

Reforming higher education

Reforming higher education is seen axiomatically as one of the key elements of the incomplete agenda of reform. With a view to achieving this goal, the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MoHRD) have been introducing various acronyms of change over the years. Recently the Vice Chancellors' conference unanimously resolved to "adopt and implement Learning Outcome Based Curriculum Framework (LOCF) in HEIs (higher education institutions) by updating curriculum from academic year 2019-20; adopt Learner Centric teaching learning processes by suitable improvement in the pedagogy". Shortly thereafter, the LOCF framework for undergraduate education to which the Vice Chancellors had earlier agreed were published.

The framework document is a marvellous application of modern management principles in higher education. The fundamental premise of this approach is to link learning outcomes (in simpler language, "skills") with curricular aspects and pedagogical techniques. In fact, the document states that the aim is not to have a prescriptive uniform approach, but rather to promote flexibility in all aspects of curriculum design and implementation. The outline of the framework is quite clearly one which any sensible person associated with higher education would clearly identify with. So, what then is the problem?

Pedagogy, as the dictionary notes, is "the study of the methods and activities of teaching", and teaching, as we all know, is the process "to give someone knowledge or to train someone; to instruct". This clearly requires both the teacher and the taught.



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Thus, effective formulation and implementation of this programme requires teachers to engage with and adopt these principles in their work. But the teachers, as a category, are completely ignored in our grand designs. In India, most teachers in HEIs can be grouped into four categories. The first (mostly in public-funded institutions) are teachers with regular or permanent appointment, the second (mostly in private institutions) are teachers with a medium-term (renewable) contract of appointment. Then we have two more categories, possibly unique to India, of teachers with short-term contracts, which includes ad-hoc teachers whose contract is typically for four months and, what is now emerging as a growth segment in major universities, the "guest lecturer" who is appointed on a daily or more often hourly basis!

This last category needs some explanation. Universities and colleges used to, in the past, invite to their classrooms as guest lecturers, people who had eminence in a non-academic sphere, to bring a real-world dimension to the class experience. These guests were complementary to the regular instructor in the course. As a major financial "innovation", the practice of inviting them to substitute for the regular instructor has taken root in recent years. The accountants who sit in judgement on higher education today have clearly decided that this is the most cost-effective strategy of delivering the requirements of higher education.

The increasing burden of teaching being devolved onto guest lecturers and ad-hoc teachers creates a peculiar paradox. We expect people who are unable to see the process to its culmination to engage with and incorporate innovations in their work. We

thus expect a teacher whose own contract of employment does not extend even to a single semester in the academic calendar, to appreciate and address issues of outcomes that cover the entire period of graduate or postgraduate education.

The logical impossibility of a modern, innovative, and outcome-oriented curriculum being designed and implemented by a vast army of ad-hoc and guest lecturers is then sought to be bridged by further reliance on the magic of modern technology. As the Vice Chancellors noted in the resolution "opportunities to the students in backward and underserved areas can best be improved through digital learning platforms like SWAYAM." SWAYAM is an "indigenous developed IT platform that facilitates hosting of all the courses, taught in classrooms from 9th class till post-graduation to be accessed by anyone, anywhere, at any time. All the courses are interactive, prepared by the best teachers in the country". Thus, in effect implying that once we have enough courses on SWAYAM, we can dispense with archaic notions of teachers and taught.

To understand this "innovation" in Indian terms it is important to recall a major approach to teaching in Vedantic thought. Knowledge was classified into *Shruti* and *Smriti*. *Shruti*, "that which has been heard", was the highest form of knowledge, namely the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. *Smriti*, on the other hand, was lesser knowledge, and was prone to change. *Smriti* could be reduced to texts, but *Shruti*, for proper transmission, required continuous engagement between the teacher and the taught, i.e. the *guru* and the *shishya*. Having, over the centuries, converted the *Vedas* into *Smriti*, we have lost sight of much of our ancient knowledge. Our policies now appear to be proceeding along the same logical process and aim to eliminate the teacher from the teaching-learning process altogether!

The writer is former Chief Statistician of India