India has all the potential to create world-class universities, says C Raj Kumar, Founding Vice Chancellor of OP Jindal Global University (JGU). But it still has many obstacles to overcome.

Building world-class universities in India: institution building for nation building

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An article published in *The Times of India* observed that over 230,000 candidates had applied for 368 positions of peons (office attendants) advertised by the government of Uttar Pradesh. The applicants included those with degrees such as BTech, MSc and MCom besides 255 candidates with PhD degrees.
The debate on the state of affairs of higher education in India ought to be a serious one. It cannot be based upon our reluctance and inability to recognise the institutionalised forms of mediocrity that are deeply embedded in many of our higher education institutions.

There is widespread recognition today that more than ever the higher education institutions in India have a long way to go to achieve the international benchmarks that will help us to promote global excellence.

In an alarming article published in *The Times of India* recently, it was observed that over 23 lakh (230,000) candidates had applied for 368 positions of *peon* (office attendants) advertised by the government of Uttar Pradesh. The applicants included those with degrees such as BTech, MSc and MCom beside 255 candidates with PhD degrees. Many States in India suffer from this situation where there is little correlation between the academic qualifications obtained and the jobs that the candidates are seeking.

The heart of this problem is the poor quality of higher education and the inability of institutions to empower students in fulfilling their career aspirations. The history and evolution of higher education in India demands a careful examination of the reasons for our failure to establish, nurture and develop world-class universities.

The issue of deterioration in academic standards in most Indian universities is indeed a matter of great concern. In this context there is a need to understand and reflect upon what is needed to build world-class universities in India. How are they established, nurtured and developed over the years, decades and centuries? What makes a university world class? What ought to be the parameters to assess the quality of universities and should they vary from society to society? What ought to be the internal governance structure of those universities? What should India do to build world-class universities?

**Institutional vision for educational transformation**

World-class universities are built on the basis of a strong foundation that has an inspiring vision and a mission to fulfil that vision.

The vision should reflect the ideals and aspirations of the university and universities should be created with a strong vision that is built around the needs of a society. But these needs ought to be broad-based and should reflect the collective imagination of a community. The vision of the university should be able to have a farsighted approach towards learning and imagination among faculty and students, but should be also fully conscious of the reality of the university’s existing challenges.

Universities do not become world-class institutions as soon as they are created but evolve to become world-class universities through long years of work pursued by the commitment and dedication of students, faculty and staff.

**Funding and resources for universities**

World-class universities around the world are established and developed through a great deal of commitment of resources. The current system of a one-size-fits-all policy of funding and resource allocation on the basis of this classification of universities needs to be re-examined. There is not enough understanding and realisation that the resources that are required to build world-class universities are significant.

Arguably, the precious resources that need to be available for universities may not, and indeed cannot, come from the state. It is in this context that there is a need for promoting private universities in India. Deterioration in the academic standards of public universities in India is due to a number of factors including, but not limited to, poor infrastructure at our university campuses, lack of motivation among faculty to perform, inability of universities to create a research environment for faculty publications, absence of interdisciplinary programmes for students, lack of innovation in curriculum and course design, inadequate compensation for faculty and faculty development initiatives, and a bureaucratic and hierarchical governance structure that does not motivate faculty members to perform.

However, the establishment of private universities in India has not led to a positive change in the quality of education. Rather, private universities in general in India have been, unfortunately, equated with all the problems of the public universities. They have fostered a culture of mediocrity and dubiousness, both of which have led to adverse consequences for higher education.

There is an urgent need for a paradigm shift in the availability of funding and resources. For example, resources for pursuing research...
and knowledge creation leading to publications should not be given on the basis of whether a university is public or private. It should be based upon the nature of faculty and research capacities that are prevailing in the university and how best to augment those available resources with a view to advancing research agendas.

**Regulatory reforms and governmental engagement**

The role of government in higher education and university governance deserves a critical examination. At present in India, the role of government in the case of state universities is significant and the higher education department of state governments is deeply involved in every aspect from the creation of a university to granting of approvals and permissions that need to be obtained for administering it.

This poses problems for university governance. The existing framework for the establishment of a university (public or private) in India requires legislation passed in the state legislative assembly or the national parliament or through a decision of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

There are elaborate procedures that are in place led by the higher education departments within state governments that are involved in every aspect of institution building, even before the creation of a university.

While this is argued to be necessary to maintain high academic standards, there is a need to recognise that once a university is established, the role of government departments and agencies will have to undergo a significant change.

The need to seek approval and permission from government departments to start new academic programmes or new disciplines should be dispensed with, so that the internal governance mechanisms of a university are activated to work effectively.

There is a fear that in the absence of external checks and balances, universities will exercise power in an arbitrary manner and offer courses and programmes devoid of academic content.

This argument is problematic at different levels:
- it distrusts the university as an academic institution that is expected to act with a sense of responsibility;
- it creates an atmosphere of suspicion and animosity where faculty members of a university, who are expected to take critical decisions relating to the academic programmes, are not in a position to drive the academic agenda;
- it creates opportunities for vested interests and corruption at the level of government departments exercising such powers.

One of the better ways to deal with this problem is to make the process of establishing a university more rigorous and transparent. The necessary conditions that need to be fulfilled to create a university should reflect the highest academic standards, availability of qualified faculty members and the necessary resources, and objective measures to assess the bona fide intentions of the promoters of private universities.

The government’s role should be one of a facilitator and not that of a regulator. There is a need to empower departments, faculties and internal governance mechanisms within Indian universities so that they are able to take responsibility and are duly accountable for their decisions. Steadily, the role of government departments in the decision-making of the university should be negligible, if present at all.

World-class universities are not developed through government departments exercising powers over institutions; they are nurtured only when faculty members, students, staff and other
stakeholders of a university are able to take decisions about the university in an independent and transparent manner.

**Faculty development and impactful research**

Of all the important things that make a world-class university, it is necessary to recognise that faculty are the most important and the most significant.

Outstanding faculty members who can make great substantive contributions to teaching and research create world-class universities. It is only by hiring and retaining inspiring teachers and rigorous researchers that we can hope to establish world-class universities in India. Indian aspirations to build world-class universities ought to centre around the hiring of faculty from India and around the world.

Teaching and research constitute the centrality of pedagogy of learning and primacy of knowledge in a university. Almost all rankings use both these as benchmarks for assessing the quality of universities. The weighting given to research tends to be more in the rankings of universities recognising the importance of research.

Indian universities ought to become fertile avenues for the generation of ideas through research and publications. Rigorous research in all fields is critical to India as it will be expected to respond to new problems for which old solutions and perspectives may not be helpful. Research produces knowledge that gives clarity on the basis of informed and deeper understanding of the issues involved.

**The future: the need for building transformative universities**

There is a need to assess universities on the basis of objective and determinable standards relating to the quality of teaching, faculty, research and capacity building rather than on the basis of it being public or private.

It needs to be noted that some of the top universities in the world are private universities: Harvard, Yale, Stanford and MIT; while some of the oldest and most reputed universities continue to be public universities: Oxford, Cambridge and London.

The effort to promote private initiatives in higher education should go hand in hand with other equally committed efforts to strengthen and develop our public universities. We need to
understand and appreciate the remarkable transformation in higher education that has taken place in countries in Asia, including but not limited to Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China.

A committee constituted by the Planning Commission and headed by the then Chief Mentor of Infosys, Mr Naryanamurthy submitted a report that focused on the role of the corporate sector in higher education.

This committee acknowledged the importance of stronger private initiatives in the field of higher education and had recommended path-breaking measures such as free land for 999 years, a 300% deduction in taxable income to companies for contributions towards boosting higher education and had recommended establishment of a Scholarship Fund of Rs 1,000 crores (Rs 10 billion) and contributions made by the corporate sector to receive tax exemption. It has also suggested that mandatory accreditation is essential for Indian universities.

Leadership is central not only for providing an institutional vision that will garner and galvanise academic consciousness among faculty and students to fulfil the goals and aspirations of the university but also to reflect on the larger role and responsibilities of Indian universities that connect them with the professions, government, intergovernmental organisations, think tanks and NGOs.

Leadership is also about taking responsibility and being accountable for one’s decisions.

Unfortunately, the existing model of governance of the Indian university system has not recognised leadership in universities as a critical aspect of building world-class institutions of excellence.

India’s aspiration to establish world-class universities will depend upon our commitment to create and nurture transformational institutions that will inspire young minds with the spirit of enquiry and instil in them the flame of imagination.

For a more detailed article on this subject, see C. Raj Kumar, "Building world class universities in India", Seminar, January 2014.

Table 1:
Asian universities among the world’s top 200 universities (2011-2016)

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