ARE THEY THE NEXT HARVARD IN WAITING?

A perceptible shift is seen in the way the young breed of entrepreneurs look at the universities they have inherited. Is it for the better? Careers360 explores....

B Mahesh/Narla

Close your eyes and think of great universities of the world, Harvard, Cambridge, Yale, Stanford, MIT, UC, ISE are some of the names that will immediately come to your mind. And all of them are in the private sector.

For a moment close your eyes and think about great universities in India. IITs, JNU, Delhi University, AMU, National Law School University, Bangalore and others come to your mind. All of them are in the public sector. Quiz Dr. Venkat Rangan, VC of Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham on this dichotomy, pat comes the reply, “Think about India 25 years back. The top 10 companies were in the public sector. Think about 2012 and 7 out of 10 are in the private sector”.

Will the story repeat in the education domain? The numbers as on date are fuzzy. While some private players like Amity, Amrita and Jamia Hamdard have been front runners, their publication record leaves a lot to be desired. And unlike the public sector companies, the public sector universities, at least in the top order show no signs of slowing down. So what would it take the private institutions to crack the code?

Can great universities be made on purpose?

Great universities are not created ab initio asserts UGC Chairman Dr Ved Prakash in a detailed interview elsewhere in this issue. World over great universities have evolved over time, may be centuries with periods of peaks and troughs. The old grandees like Oxford and Cambridge have nearly 8-10 centuries behind them. Even the new kids like Stanford and MIT are a century and half young. However, examples of ab initio, like Hong Kong University of Science & Technology comes to mind immediately. Set up in 1991 with substantial funding, the university raced to excellence within a short period of ten years. National University of Singapore and Tsinghua are other names, though both are of older vintage.

Prof. VV Krishna, Senior Academic at Jawaharlal Nehru University is much more emphatic. “India needs at least 10 such universities in the coming decades and they can be created at 1/3rd of the global cost,” he asserts. Concurs Prof. Venkat Rangan, “I would rather that India needs about 20 such universities to be set up across the country and they can be set up at a cost of say 20,000 crore rupees.” It is eminently doable, he says. The question is will the new breed of private universities, that have the critical mass, make the transition?

What does it take to be a great university?

A high concentration of talented academics and students, significant budgets and strategic vision and leadership, is what is needed according to Jamil Salmi, who wrote the report on world class universities, published recently by the World Bank. Add to that regulatory regime, research partnership and culture says Atul Chauhan, President of Amity Group of Institutions.

Talented Academics

Every Vice Chancellor we spoke to was unanimous on this count. And most of them agreed the best still go to public universities. But none of them are giving up. Atul Chauhan has a Scout Programme wherein a team is in place to scout young faculty members, who have completed their PhDs abroad. He is cagey about the numbers achieved though. Manipal University follows a different route. They have announced 20 chair professorships wherein exceptionally good professors are brought...
What we intend to achieve may not be realised in my lifetime. So the objective is to put in the right DNA that will serve the university and its students.

We believe in excellence. Numbers and metrics are important. But what is essential is to instil the hunger to excel in all the people we recruit.

University-level sports and bonding that it generates in a Harvard or Oxford is yet to take root in India. But we will make it happen.

We need to be aware that even if you offer a scholarship to a student, he or she may not have the money to travel to collect the scholarship.

What we have in India are excellent teaching institutions. The shift to being research intensive is a slow and very long drawn process.

More than just the patents and papers, to us university research must be able to solve real-life problems and bring smiles to people's faces.

"Our endeavour is to continue attracting outstanding faculty members (both regular and visiting) from all over the globe," asserts Dr. Rajeev Shorey, Founding President and Advisor NIT, another private university.

Dr. Nikhil Sinha, Vice Chancellor, Shiv Nadar University is clear about it. He is investing in young faculty members and is willing to wait until they grow up and produce results. Yes, the Associate Professor level positions are the most challenging to him.

Exceptional students

This is the second big challenge. "Each year at Manipal we want to see if the average quality of our intake is better than last year's," asserts Dr. Pai. Amity University has a scholarship programme wherein any candidate with 90% and above in 10+2 from CBSE Board becomes eligible for a full scholarship. Nearly 2% of the whole student body is on full scholarship. If we take their advertisements at face value, about 350 students out of 55,000 would be top scorers in their school board. But this is not enough to create a critical mass. VIT University, Vellore has an Ignite Scholarship. But Sekar Vishwanathan, Vice President, VIT cautions, "We once announced a rural outreach programme where we offered 100% fee waiver to each student who topped the 10+2 exams in all districts of Tamil Nadu. When called for counselling few turned up. Later we found that half of them did not even have money to travel to Vellore to avail of the scholarship."

All of them are commendable initiatives, but considering the fact that most of the private universities charge fees which is 4 to 22 times higher than corresponding public sector player, the costs really are prohibitive. So, good students would always prefer to go to a highly subsidised public sector university. A foreign language BA programme at Amity would cost about Rs. 1 lakh per annum excluding other costs while a student at School of Languages, JNU, New Delhi would study at just Rs. 240 per annum.

Unless private universities find a way to subsidise education, unless the government moves out of its Brahmanic mindset of not touching private players, the scenario might not change. And that takes us to funding.

Significant budgets

As on date, the only university that appears to be able to breach the barrier is Azim Premji University. With its parent foundation sitting with an endowment in excess of USD 4 billion, it is the only institution comparable to the best in the West in terms of resource availability.

Harring APU, NIT, and Shiv Nadar University, which are backed by big corporates, most of the other top tier private universities are primarily educational empires. And they bank on student tuitions to fund themselves to a large extent. Both Atul Chauhan as well as Dr. Pai are candid in admitting this and also acknowledging that this has to change.

Two sources are cited by them. Competitive state funding is one source and endowments are another. If both the centre and state governments create a transparent mechanism for research funding, and open it to public and private then the dependency on student fee will come down. Industry funding is another source; all agree, which needs to be tapped much more. All of them cite partnerships with industry as a sign of bigger things to come. Some of them do get funds from DST, IIT, etc. But what they lament is the absence of a system.

Alumni - the next generation

Almost all private university players we spoke to agreed on the need for alumni endowments. Atul Chauhan made an interesting observation about the role of sports which is creating an intra-university bonding and pride when it comes to other competitors. A la the famous quote in Da Vinci Code "In which year did a Harvard student last outrow an Oxfordman at Henley?"

The fierce pride that competitive sports generates in a US university and the everlasting bonds it creates with the alma mater goes a long way when it comes to alumni funding. Sunil Bharti Mittal, another educationist, has a different take on the same. He contended, most rich Indians in the last generation had seen acute poverty and shortage. The young entrepreneurs of the current generation have seen none. So, as the sense of entitlement rises so does the propensity to give back.

But either way it must rise, so that the universities are able to reach a level wherein, as Dr. Philip Altbach says, the
Students relaxing at the KIIT University campus in Bhubaneswar

Students at the campus cafeteria catching up with friends

SRM University has four campuses in Tamil Nadu and one in Morinagar

Multidisciplinary MECCA The Shiv Nadar University campus in NCR will have eight schools by 2014

Quick Bites Students enjoy a meal in the spacious cafeteria at the Shiv Nadar University campus

Present in every graduation photograph Yet has not graduated out ever
GOOD EDUCATION ELUSIVE RESEARCH

Some of them are very good teaching colleges. They provide employable graduates and feed the ICT industry. But a few of them now realise the need to move beyond teaching alone. Godspeed to them.

With over 1.5 million sanctioned engineering seats every year, India is the largest producer of technical manpower in the world, and 3/4th of it comes from private sector. The state of Andhra Pradesh leads the pack followed by institutions in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka. In the last decade and a half, many of the established engineering colleges obtained Deemed to be University status. Some of them are VIT, Vellore, Karunya University, Coimbatore; Jaypee Institute of Information Technology Noida and IIIT University, Bhubaneswar among others.

Barring a few, many private universities are constrained by a lack of academic flexibility. Another important measure for assessing the overall performance of the university is the NAAC score. VIT Vellore and Thapar University, Patiala have got a score of 3.25 and 3.15 respectively. IIIT Hyderabad, however, is in the forefront owing to the highest NAAC score of 3.4 among private engineering universities.

The fact that out of the 65-odd deemed universities that focus on engineering domain, only three of them could get four-star status, shows the distance most of these universities need to travel.

Among private universities Shiv Nadar University, Dadri; Jaypee University of Information Technology, Solan;

A nation is what it is because of the education it offers. So I thought that I should do my bit to transform the nation by offering quality education at par with the best institutions of the world.

The result is VIT Vellore

Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of Information and Communication Technology, Gandhinagar, are some of the engineering-focussed institutions that are young and look promising. The IIITs set up in PPP mode have taken off in a big way and some of them like IIIT, Hyderabad and IIIT, Bangalore are way ahead of the rest.

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