



University Grants Commission
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The Killing Of Higher Education

Prof. V. R. Mehta



UGC Golden Jubilee Lecture Series

Chairman's Foreword



The University Grants Commission, an apex body of higher education responsible for the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of university education in India, is celebrating its Golden Jubilee Year during 2002-2003. As part of the academic activities the UGC has conducted the 'Golden Jubilee Lecture Series' throughout the country by eminent individuals who have excelled in their respective fields and made a mark not only in India but abroad too. These Lectures have mostly been organized in Universities located in remote areas. The basic concept behind organizing these Lecture Series was to bring UGC closer to students, teachers and intelligentsia in that region. It is hoped that these luminaries including academicians, scientists, social scientists and others, with their rich and varied experiences have motivated and enabled the youth of the country to understand things in better perspective.

To reach out to a wider audience, the UGC is presenting these lectures in the form of Golden Jubilee Lecture Series Booklets. I hope students, teachers, educational administrators and the general public at large, will benefit from the vast repository of knowledge of these achievers.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'A. Nigavekar' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Arun Nigavekar

Introduction

This lecture was delivered by Prof. V R Mehta at Ranchi University on 19 September 2003 as part of the UGC's Golden Jubilee Lecture Series.

It is a deep honour for me to be asked to deliver this special lecture as a part of the golden jubilee celebration of the University Grants Commission of India. I accepted the invitation with eagerness and humility. I have had the privilege to be both a participant and a witness, for almost three decades, in the enfoldment of vast potential of the institutions of higher learning in the country, a process in which the University Grants Commission has played a critical role as a benefactor, and in some cases of a catalyst too. It has facilitated massive expansion of higher education from 21 universities on the eve of independence to about 320 universities and deemed universities, from a few hundred colleges to about twelve thousand colleges today. It has created new structures in the hope that they would act as catalysts to enhance the quality of education. It has also tried to act as a buffer between the state and the academia. It still remains the most important institution with which our hopes and fears in the field of higher education are connected.

And yet, there are grave problems with universities and other institutions of higher learning in the country. Universities and other institutions of higher learning are important to the life of the nations. Someone has called them "The Incubators of Future Health and Prosperity." The ----medieval image of the university was that they were ivory towers far removed from the society. This is what Newman had in mind when he spoke about "The Idea of A University." Today universities not only preserve and transmit knowledge inherited from the past, they are also expected to create and disseminate knowledge. They are also expected to contribute to national development. As we move from "Knowledge Society" to "Knowledge Economy," they are expected to provide necessary manpower with skills and expertise to man public and private services. In today's highly competitive high-tech global society, they are expected to generate new ideas, for only those societies and economies will be able to compete which have capacity to nurture, sustain and develop innovative minds. Indeed, the modern university to quote one of the Presidents of Princeton University, is "a highly porous material, one that allows free diffusion on both directions."

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Unfortunately, this image of the university is far from true in our country today. There is a wide chasm between what is expected of higher education and what it is in fact accomplishing. It is true that there has been massive expansion of higher education. The social composition of the class room has dramatically changed with the entry of students from classes which not long ago existed either on the periphery or did not count at all. There is no doubt that we have moved, from classes to masses. This massive expansion has, however, not been accompanied by increase in quality of education. In fact, invariably, there has been an inverse relationship between the two: in most cases expansion has resulted into steep decline in the quality of education.

Our best students can indeed be compared to the best anywhere in the world. But the system has not done enough to address the problems of students at middle or lower levels. Education by rote learning is still the order of the day. There is very little incentive or encouragement for original thinking. The situation becomes worse when one considers the fact that the number of good institutions in the country is extremely limited. We often boast of our IITs and IIMs and a few universities whose academia could make top grade anywhere else in the world. But these institutions are oases in the otherwise vast desert of higher education. We have world class faculty and world class students but no world class university. The number of good institutions is so limited that still for the vast majority of students from socially and economically deprived sections equality of opportunity remains a deferred dream. They do not have funds to pursue higher education. Only 3% of the disadvantaged who pass out their higher secondary examination enter higher education. If somehow or other they are able to manage on the basis of the Government of India scholarship to SC/ST, they rarely have opportunity to study in the best institutions having a proven record of excellence. They are condemned to study in the local institutions which are invariably sub-standard. Unless these students have access to centres of excellence they will not have access to power and consequently economic opportunities in society and all the talk of their empowerment will be in vain. Even if they manage to get admission in good institutions they continue to suffer from various disabilities because either these institutions generally suffer from both lack of facilities and right kind of motivation and commitment

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to bring them at par with the students from better off sections in society in a level playing field.

Most of our institutions are characterized by poor teaching (or no teaching!), over crowded class rooms, lack of competent faculty and absence of infra-structure. The expansion in the size of the faculty has not been matched by the increase in the facilities. There is near unanimity among all sections of society that universities are under funded. In most cases libraries don't have funds for books, laboratories for equipment. Most teachers don't have even a decent space to sit. It is a matter of shame that when we appoint a lower division clerk in the Government, we ensure that he gets a table and a chair. But when we appoint a teacher we throw him into an overcrowded staff room. You can imagine his plight. Either he stays away or sooner or later joins his colleagues who have over the years learned to while away their time in non-academic activities. No wonder our institutions are characterized by cheap politicking, debilitating texture of partisanship and allurements of power. The lack of cohesion combined with decline in standards within the university community is good enough temptation or excuse for political and bureaucratic bosses in the society to invade the so called "private life of the academia" in the name of regulation and accountability. There has been a serious onslaught on the university autonomy in recent years. A nexus seems to have developed between teacher-politicians, students-politicians and the politicians in the town. The Vice-chancellors and other academic bodies are either too weak or find it impossible to mediate between political elements within and such elements outside. The elements which are determined to subvert the university autonomy for narrow political or personal gains seem to be thriving. The UGC was created as a buffer between the state and the universities. But I doubt whether it has the necessary will, determination, perspective and means to act as a shield for the universities.

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Despite the existence of a few good institutions and students and teachers who are intellectually alive and robust, our universities and institutions of higher learning have generally failed to act as vehicles for national development by either providing manpower for the job market or new ideas and innovations necessary for economic development. They have not led to a vibrant economic and robust civic culture. No wonder social evaluation of our institutions of higher learning

is very low. Why should it be so? Some attribute the present state of affairs to lack of infra-structure, others to the decline in the spirit of service among teachers. Still others to increasing political and bureaucratic interference. While all these explanations have some iota of truth, I am increasingly driven to the feeling that notwithstanding these complex factors which have eroded the credibility of the system, one of the most important factor is that we have ourselves, by design or inadvertently, made the system irrelevant to such an extent that internally there is lot of cynicism and despair and externally we hardly count. We have failed to sustain a sound teaching-learning process, or to provide right kind of "Fodder to The Job Market." And worse still, we have failed to provide authentic process of certification to provide signals about our pupils to society which the latter could trust. In what follows, I propose to reflect on the ramifications of this and examine the status of recent trends, particularly in the wake of liberalization.

Part II

Our degrees and diplomas are expected to provide certification that the awardee possesses basic skills and analytical rigor of a particular type. These certificates provide signals to society that a student possessing a particular certificate has specific talents corresponding to them. These certificates declare the minimum level of competency which the society can expect from students possessing them. Unfortunately our institutions have failed to perform this basic function with the result that the society no longer trusts us. The credibility and relevance of higher education degrees stand completely eroded. There are a few exceptions but they only reinforce the general impression. People are so much uncertain about the qualities of our product that they no longer take university certification seriously. I suspect whether the universities themselves do so.

Strange are our ways of dealing with situations. What was required to reinforce the value of these degrees was to reassure society that we had taken every step to stop the rot prevailing in the system, that henceforth students with certain certificates will be endowed with corresponding skills and minimum standards required for certification. Unable to enforce these standards, we have sought escape by creating a system of parallel examinations and alternative structures and practices. At stages where merit is required, we have introduced a

system of additional tests. No wonder, even if one is a topper of his university, he cannot hope to get admission to any engineering, medical or high profile courses in frontier areas of science without these tests. Some universities and colleges have introduced these tests even for admission to social sciences and humanities. The obvious result is that all degrees, diplomas and certificates have only been reduced to qualifying status for various tests.

This has adversely affected the academic atmosphere of the universities. The pre-engineering, pre-medical tests, and a host of such other tests have taken precedence over higher secondary as well as first year undergraduate examinations. The best in the first year devote themselves to the preparations for these tests for admission to professional colleges. Most of our classes are deserted. A culture of non seriousness overtakes them. Students discover to their chargin, that their result in higher secondary examination has a limited value. For most part it doesn't adequately equip them for these tests. As for the classes in the first year, what is taught is too remote from the immediate objectives. But then the question arises: how do the student prepare for these tests? To fill up the vacuum created on account of inadequacy and credibility of the existing system, parallel institutions in the form of coaching institutions have come up. There are coaching institutions in the country in which the number of students enrolled is higher than most of the universities. There are coaching institutions which claim to have the best students as their alumni. I have often come across even the top ranking students who have told me, "I stand no chance because I have not joined any coaching institution this year" – a menace which is sadly acknowledged even by senior faculty members of the professional institutes.

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We may denounce these coaching institutions as teaching shops responsible for "commercialization" but why blame them? They are a response to social demands which institutions of higher learning have failed to meet. Their success raises a fundamental question: Why do students trust these institutions more then their schools, colleges and universities? Indeed, so great is their demand and consequent pressure on the limited seats available that some of these coaching institutions too conduct tests for admission and, in some of them at least, none getting less then 70 to 80% marks in the qualifying examination stands any chance of admission. The ugly side

is that most of the teachers in these coaching institutions are the same as in the regular colleges. The major difference is that they take their obligation more seriously in these so called “teaching shops” and get paid twice or thrice the wages they would normally get in a regular institution.

As if this damage done to the system of higher education was not enough, in our new found enthusiasm for so called “centralized common merit” we have introduced a series of parallel examinations after graduation and post graduation. Separate civil services examinations after graduation were introduced long back, notwithstanding the debate whether the qualifying degree to make a candidate eligible to sit in for these examination should be graduation or higher secondary. D. S. Kothari Commission did recommend de-linking of these examinations from the university degrees in the hope that such a step would reduce the burden on limited seats in higher education and hence help improve the quality of education. And now we are caught in another debate, namely whether we should at all permit graduates from technical and professional colleges to sit in these examinations? So long as the pay scales at the beginning and towards the end as well as opportunities for promotion in between differ in different services, it will not be proper to deny professional students, who in the present lopsided system represent the cream in the society, this opportunity. Indeed, once the entry is through open competition, it hardly matters. The competitive examinations have a logic, a pedagogy and methodology of their own and one’s success is clearly linked to how clever one is in handling it. It may or may not have any relations with the skills or the scholarship you acquired as an undergraduate.

The culmination of this process was reached with the introduction of NET for recruitment to teaching positions and various other examinations for research scholarships and fellowships leading to devaluation of our own post graduate degrees. I remember my own young days when we were required to be in constant touch with our teachers. We had to attend our classes and write our tutorials seriously. Our prospects to enter academic life largely depended on the reputation we acquired in the course of our interaction with our teachers and peers. The entire process of teaching and learning had a sacred quality of Yagna in which both teachers and taught participated. But today, thanks to the system we have created, a system where a student doesn't have to attend

his classes or tutorials or even take his teachers seriously as long as he is able to manage 55% marks, which is not difficult these days when even the first class in social sciences and humanities are in hundreds. If he fails to secure 55% marks he can avail of another chance and improve division in the subsequent year. While competing for a position in any post graduate examination, the least that is expected is that I shall be well versed in all the subjects listed in the syllabus, for NET all that I have to do is to master a few topics which may or may not have any relevance to the subjects I have specialized or my potential for research. We have literally ensured recruitment not only on the basis of fragmented knowledge but also on the basis of outdated knowledge. NET curriculum is worked out in terms of uniformity and not on the basis of what may be academically relevant today. There is as yet no empirical evidence to show that introduction of NET has improved the quality of teachers. And even here human ingenuity knows no bounds. We have developed guidebooks and pass books as well as coaching institutes. Since examinations are for the clever, the student depending on these books is likely to score better than those who have genuine thirst for scholarship. In any case, these examinations are too inadequate to judge my research potential which depends not on my capacity to reproduce what is written in the books but my ability to ask new and awkward questions in search for innovation and creativity. No amount of sophistry will do to convince me so take my post graduate training seriously when I know that it has only limited relevance to my future life prospects.

The same disease of uniformity, mediocrity and over centralization affects research and research institutes. There was a time when post graduate degree was considered good enough as a qualifying degree for pursuing research. Unable to maintain standards at the post graduate level, we devised M.Phil program creating enormous burden on already tottering university finances as well as increasing one year span for any serious student wanting to take up research as his vocation. I remember that when I was a student at Cambridge (U.K) there was a great debate whether Cambridge should have an MA degree after their "Tripos." The motion in its favour was turned down by the University senate on the ground that there were not enough funds for starting a new degree. Instead, a message went across the university community that if

standards were declining, every effort should be made to stop that decline rather than look for easy solutions in terms of extra-ordinary remedies. I wonder whether introduction of M. Phil has done anything different from what an improved version of M.A. couldn't have done. It hasn't made any substantial difference to the quality of Ph.D. research. There are individuals who make outstanding or useful contribution at this stage but the overall quality of thesis in our universities leaves much to be desired. There is a standard joke about Ph.D. degrees. The quality has been so much diluted that I have often heard people saying "The Ph.D. degrees are awarded not to the student but to the supervisor." I repeat, this is not to deny that there are good Ph.D. thesis. But in most cases where the Ph.D. is a matter of routine after registration, it is these good scholarly contributions which get drowned and go unnoticed in the vast ocean of mediocrity.

To this general approach of looking for extra-ordinary remedies research institutions are no exceptions. In developed countries best universities are both teaching and research institutions. In our case we created national laboratories because in a young developing but resource scarce country we could not make available most of the facilities required for research to the universities. These laboratories were perceived as some sort of central facilities. The success of Nuclear Science Centre is a case in point. But in due course of time, these institutions became exclusive preserves of the insiders, developed their own bureaucracies and siphoned off major funds earmarked for research. One of the basic conditions of good research is that we shall continue to ask new questions and where could these questions emerge, naturally and spontaneously, except in the environs of a class room, in which both teachers and taught, the old and the young, intermingled in a spirit of partnership. Research has suffered because it has become divorced from teaching learning process. Teaching has suffered because some of the finest minds who couldn't ignite the brains of the young found exit from the universities to these institutes. Doubtless, we do come across some glimpses of intellectually brilliant and robust science, but it is doubtful whether it is a product of these institutions or the opportunities most of these scientists have had to work in the best institutions and laboratories abroad.

The same prospective was extended to social sciences, history and philosophy. Side by side of the UGC and The Indian

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Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, we created Indian Council of Social Science Research, Indian Council of Historical Research, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, Council for Technical Education and so on. These Councils in turn, have created research institutions outside the university system ostensibly committed to excellence in research. Some of these institutions have some of the finest minds as their faculty. These individuals have without doubt made substantial contribution to the growth of knowledge in their respective fields. But we have never asked who benefits? Certainly not the students or the higher education system. In a country where there are 7 million students enrolled in higher education the impact of such institutions is negligible. Indeed, in my own view it is negative, for these institutions drain away whatever meager resources social sciences and humanities could have within the system of higher education where most students are. These resources could easily be utilized for improvement in the quality of undergraduate education. Moreover when these institutions tempt good scholars to desert universities, the students are the losers. Our general approach has been that if the Departments of Economics are not performing, let us create institutions of development studies or policy studies. If the Law faculty is diseased, let us create national law school, little realizing that one Nariman or Ashok Desai will not make any difference to the practice of law and stem the rot in the system of justice, unless we seriously address ourselves to the task of improving average students of law faculty. This applies no less to other disciplines too.

Part III

I don't wish to belittle the basic problems which gave rise to these examinations. These tests were devised to compensate for deficiencies of a highly diversified system of sub-standard universities and colleges which emerged in the wake of massive expansion of higher education. The expansion created an atmosphere of uncertainty in which it became difficult to find a common denominator and place universities and colleges on the scale in terms of their academic standing. There are universities and universities and the variance in their standards of teaching and research is mind boggling. But unfortunately the solution we have found is worse than the disease. The disease is that the universities and other institutions of higher

learning are not performing signalling function for the society. There is no certainty in their program, no guarantee about the quality of their product. In addition there are certain institutions which could be termed, to borrow a phrase from international relations, “rogue institutions”, out to subvert every norm of educational propriety and excellence. They habitually and shamelessly pursue all kinds of evil practices. But instead of addressing ourselves to regulating their deviant behavior, we have created a system which devalues diversity in the name of uniformity and centralization, a system in which even the best are forced to compromise their standards so that they become part of the general system.

Uniformity and centralization are both arch enemies of creativity and excellence. Teaching and learning can yield results only when teachers decide what is to be taught and the pupil is evaluated on the basis of his performance in relation to what has been taught. We have created a system in which there is a dissonance between what is mentioned in the syllabus and what is actually taught in the classes on the one hand, and the basis on which students are finally evaluated, on the other. Added to this is the fact that while there is an explosion of knowledge taking place every second, syllabi, even in the best of our universities, take years and even decades to change. To top it all, now we have created a system in which there is no scope for diversity, experimentation and innovation: the entire system must sub-serve the requirements of centrally devised tests. The sordid result is that even in the best institutions the intimacy between the teachers and the taught as also the search for excellence and innovation take a back seat, and hence society is not sure of the quality of our product.

In our search for uniformity and standardization, we have become victims of centralization, uniformity and bureaucratization. A sound education system cannot be created on the basis of these characteristics. It can not be created in terms of equality either. In pursuit of excellence distinctions are necessary and inevitable. There was an obligation laid on us to improve every university and college and bring them at par with the best. We have instead ensured that the best become the worst, if only to survive.

There has been undoubtedly democratization in the university life. We have enlarged the parameters of participation by creating staff council and committees and devising the novel scheme of “rotation of headship.” But in this process we have

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ignored the need for leadership as the basic condition of a well functioning democratic system. If all the teachers irrespective of their background and academic contribution get the same salary or play the same role in the decision making process, it is too much to expect excellence to flourish. In our mistaken zeal for equality after introduction of the merit promotion scheme particularly, we have promoted everyone and put them on equal academic level.

Reforms designed to improve the quality of education have led to chaos in which the best academicians have either voluntarily abdicated their role or have been pushed into background. Today every other virtue counts except excellence. It is not that there are no good teachers but in the absence of effective academic leadership, the so called “democratic participation” has made the entire system dysfunctional. Every institution is forced to conform to general norms and standards. The best must redesign themselves not in terms of their own vision but in terms of the vision set at the level of the median. No wonder that most decisions are unrelated to the larger purpose of academic life. No wonder that mediocrity and populism rules the roost. No wonder that there is a complete breakdown of the system of rewards and punishment.

Part IV

So far we have argued that there is a need to restore the signaling function to the university. In a nut-shell, there is a need to give an element of reliability to our process of certification. But in the present context reliability alone will not be sufficient. We shall have to make our education relevant too. The new and expanding economy demands expertise in different public services which the older universities and college are unable to offer at the required pace. Today, there is a mismatch between university degrees and the job market. Universities produce graduates which the market doesn't require. What the market requires to expand itself, universities hardly produce. That is one reason why universities exist on the periphery of the community. The public hardly cares about what goes on within the four walls of the campus. That is one reason why we are so low in public estimation. Lest I be misunderstood, I don't wish to belittle the importance of traditional liberal arts or science degrees. These degrees are going to remain the warp and woof of any educational

system. Every society requires poets and authors, scientists and men of vision to sustain its civilization and culture. Where from these inspirations can come except from the university academia committed to the idea of search for truth, beauty and goodness. How can society progress unless there are inquisitive minds asking new questions ranging from the origin of the cosmos to the place of man in it. If today there is distrust of university degrees it is largely, as explained above, in terms of their unreliability. Indeed, the process of economic liberalization is giving rise to demand for young men and women who can analyze with vigor, write well and plan things in global terms. Our graduates can fill in the vacuum. The problem is that the public would rather rely upon a student from a public school than from a university. Public is not sure whether a university student can even draft a letter well. This applies not only to writing in English but also in vernacular and Hindi; likewise the shopkeepers are not sure whether commerce graduates have the skill to manage even the basic accounts.

We also require to wed the system to development of job-skills. Recent circular of the UGC for add on course is a welcome step. But there is every danger that in the present setup it will blur the distinction between a university and a polytechnic. What needs to be done is to integrate the skill oriented component within the existing degree structure. We can easily do so by adopting credit system so that students have a choice to choose the course in terms of their own career ambition. This will enable the system to create a fine balance between theoretical and practical knowledge. This also will produce young people committed to the idea of both a decent human being and a good citizen. In a system in which vested interests are deeply entrenched a change of this kind however, it will not be easy.

We have created complex politico-bureaucratic system which seems to grind on and on without any purpose. The crisis of economy also gets translated into crisis of education. However, the process of liberalization and globalization sweeping across economies of the world seems to have opened up new possibilities. While liberalization has opened up economy, the world of educational services remains shackled to the old order of controls and regulations. New institutions have emerged but they are yet to find legitimacy in the system. They are often accused of “privatization” and

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“commercialization.” We know that some of these institutions have many deficiencies. The process of liberalization has led to commercialization, corruption and even daylight robberies. The recent revelations about the undesirable practices followed by some of the private colleges in the South have highlighted these ugly features and yet the process is irrevocable. We tend to forget that the emergence of these institutions is itself a response to the felt needs of the society where existing institutions are either too inadequate or lack quality. Indeed, since education is a service sector there is every case for opening up education sector to market forces. We have nothing to fear from liberalization or privatization. Liberalization does not mean handing over education to a capitalist or a body of capitalists. The expanding economy to sustain itself will require huge public investments. For various reasons the state is unable to do so. It has not even met the primary obligation of providing compulsory elementary education to all so far. So long as academic decisions remain insulated from the pressures of donors, there are no dangers. Moreover, around 54000 students migrate every year to universities in the USA alone causing a severe drain on our own resources. India’s forex outgo towards payment of education services has shot up from \$61 million 1999-2000 to \$ 122 million - 2001-2002 (The Times of India 29 July 2003). Moreover, only 7% of those who pass higher secondary examination are able to enter portals of higher education. In this light, it would be prudent to mobilize funds from whatever source we can. Every effort has to be made to ensure that needs of economy are met and we are able to retain foreign reserves by creating world class institutions. This will not happen unless we open up education sector to private sources as well as good foreign universities.

The shape which private institutions have taken is itself a natural consequence of scarcity and mediocrity created by the present system. Once we have an open, expanding, competitive system committed to meeting the rising skill - needs of expanding economy, inefficient institutions will be automatically weeded out. In any case most universities and colleges are in a shambles. The proper word to describe their condition is not “disintegration” but “degeneration” without any hope of redemption in the near future. How long shall we keep the institutions alive on artificial oxygen and that, too, at the expense of the public exchequer? Lest I be misunderstood,

let me make it clear that I am not saying that the state should withdraw from higher education. In a developing country like India the state has to remain the major player. Indeed, investment in higher education is an investment in the state itself. But given the circumstances of our limited resources, there is every reason to open up education sector. There will be problems of travail but these institutions will survive in an open competitive environment only so long as students will perceive their need and relevance otherwise the chances are that they will be forced to wind up. Creativity will spring more readily from innovation and experimentation than from the status quo. The problems faced by socially and economically deprived students are real. But as indicated earlier, the best way to make them beneficiaries of the process is by evolving schemes of scholarships which will ensure that all talented students have access to the best institutions and are also compensated adequately for the deficiencies of early education. Governments and other agencies must put in place cushions to take care of the problem.

In the wake of the mushroom growth of private institutions, entry of foreign universities, and reckless setting up of private universities as a result of myopic legislation in some of our states (Chattisgarh is a case), there is an increasing demand that the UGC and other regulatory bodies must step in with a heavy hand to check the rot. The University Grants Commission was created to maintain and co-ordinate minimum standards. Instead of re-designing the role of Commission in the context of liberalization and globalization, we have created a plethora of institutions like All India Council for Technical Education, IGNOU for distance education and The National Council for Teacher Education. And now in our habit of looking for miracles through creation of extra-ordinary agencies we have discovered that there is no agency to co-ordinate between these bodies.

Most of these bodies tend to be too political and bureaucratic. They also have become victims of standardization and uniformity with the result that the funds are distributed not in terms of quality but in terms of the very fact that the university is enlisted. These bodies have failed to link their grant to the objectives with which these bodies were created. I remember asking one former Vice-Chairman of the UGC to close down a special centre which was not functioning properly. He in his own characteristic way replied, "It is in our power to give but

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not to take away." To me he summed up the general atmosphere of cynicism prevalent in the country. In fact some of these bodies are busy settling the nomenclature of courses and degrees. A few academics selected at random tend to sit in judgment over the university bodies. It is time that we realized that here too standardization is an enemy of change. What we need instead is a flexible system in which participants are evaluated not in terms of what a handful of academic bureaucrats decide but in terms of market value of the services. While the best universities in the world experiment with all sorts of courses and course combinations, ranging from philosophy to physics to neuro-sciences, to produce fodder for the expanding economy, these bodies appear to be settling scores in terms of who will control what and how? The famous case of BITS (Pilani) in relation to the AICTE brings into bold into the dangers inherent in an over regulated system.

Indeed, we must make a clear distinction between control and regulation. In a system in which the actors enjoy relative autonomy, some sort of regulation in terms of minimum standards may be necessary. The best way to achieve this would be to introduce greater transparency in the system? Who controls? What are the sources of funding? What is the criteria for taking decision? – These bodies can surely play a role in evaluating different institutions and creating public awareness about them from time to time. They can link their grants to certain minimum levels of performance, a task which they have not been able to accomplish so far. But let us be clear that control beyond a point is counter productive. Too much of it will dampen enthusiasm for innovation and creativity.

We must not deprive universities of their autonomy to use their long experience in judging the means to disseminate and provide knowledge. We may have initial setbacks but in the long run both the market and the public perception will provide surest guide to their status. Let us not forget that the best universities like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Yale had their origin in opposition to established systems and orthodoxies rather than in conformity to them. Universities ought to be places where new ideas emerge and orthodoxies are challenged. Autonomy is not a privilege we grant to academics, it is the very basis of a vibrant university life.

We in India are fond of miracles. We tend to look for extraordinary solutions for routine things. The field of higher education has been no exception. The problem is that the universities have failed to perform signalling functions on account of steep decline in standards; we have delinked our degrees completely from entry into professional and the job market. Our crisis is organically linked to increasing irrelevance of our process of certification leading to alienation of participants within and disenchantment of public outside. What is needed is the restoration of this signalling function of the university linking it to the needs of the community. We need a new engagement with the community. We need to reassure it that our certification is both reliable and relevant, that our pupils have necessary competence for which our degrees stand, that these young men and women can be trusted for different jobs and skills.

A reaffirmation of the signalling alone will redeem our public image and provide us protection against political and bureaucratic interference. This becomes all the more necessary in the present context of expanding economy. Even graduates of social sciences and humanities will be in much greater demand because service sector is expanding at an enormous pace in our society. This sector will need people with decent degrees, who can write, compose and analyse in terms of national and international trends. It is only with the restoration of the first rate teaching and learning experience linked to skills required by the market that the universities will acquire a new dignity and find a new place for themselves in the life of the community.

The changing landscape of higher education requires greater initiative and openness, innovation and experimentation. It is not clear whether we have the necessary will, direction or vision. There is a climate of cynicism resulting from loss of self-esteem on the one hand and legitimacy in society on the other. The internal rivalry and squabbles within the University fraternity have also traumatized it. The task that lies ahead of us calls for a new vision and courage, ingenuity and creativity.

Profile

Professor Vrajendra Raj Mehta



Vrajendra Raj Mehta, Ph.D. (Cantab) is the member secretary of the Foundation for Academic Excellence and Access (FAEA). He is also the Vice-Chairman of the Executive committee of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

Prof. Mehta was earlier Vice-Chancellor of University of Delhi (1995-2000). He was educated at the Universities of Delhi and Cambridge (U.K.). He began his academic career as a Lecturer in Political Science in Delhi. He was later appointed Associate Professor at Himachal Pradesh University and today has the distinction of being a University Professor of over twenty seven years standing. He also became Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and a Member of the Executive Council at the Himachal Pradesh University. In 1978 he was invited to become a Professor in the Department of Political Science, Rajasthan University, Jaipur. He was also Head of the Department of Political Science, Coordinator of UGC sponsored ULP Programme in Political Science, Rajasthan University, Hon. Director of the Centre of Gandhian Studies, University of Rajasthan. Besides being Professor of Political Science, he was also Director of the Institute of Correspondence Studies, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur. He was also Chief Warden, Rajasthan University for two years.

Professor Mehta was the First Vice-Chancellor of Kota Open University from 1987 to 1990. He was also Vice-Chancellor of Jodhpur University from 1991-93.

Professor Mehta was the Vice-President, International Association of University Presidents, and Chair of the South Asian Council (1997-99). He was also elected Academic Director of the National Office of the International University Programme "World Academy: Plato", Greece. He is a Member of the Council of Association of Commonwealth Universities (U.K.). He is also a Member of the Governing Boards of the Association of Universities of Asia and Pacific Region and also of the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning. He was a special invitee at the UNESCO Advisory Group on Higher Education 1996.

Widely travelled, Professor Mehta was a Commonwealth

Scholar at Cambridge 1967-70; Commonwealth Academic Staff Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies Oxford, 1982-83; International Visitor to the American Universities 1984 and Shastri Visiting Professor at the University of Calgary (Canada), 1985 and Visitor to the Open University (U.K) 1988, and has delivered lectures at important Institutes and universities in India and abroad. He was also member of the Government of India Delegation to the "intellectual meet" in the USSR which was organised as a part of the Festival of India. Japan Foundation invited him to visit Japan for a short term under its international Cultural Exchange Program in 1997. Professor Mehta used this opportunity to strengthen University of Delhi's academic relations with various Universities in Japan.

Professor Mehta was Editor and Chairman Advisory Board for the Second Survey of Political Science commissioned by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and was thrice a member of the UGC Advisory Panel in Political Science. He has been a member of several important committees at different levels in the Universities, the State Government, Central Government, UGC and IGNOU. He was a member of the Standing Committee of the Association of Indian Universities (1995-97). He was a member of the General Body of All India Institute of Medical Sciences, National Assessment and Accreditation Council, Bangalore; National Law School of India University, Bangalore. He was also member of the Trust of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts. He is also a member of the Indian Council of Social Science Research; The General Council of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and he was elected as Vice-President of the Association of Indian Universities for the year 2000. Prof. Mehta worked as Consultant to the Ford Foundation for about six months.

He is also member of the Governing body of The Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. He is also a member of the Governing body of the Centre for the study of the civilizations. Recently he was elected as its treasurer.

Professor Mehta was awarded the V.K.R.V. Rao Award for outstanding contribution to Political Science for the year 1983; Swami Pranavananda Award by the University Grants Commission of India for the year 1989; Nahar Samman Puruskar by Rajasthan Welfare Association for outstanding contribution in the field of Education for the year 1990; Rajiv

Gandhi Sadbhavana Award 1995 for scoring a string of inspiring achievements in education by Indian Solidarity Council; Rajiv Gandhi Excellence Award in appreciation of his services towards Nation by Shromani Institute; Super Achievers of India Award 1995 for outstanding services, achievements, and contribution by Front of National Progress; Rajiv Gandhi National Unity Award for Excellence 1996 by All Indian National Unity Conference, New Delhi; Bharat Vikas Excellence Award 1996 by Council for National Development, New Delhi and Shromani Award 1996 by the Shromani Institute and Dr. Ambedkar Distinguished Services Award by Bhartiya Dalit Sahitya Academy. World Academy Plato has decided to include his name in the 2001 Famous people of the 20th Century. The International Biographical Centre of Cambridge, England has nominated him as International Man of the Millennium, for the Twentieth Century Award for Achievement and Honorary Member of its Advisory Council. American Biographical Institute (U.S.A.) has nominated him for 2000 Millennium Medal of Honor, 1999 Platinum Record for Exceptional Performance and also as Man of the year 1997/1998. Recently he has been awarded CSR Gold Award: Super Brain of India 1999.

A prolific writer, he has authored five books, three of which have been widely reviewed and praised all over the world. These include *Beyond Marxism: Towards an Alternative Perspective* (1978) , *Ideology, Modernisation and Political Thought* (1993). He was Managing Editor of *Political Science Review* and *Rajya Shastra Sameeksha* for four years. He has also been a member *Journal, Government and Opposition* (U.K.) since 1984.

Soka University, Japan, has honoured Professor Mehta with Soka University's "Award of Highest Honour" and Medal. He has also been awarded School of Oriental Philosophy Scholarly Achievement Award by the same University.

Professor Mehta was also President of Delhi Annuvrat Samiti during 1996-98.