutional embedding of engagement and social outreach strategies and practices largely depend on contingent factors, and each institution has peculiarities that characterize it. Several and diversified factors can favor or hinder institutional embedding of social outreach. It is therefore important for the institution to identify those specific factors and provide for their positive combination. He added that, '*the right combinations of factors are largely dependent upon a positive alignment of regulatory instances acting at different levels: systemic (regional, national and local higher education systems); institutional (single university) and intra-*

institutional (university units such as departments, schools etc.)'. Policies which facilitate the right combination and alignment of factors allow for all relevant actors to creatively and autonomously work out strategies to play the combination-alignment game. Therefore, regulations that favor autonomy and flexibility while aiming at ensuring quality are needed for institutional embedding of engagement and social outreach. Ms Abraham and Ms Jose also agreed to the point of institutional embedding as they shared that unless and until, social outreach activities are integrated into the curriculum, the intended impact will not be achieved.

- *Favourable higher education policies helps in mainstreaming social outreach practices*

The Indonesian government through an Act on Higher Education, has made 'community service' an integral part of the academic curriculum. It is also mandatory for the students to engage in these activities, in order to be able to earn a certain number of credits, as a requirement for their undergraduate degree. As a result, the country presents some best practice models of social outreach, ranging from Participatory Action Research (PAR), Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), Service-Learning (SL), Community-Based Research (CBR), etc. Dr Das reiterated the importance of having favourable higher education policies backing social outreach functions. He shared that higher education regulators like Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) and University Grants Commission (UGC) should come up with schemes which promotes and also incentivizes this area of work.



Pic: Panellists at the session on 'Social Outreach in Higher Education' at FICCI HES 2017 (from left to right: Ms. Phinu Jose, Dr Andrea Vargiu, Dr Diptiman Das, Dr Rajesh Tandon, Dr Abd' Ala, Ms. Nandita Abraham, Dr Prasad Khandekar, and Ms Shobha Mishra Ghosh, Senior Director, FICCI)

Implications on Indian Higher Education

Indian higher education system in the recent times has been seen as taking positive strides towards making higher education 'socially responsible' and reversing the traditional 'inward looking'

approach into one which is more engaged and in-sync with the society. Although 'social outreach' has traditionally been one of the functions of the HEIs; approaching it from the 'socially responsible' an 'mutually beneficial' perspective began from the 12th Five Year Plan, which for the first time acknowledged this aspect. As a result, the UGC in the year 2014 launched a Scheme on '*Establishing Centres for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement*' in Indian universities. Its emphasis on '*participatory research, community-university research partnerships and cross cutting collaborations between universities, NGOs and other institutions*, etc. made it an impressive policy move, which was appreciated across global circles. Following suit, very recently, the MHRD has launched a plan on establishing 'world class institutions'. The principles of this plan categorically mentions '*tangible and intangible contribution to the society*' as one of the essential characteristics of a world class university. It also emphasizes the importance of universities striving to achieve '*social impact by engaging in applied research and innovation in issues of concern to developing societies*'³.

Established in 1994, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) (an autonomous institution established by the UGC) has also been placing particular importance on community engagement in higher education institutions, for improving overall quality of higher education. Recently, it revised its Quality Indicator Framework (QIF) for assessment of universities; which talks about '*institutional ethics and social responsibilities*'. It tends to assess universities on grounds on its '*engagement with the communities, for addressing its locational disadvantages and making use of advantages for their betterment*'⁴. These policy moves and initiatives indicate that the Indian higher education policy has now gradually started acknowledging the importance of meaningful social outreach and engagement by universities in addressing societal challenges. The Association of Indian Universities (AIU) too, has been a supporter of this area of work. Dr Furqan Qamar, Secretary-General, AIU has repeatedly shared the need for integrating such practices in the curriculum, for better outcomes and impacts.

Following this policy push, the Indian universities have slowly begun to realize and act towards their social responsibilities. A step forward in this direction has been the institutionalization of such social outreach practices. Some examples emerge in this context. A couple of them are: first, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya in Sonapat, Haryana, which has institutionalized its community engagement activities by constituting a structure called as the Centre for Society University Interface and Research (CSUIR). This centre coordinates all engagement activities at campus, and ensures that the same is mainstreamed within the regular academic curriculum. Second, Ambedkar University, New Delhi has designed a special M. Phil. course in Development Studies, along with PRADAN (a civil society organization), which moves beyond conventional postgraduate research, and actually focuses on 'practice/action' as a major part of the curriculum.

Lately, some universities have also attempted at being more 'outward looking'. For example, Pandit Ravi Shankar Shukla University has partnered with public institutions like the State Planning Commission, Chhattisgarh and PRIA (a civil society organization). All three have recently entered into a tri-partite partnership agreement, where the involved parties have committed to build research capacities locally for addressing pressing local challenges. In the year, 2014-15, four universities

³ http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/Public%20Consultation%20Document.pdf

⁴ <http://www.naac.gov.in/docs/Pre-Final-QIF-University-Formula%20document-17-5-2017.pdf>

(Panjab University, Chandigarh; Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati; North Bengal University, Siliguri, and Jain University, Bangalore) worked with the UNESCO Chair in CBR for researching on the aspect of 'community university engagement in Indian universities'. Academics at Ajmer University have also begun a collaborative research work with PRIA on women sanitation workers in the city. These arrangements have opened up avenues of 'new knowledge' by respecting knowledge diversity and bridging the world of research and practice. Doing so, they have been able to demonstrate in practice, as to how to adopt engaged teaching, engaged research and engaged service in higher education.

One of the most recent and ambitious initiatives in this context is the Knowledge for Change (K4C)⁵ initiative of the UNESCO Chair in CBR, which aims to transform higher education research, pedagogies and curriculum to enable researchers to provide practical, implementable solutions to real world problems. K4C is a practical effort towards realizing the objectives of meaningful social outreach in higher education by enabling engaged teaching and engaged research. K4C addresses the goals of 'social outreach in higher education' by enabling mutually beneficial partnerships between HEIs and civil society organizations, and uses this partnership structure to make higher education teaching and research more 'outward-looking and socially relevant'

So, institutional attempts (at the university level), coupled with higher education policy backing makes the perfect case for realizing 'social outreach in the Indian higher education'. An important point to note here is also that higher education cannot do this singularly. All the key stakeholders need to come together in a partnership which is new, involves new partners, new ways of thinking and strategizing higher education processes. This alignment between new and different set of partners will develop over time and needs to be continuous, sustainable and durable, in order to allow for stable partnership arrangements to form and persist with community and also between the societal partners. With global debates on 'social responsibility' picking steam, and SDGs as an important area of work, 'education' is deemed to play an important role in the process. Therefore, it is much pertinent that we focus on how we perceive higher education, and how the latter responds to our needs and aspirations as a society. The Indian context in particular offers a diversity of opportunities and challenges, and it is up to us as to how we leverage the opportunities to our advantage for responding or addressing the challenges, through engaged teaching, research and service.

⁵ <http://unescochair-cbrsr.org/index.php/current-project/>