

Education

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● MAKE THE MOST OF ONLINE LEARNING

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We are witnessing the fourth industrial revolution, and (students) should learn about artificial intelligence, machine learning, analytics, blockchain, 3D printing, augmented reality and so on to stay ahead. Today, you have the option of online learning and you all must make the best of it.

● NEW INSTITUTIONS OF IMPORTANCE

A doubtful beginning in the pursuit of global excellence

Much is being hoped by the government of the new IIMs, IITs, AIIMS, NITs, which are expected to be differentiators globally. The reality check, however, unfolds a different story, which creates despair

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CONCERNS ARE IN the air over the lack of quality standards of higher education institutions (HEI) in India, specifically in institutes of 'national importance' such as IITs, IIMs and select central universities. The concern gets magnified looking at global rankings—THE World University Rankings 2018 has just one; QS World University Rankings 2018 has six; and FT Global MBA Ranking 2018 has four Indian institutions. Considering we have over 40,000 HEIs (UGC, AICTE 2016), the percentage works out to 0.000025% (Times), 0.015036% (QS), and 0.11% (FT)—out of 3,500 B-schools. As is evident, the numbers are a pittance. Several authors have published well-researched, well-explained reasons for this malaise. Lack of vision and futuristic outlook, institutions stuck with the old and crippled system, lack of basic

resources, absence of leadership compounded by poor accountability and, above all, the archaic learning environment devoid of present or future realities are a few reasons behind this scenario.

What needs immediate attention is the alarming situation of the new institutions of national importance. Much is being hoped by the government of the new IIMs, IITs, AIIMS, NITs, which are objected to leapfrog and be the differentiators globally. The reality check, however, unfolds a different story, which creates despair.

These new institutions have been made functional right after their creation and are in the age-group of 2-5 years. This rush to make them operational at any cost with zero manpower and capabilities of their own, and without a leader, has resulted into a chaos. Provisions have been made for temporary campuses, and a 'mentor' institution (older IITs, IIMs, NITs) has been entrusted with the responsibility to lay the foundation and make them operational.

Results, so far, are nowhere close to the objective of their creation. For a mentor to do its job, there should be a full-fledged structure and a set of 'people of its own' of the mentee institutions, whom 'an experienced' and 'trusted' (mentor) would 'advise and help'. Forget the inception year, even after 2-5 years of existence, it has been seen that there is neither a structure nor an ecosystem, leadership or employees of their own in many of these new institutions. Incidentally, these institutions are



Illustration: SHYAM

cases of 'copy paste' of mentor institutions—no fruitful outcome, even with so much public money being spent.

What is the way forward? These institutions need to ensure four Ps are in place, i.e. purpose, people, pedestal and pride.

Purpose: In their pursuit of global

excellence, they should have a unique purpose for the youth, the industry, society and for the region/state. Standardisation is not the answer, nor is replicating mentor institutions, which are in an entirely different life-cycle.

People: Leadership, faculty and staff in

any institution form its backbone. There can be no alternative to their ownership and commitment for the institution, and it is this intellectual capital base that shall drive the institution. Hence, not only people are required on a permanent basis, but they should be competent. Mentors often have a short-sighted, stop-gap approach.

Pedestal: Land, building and state-of-the-art infrastructure are the basic platform on which an institution runs. It has been seen there are institutions where even after years land has not been made available, what to speak of buildings and academic infrastructure.

Pride: It is what these institutions should stand for. These new institutions shouldn't be a place for regret. As is happening, we have seen there are cases of students and parents "regretting" the decision to join a few of such institutions.

While these four Ps are macro aspects, at the micro and operational level ITO—input, throughput and output—is critical. The purpose of these institutions should be deciding programme design, curriculum, teaching-learning process, etc. Curriculum should decide on the input of students, faculty. A 'copy paste' job damages the foundation before it is laid. Shortage of permanent faculty is a major setback—visiting faculty cannot support an institution in the long run. The inappropriate mix of input and throughput shows a negative impact on the output, i.e. the skills sets.

There are other critical dimensions,

which can be encapsulated in three Cs.

Competition of the day and rules of the past don't go together. The government has flushed these institutions with rich resources in form of grants and there is no resource crunch as far their projects are concerned. However, the rules and procedures running these institutions are archaic and bureaucratic, holding back decision-making, and are time-consuming. There is a delay and spillover of project time-lines and cost. The corporate sector is actively getting into the field of higher education and has created some quality-oriented institutions with lofty visions.

Capacity building will be required to face this emerging competition. Institutions evolve and excel through capacity building, faculty being the most critical, assisted by staff. Institutes often talk about short supply of quality, which is because appointments are ad hoc and contract-based, and also because they get engaged in non-academic activities.

The third C—'copy paste'—from the old institutions to the new needs to be stopped in this evolving competitive environment. Instead, originality and uniqueness has to be brought in.

An on-site independent audit can help identify problems. Addressing them would require a transformative approach.

The author is professor, Strategy, Birla Institute of Management Technology. Views are personal