Creating Responsible and Engaged Students

Pankaj Mittal

Since 6 BC, when the first university of the world was established in Takshila in India, higher education in India has been integrating advanced knowledge and skills with larger social concerns. Apart from teaching and research, a prime concern of universities is to engage with the community and to contribute towards the development of society. Much emphasis is placed on the values of education by complementing curricular instruction for shaping future generations and enabling active engagement with society. The emphasis has been on holistic development of the student leading to complete realization and liberalization of oneself. To quote Swami Vivekananda, a well-known Indian scholar, *“Education is not the amount of information that we put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas. If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library. If education is identical with information, the libraries are the greatest sages of the world and encyclopaedia are the greatest Rishis”*.

1 Genesis

The idea of involving students in the task of national service in India dates back to the times of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation. The central theme which he tried to impress upon his student audience time and again was that they should always keep social responsibility at the forefront. The first duty of the students should be not to treat their period of study as one of the opportunities for indulgence in intellectual

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luxury, but to prepare themselves to offer dedicated services to those who provided the sinews of the nation with the national goods and services, so essential to society. Advising them to form a living contact with the community in whose midst their institution is located, he suggested that instead of undertaking academic research on economic and social disability, the students should do “something positive so that the life of the villagers might be raised to a higher material and moral level”.

The setting up of the National Service Scheme (NSS) by India in 1969, the centenary year of Gandhiji, was a concrete manifestation of this emphasis with the motto, ‘not me but you’. This was in the form of ‘adding on’ community engagement to teaching and learning. The NSS, which exists in every university in the country and in some of the undergraduate colleges, has about 3.86 million students enrolled as volunteers. Many worthwhile projects are undertaken by the NSS such as Adoption of Villages, Cleanliness Drive, Afforestation, Health Camps, Blood Donation, Sustainable Development, Mass Literacy, National Integration and Social Harmony.

2 Education as a Tool for Social Transformation and Sustainable Development

Today in the 21st century, the whole world has realized that apart from individual prosperity, education must also lead to the attainment of social transformation and sustainable development. The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals designed by the United Nations are a blueprint to achieving a better and more sustainable future for all. The goals of ensuring inclusive development, democratic governance and sustainable growth can be meaningfully achieved through a process of broadening and deepening the involvement of institutions of higher education; in societal development, and in the process, the idealism and dynamism of youth can also be harnessed in a more meaningful manner. Community engagement helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice, in order to make theory more relevant and practice more informed, where community knowledge systems are seen as legitimate partners in the process of development of innovation and trained human resources. It also promotes deeper interactions between higher education institutions and local communities for identification and solution of real-life problems faced by the communities in a spirit of mutually agreed interest and interaction and facilitates partnerships between local communities and institutions of higher education so that students and teachers can learn from local knowledge and wisdom, thereby democratizing knowledge production. There is a need to engage higher institutions with local communities and make curriculum, courses and pedagogies more appropriate to achieving the goals of national development; catalyse acquisition of values of public service and active citizenship amongst students and undertake research projects which are need-based and community-oriented, including community as research partners, leading to policy formulation for societal development.

3 Forms of Community Engagement

To achieve the objective of societal development through community engagement, it is important that an institutional mechanism is developed to adopt a holistic and functional approach to community engagement based on core principles such as; articulating and respecting mutually agreed interests and needs of both communities and institutions; encompassing all the three functions of institutions of higher education—teaching, research and outreach/practice/extension; creating institutional engagements cutting across disciplines; giving credits to students for participation in community engagement projects while integrating it into their evaluation systems; and by making it a part of the performance assessments of teachers, researchers and administrators in institutions.

The need of the hour is integration of knowledge – bringing together education and work, theory and practice, university and society. To be an integral part of the objectives of higher education, university-community linkages have to be integrated into the processes of making and sharing knowledge, into teaching-learning, research and practice. Strengthening higher education-community linkages means that we place the connection between community and the university at the heart of the educational process in order to ensure the continuing relevance of higher education. There can be multiple ways of institutionalizing such engagements. Firstly, learning can be linked with community service; in which students and teachers apply their knowledge and skills in a chosen community to improve the lives of people in that community. This can be achieved through ‘adoption’ of a specific village or slum and then providing engagement opportunities to students from various disciplines and courses to apply their knowledge to address the challenges of that specific community. Secondly, we can link research with community knowledge in which joint research projects can be devised in partnerships with the communities. Through this, the community’s own knowledge is integrated, systematised and integrated into the design and conduct of the research. Thirdly, the knowledge available with students and teachers in various disciplines can be shared with the local community to realize its developmental aspirations, secure its entitlements and rights from various public and private agencies. These can take the forms of surveys, camps, training, study reports, public hearings, policy briefs, engagement with urban homeless shelters, teaching and health services in poor communities, to give but few. Fourthly, in consultation with local community-based organisations, institutions of higher education can develop new courses or modify existing ones by enriching the curriculum through locally-appropriate subject matter; and create new, locally-appropriate educational programmes of interest to a new generation of students. Fifthly, local community elders, women leaders, tribal and civil society practitioners having enormous practical knowledge of a wide variety of issues—from agriculture and forestry to child-rearing, micro-planning, water management and project management—can be invited to co-teach courses both in the classroom and in the field and lastly, in consultation with student unions, associations and clubs, student-initiated learning projects which have a social impact can be supported. Such social innovation projects by students can also have meaningful

links to curriculum and courses. In practice, these different forms can be integrated together in an organic and dynamic manner for each institution and its surrounding communities.

4 Paradigms of Community Engagement

Community engagement should not be seen as an 'addition' to learning and teaching, but intrinsic to it. This is essential if education is to be a vehicle for social transformation and attainment of social justice, rather than as the means to individual prosperity alone. For this, institutions of higher education need to place their learning and teaching in the communities in which they are located and to harness the idealism and dynamism of the youth.

We can explore the possibility of creating an Alliance for Community Engagement (ACE), a membership-based network primarily engaged in promoting ideas and practices of community engagement throughout the country. This mechanism has to be an independent ACE that comprises champions of such engagement from the sectors of higher education (including students) and civil society. It can serve as a platform for community engagement by institutions of higher education and also act as a vehicle for sharing knowledge and good practices. The Alliance can encourage and be a catalyst for new initiatives in community engagement for a wide variety of post-secondary institutions in the country by regular sharing of information; disseminating existing and emerging models, approaches, best practices and lessons of change and transformation through various media; create a web-based platform for the dissemination and communication of practices and models, as well innovations and challenges; create mechanisms for sharing such experiences and knowledge through national and regional conferences, workshops, field exposures and newsletters and web-based platforms; evolve benchmarks and standards of quality, monitoring mechanisms and recognition/awards of effective and sustainable community engagements in the country; disseminate knowledge internationally in a proactive and mutually responsive manner; invite, scrutinize and fund innovative proposals from institutions of higher education in respect of fulfilling the above goals; generate new schemes of funding as per requirements, including student and researcher fellowships, engaged scholars' fellowships, etc.; create funding schemes for community-university research projects, and guidelines for promoting the same through various existing research funding councils; and define policy elaborations and criteria for effective integration of such goals in the national, provincial and local systems of higher education in the country. The Alliance can act as a motivator, facilitator, encourager and recognizer of new initiatives in this field in a spirit of partnership; it can generate demands for engagement; and it can act as a funding mechanism pressure group for implementation of policy in this regard.

Flexibility in terms of devising new systems of curriculum design, review and pedagogy that incorporate elements of community engagement should be encouraged. Universities and other higher education institutions should be provided with

the autonomy to make their programmes, courses and initiatives more relevant to the needs of society. Such curricula flexibility would enable enhancement of the quality of knowledge produced by the university about communities and also help create new programmes. Student-initiated community engagement work (including internships, fellowships, and course-work) should be particularly encouraged to leverage the dynamism and idealism of youth. It is also necessary to establish a few institutions which will primarily engage in community-based and common knowledge traditions. These institutions can be linked to vital aspects of community health, community cultures (arts, crafts, music etc.), community practices in sustainable development/natural resources, and other aspects of community knowledge production, application and dissemination.

5 Initiatives at BPS Women's University: A Case Study

The BPS Women's University, a rural women university in Haryana, realized its vision of socially relevant education by empowering women through education. The university is reinforcing its strong nexus with the wider society by setting up activities, programmes and centres that liberate rural women from their physical drudgery and empower them; by enabling them to use their inherent strength and inherited skills for their own and the rural community's welfare, and by preparing them for self-employment through training in all aspects of entrepreneurship. The author, as Vice-Chancellor of the university from 2008 to 2014 undertook several such initiatives.

One of the initiatives was to re-link the university with its social and natural environment by involving women outside the university and their knowledge in diverse fields, and women students of the university with their academic knowledge acquired at the university and their knowledge of life and activities of the local community. It took the university out of the confines of four walls to the larger community outside, particularly the women, and involved them in the knowledge creation and dissemination process by establishing a number of innovative areas of study. Among others, the '*Centre for University Society Interface and Research*' was established to bridge the gap between the university and its local rural community. The disconnect between society and the university was removed by way of carefully designed courses for students in areas like micro-financing, integrated energy resource management and folk medicine which were held on a 50:50 basis, whereby 50 percent of the course was taught in the classrooms and 50 percent in the villages. It was thus a two-way process by which the university was able to both learn from and teach the community at the same time. The curricula of the academic programmes were also tweaked to align them with community engagement. The centre, in collaboration with neighbouring universities, developed small-time technologies for direct use by the rural community such as a machine for making cow dung cakes (cow dung cakes are used as fuel in rural household) and a 'fitness-cum-washing machine' which doesn't need electricity but someone cycling. The centre also adopted some villages from

nearby areas to take care of their overall development in terms of awareness, medical facilities, infrastructure, sanitation, education etc. A state government-funded demonstration centre, based on the Indo-Israel project was set up to demonstrate to the rural community various means of enhancing agricultural production by adopting modern farming techniques of vertical farming in the poly-houses rather than traditional horizontal farming to improve their earnings manifold, thereby, increasing the relevance of education for the rural masses.

6 Involving HEIs in Rural Upliftment

The government of India has also launched 'Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA)', to involve the higher education institutions of the country in the process of indigenous development for self-sufficient and sustainable village clusters. The mission of the UBA is to develop the necessary mechanisms and proper coordination among education institutions, implementation agencies and the grass root level stakeholders to enable effective interventions at field level, holistic development of rural clusters and reorienting academic curricula and research programmes in higher education institutions to align them with development of the local community. The UBA engages the faculty and students of higher education institutions in understanding rural realities, to devise implementation methods for innovative solutions and to leverage the knowledge base of the institutions to devise processes for effective implementation of various government programmes.

7 Conclusion

University Social Responsibility (USR) needs to be created as a formal structure within the higher education system in the pattern of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) with mandatory participation by every institution of higher education. The Indian higher education system, with about 37 million students and 15 million teachers, can make a major impact on programmes of societal development through active and positive engagement with the community.

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