

Attaining global standards in our universities

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With every new discovery, we enter a new realm of knowledge that quickly reveals our inadequacies and how much more we need to know. In these domains of the unknown, universities are like spaceships, venturing deep into the field of knowledge in pursuit of *verstehen*—understanding in a deep way. Along the way, they transform minds, hearts, and even souls of a lucky few entities—individuals, organisations, communities—who go on to make a mark for themselves and then proceed to make a difference for humanity. Universities are the changemakers of changemakers—reforming, enlightening, galvanising, and often creating entirely new worlds. With wisdom and energy (the WE factor), they are beacons that radiate light to the far reaches of human endeavours to help push the limits of our 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, uncovers 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, teamwork, 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—the fourth Industrial Revolution, the Exponential Age, the Age of Disruption? In a tumultuous world of rapid change, universities 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 on-course and reach global standards, however, there is much work ahead.

A basic need in our universities is fundamental transformation and alignment of five essential components:

1. High quality faculty
2. Quality students
3. Trained and supportive administrative teams
4. Innovative and challenging programmes
5. Sufficient resources and modern facilities

Quality faculty

The centrepiece of a university is its faculty, which will be the main focus of this article. Whatever the balance sought by individual institutions, the faculty must be equipped with two methodologies: 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 itself 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 to 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 (The Daily Star, January 2016):

- * Teachers did not take classes regularly and had many excuses for being busy
- * They could not make the class interactive
- * They used the traditional lecture method and taught straight from the book
- * They had neither a clear idea of the content nor the materials
- * The course outline was not up-to-date
- * The faculty was not approachable or friendly
- * The assessment system was questionable
- * Teachers went through the slides without explaining the subject matter
- * Lectures were disorganised; no clear expectations were set
- * Teachers were not available during office hours
- * Exams required rote memorisation of mundane/trivial facts

As a teacher myself, I emphasise discovery as a fundamental process of learning. Employing this mode, however, requires a different style of knowledge dissemination, acquisition and exchange. Many of us will have to transform our styles from the traditional mode of lecturing, away from 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 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, coming up with questions (not answers), research, and much more. These approaches are most effective in “reaching”, not teaching students. Combining the above methods with students' new learning options, styles and expectations, especially with evolving technology, social media, and alternate learning sources, should result in a dramatically changed teaching-learning environment.

The new teaching-learning paradigm may be perceived by teachers as painful and requiring significant extra effort. This will cause substantial initial resistance; in fact, sadly, many faculties 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 mould and transition into a new world of teaching and learning.

Administrators may find the new modes of learning disconcerting for a number of reasons. It is often heard, especially in private universities, that even a few disgruntled students can make the administration nervous and anxious about future enrolments. 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 just as important

Knowledge is not static; it continues to grow, often exponentially. Thus curricula must be updated regularly to equip students with contemporary education. Otherwise they will be equipped with dated and obsolete knowledge and rendered non-competitive. The curriculum must be exciting and relevant for the times and every academic unit must scan the horizon for developments that must be quickly incorporated. In the end, the curriculum must be “vibrant, pragmatic, pro-nation, and contemporary.” In fact, in today's technology-driven world, smart students can access various knowledge systems. Teachers relying on outdated and outmoded content will be quickly relegated to irrelevancy.

Disruptive innovations in education are also on the rise, and will challenge or even replace university education in the future. Imaginative organisations could potentially meet targeted needs and draw “customers”

away from academia to even replace university education. Even accreditation systems may have to support creative knowledge producers who deliver knowledge in innovative and demand-driven ways, e.g. distance education, thus bypassing academia. To be competitive, academia must awaken from its stupor and innovate.

Knowledge generation is imperative

Research is another area in which the faculty must demonstrate methodological competence. Yuto Kitamura of Nagoya University said: “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 programme, 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 programme 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 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 “the enrolment rate of 91 percent (in Bangladesh) falls flat in the low completion rate.” On the level of learning, a study claims that “only 2 in 1,000 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 programmes and connect them with higher education as a smooth supply chain operation. Disjointed as things now stand, universities need to be supplied with 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, programmes, policies, processes and resources; their coordination and management is the central role of the administration. Analysing, planning, organising, 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 a big power trip mired in little things that are collectively unsubstantial. The core team members at the top forget they are managers whose job is to run the ship efficiently and smoothly. Often they 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. They run these systems in arcane and archaic ways. Some learn on-the-job; others can be destructive in their incompetence, a problem with grave consequences. In many cases seniority is a poor criterion to use for such leadership roles: Training and administrative capacity is much more important.

Then there are the interactions with other stakeholders that 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 include policy circles within the university, as well as external bodies, including political elements, regulatory bodies, accreditation bodies, bureaucracy, experts, associations, the legal system, and more.

The overall evidence points to the need to establish a discipline or programme—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 volumes to write.

Academic programmes

Rather than just a mere pathway for fulfilling degree requirements, innovative academic programmes must engage students to explore new ideas and challenging problems. Duke'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 programmes, exciting curricula, 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 programme 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 percent of GDP (roughly over the last 14 years), whereas Afghanistan has 4.6 percent, Bhutan 5.6 percent, Nepal 4.1 percent, India 3.9 percent, and Pakistan 2.5 percent. One study indicates that the percentage of “university” allocation from the education budget is less than 10 percent. 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 truly 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 in “effective management,” especially realigning roles and responsibilities without which the universities will generally run in crisis mode. The structure of a university must also 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 a higher 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. Added 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. That's when we will be creating human assets of high value.

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