UGC tells Universities to postpone exams, suspend evaluation work due to COVID-19

"All universities and affiliated colleges should postpone exams till March 31 and suspend evaluation work. Further schedule should be decided following a review of the situation," the commission said in an order.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) directed all universities and affiliated colleges on Thursday to postpone examinations till March-end due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. The evaluation work will be suspended during the period too.

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Link:/https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/education/ugc-tells-universities-to-postponeexams-suspend-evaluation-work-due-to-covid-19-spread/articleshow/74707411.cms

AICTE instructs Institutions to beware of fake news on social media

All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) on Wednesday issued a circular to all approved technical and management institutions to beware of the circulation of fake news spreading through various social media channels. The circular has been uploaded on the council's official website.

In the circular, the council has directed all institutions to only believe in the notices issued on the MHRD/UGC/AICTE official website. The council has also asked institutions to promptly report any such circulation of fake news to the concerned authority.

The Council further instructs the institutions that for all matters related to classes, exams, entrance tests, admissions, fee payment dates, approvals, etc. institutes should refer only to the official websites and don't rely on any other sources.

Amidst the nation-wide lockdown, a lot of fake news cases are coming forward. Recently, the Press Information Bureau (PIB) refuted a fake news that has been aired on a Marathi TV channel claiming that all exams held by Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) have been cancelled in the view of the coronavirus pandemic.

Link:https://m.dailyhunt.in/news/india/english/hindustan+timesepaperhttimes/aicte+instructs+institutions+to+beware+of+fake+news+on+social+media-newsid-178824840?ss=pd&s=a

Role of Technology In Education

The new education policy (NEP) has long been awaited. The draft released last year was greeted with aplomb as long-awaited forward-looking policy which responded to today's needs of India. Not only so it also provided a direction for education in this country. It's an acknowledged fact that if we do not announce it today at the earliest India stands to lose the possibility of transforming our vast population into a globally employable workforce and making India an education hub.

At no other point in history the opportunity to improve the lives of an average Indian through education had been so significant as today. That's because society acknowledges it as an engine to improve average individual's living standard. Even though the last two decades has witnessed an exponential growth in higher education system, the issue of access still continues even when GER has increased to 25.3 There are still large groups of people who are eligible but not able to access any higher education institution either because of discrimination or distance or cost. For example, GER is higher for males than females. South and West regions show higher than national average GER. This has skewed the demand for higher education towards the West and the South.

Since not all can afford to study out of their home state or city, a significant proportion of eligible students either join low grade institution in their region or simply drop out. Cost of higher education, especially professional education, has also rapidly gone up in the last decade.
The current system does not permit individual to work and acquire a degree or diploma simultaneously even when companies offer the opportunity to young people to work and alongside acquire qualifications at a degree level

from a premier university. Hence for an eligible student who cannot afford the high cost, it's a Hobson's choice to either study on a loan in a good institution or simply accept low quality option. The latter has no connect with industry and hence its graduates' employability is doubtful.

Another reason for an urgent policy announcement is to improve the quality of our higher education system, make it an excellent and globally competitive system. Such system will for sure help Indian youth; equally it will attract a large population from the world which cannot afford the US cost of education. Benefits of global diversity in higher education will only create a better learning environment and a more tolerant world.

Hence NEP and, in its absence, executive decisions should attend to the following issues on a priority:

Technology for improving access
Government recently announced that universities ranked in NIRF in top 100 or as Category 1 would be able to offer online courses. This is a welcome decision, but Government needs to remove the jurisdictional restrictions.Today institution cannot offer courses out of their home state. This defeats the purpose of providing quality education to one and all irrespective of their geographical location. In a world of internet especially, mobile internet geography and time has become redundant. In such circumstances, government needs to deliberate on rationale of institutional jurisdiction.

Technology can also help reduce the cost of education and hence make good quality education available to all those who are eligible but cannot afford on campus education.

There is also an urgency to make it possible for universities to unbundle their program through credits. If the credits are stackable and student permitted to earn them over a period either through campus-based education or online education, it will get more students to come in. They will now pay per credit earned and finally for the degree. It should also be possible for the university to give credit for work experience. This will require a significant change in UGC definition of program and degree in terms of credits and duration. Today UGC for example defines duration in terms of years for each degree or diploma.

Wider range of programs responding to the environment is the need of the hour. These need not necessarily be a vanilla type engineering or management or business programs. Short term and long-term programs in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, forensics, data sciences and analytics, liberal arts, design and vocational programs in new emerging areas of IT enabled services, film production, paramedical sciences should now get created. One of the reasons of students going abroad for higher education is the wider choice and flexibility they get in program selection. Universities should have the liberty to launch such innovative programs. It should be possible for the student to curate his program depending on his life choices. Equally it should be possible for the student to change his choice of program

midway. For example, engineering student should be able to give it up midway to pursue an economics degree or an entrepreneurship degree. Credits earned should be evaluated and those relevant should be allowed to be retained. Affordability, scale and quality can go together.

I had many a time heard the argument against scale as adversely impacting quality of education. My experience tells me that scale may not necessarily affect quality. Quality is a function of people and processes. Hence institution should focus on these two as it grows and expands its capacity. On the other hand, scale can help reduce cost and in turn make education more affordable.

Further government needs to consider rationale of formula for fees fixation for institutions when their cost and efficiency structure varies.

Beyond quality-----Excellence
Quality today is rewarded by government in the form of graded autonomy. But going forward, higher education must pursue the agenda of excellence especially if we aspire to become a global hub for higher education. Excellence presupposes best in class quality of education. NAAC has defined it through its letter grade like A+. Some of the institutions that are today recognized as excellent show common characteristics as mentioned below.

Purpose
These institutions integrate excellence in their purpose statement. The task does not end there. It involves getting the institutional community to commit to it and make it a part of their work. These institutions breathe excellence and to an outsider it is visible through its performance. Though government has announced more than 20 institutions of eminence, they have still a long a way to emerge as world class excellent institutions from India. There are still many others who are already recognized nationally as excellent institutions. They now need to broaden their horizon to become globally best. Government support to all such institutions is needed for research, faculty appointments infrastructure and technology development.

Processes
Processes, be they teaching-learning, research, assessment or admissions, are all benchmarked with the best. Unfortunately, most Indian institutions are lagging on this account. Processes in the first place are absent thereby increasing the scope for management discretion. While one cannot deny the role of discretion in executive decision, it should be used more as an exception. My experience in institution building is that processes, especially those that are benchmarked with the best in class can help develop institutions that are made to last.

Performance
These institutions consistently perform at the best level. In a conversation with Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University some years ago, we learnt that global rankings were a reality and that he felt happy when Cambridge was ranked worldwide number one university. But what pleased him more was

the number of professors from his university getting the noble prize in a particular year. Top universities today are recognized by such awards and inventions. Similar comments were made by Boston University President a few years ago in his conversation with me. In all these institution cases, government policies and institution structure have been facilitative. Their Boards and donors were encouraging. In fact, as one of the well-known philanthropists, who was also an alumni and donor of Boston University mentioned, it was a matter of pride for him to be associated with such a world class university.

So, the performance parameters in such universities are research outcomes in the form of inventions, patents and number of faculty research papers that were cited by others and hence facilitated thought creation. It was the diversity in class and faculty, peer recognition of faculty and the academic environment that valued innovation rather than just compliance. Alumni that were recognized globally or nationally for their contribution also defined the strength of these universities. Hence, it's the outcomes that are more valued in such institutions.

Indian higher education policy needs to focus on outcomes rather than inputs. Hence for example rather than defining faculty load in terms of teaching hours and the number of hours faculty needs to be on campus, UGC needs to define faculty performance on parameters mentioned above. Time has come when we need to redefine institutional performance parameters that reflect both national priorities and what takes to be the best in a global context.

Peer Recognition
As one can make out it's the peer recognition that makes excellent institutions. Such recognition is often an outcome of performance and quality of people serving in these institutions as faculty, staff leaders like Deans and University top leadership like Vice Chancellor/President/Provost etc. Charismatic leaders in faculty and administration are difficult to get but once institution is fortunate to have, all efforts must be made to retain them. Often such charismatic University Presidents or Deans are reelected after their term. They continue to remain at the helm term after term ensuring that the university or the school continues its journey on the chosen path.
The new education policy should not define the number of terms a Vice Chancellor could have in the same university, nor should it put age limit. These decisions should be left to the university boards who are the best judge of the leader's performance.

The New Education Policy that has provided for such flexibility now needs to be announced without much delay so that rules can get framed. The financial allocations can also be made based on expectations of outcomes and time frame can then be given to select top 100 institutions to emerge world class or best in class in 10 years' time.

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