

Wanted: New courses, more internships

CASE FOR CHANGE

Prof U K Ashoke Rao says there is urgent need for reforms in technical education



The next wave of educational reforms should hopefully not only address the existing demand-supply mismatches but, more importantly, study employment and employability of technical graduates.

Findings of various studies conducted in recent times by apex institutions such as IEEF, NASSCOM, FTCL, CII and ASSOCHAM have revealed that only a quarter of India's graduates are readily employed. The findings have grave implications in the context of the huge manpower requirements of the government and the private sector in India.

What are the challenges?
The process of building up intellectual capital in any discipline is gradual, complex and time consuming.

There are two approaches to build intellectual capital:

1) Exchange/collaborative programmes and other transfer mechanisms help teachers accumulate and assimilate domain knowledge, experience and expertise which then translates into academic material, teaching notes, research findings and chronicled case studies.

2) The course instructor may need to do the work hands-on and learn first hand how the process actually works before attempting to glean insights and transfer learnings to students.

Ministries need to wake up

The process of developing intellectual capital in technical institutions, on a sustained basis, will continue to pose significant challenges.

It will also require resources (time, human, capital and technology), rendering it hard to offer specialty courses in growing sectors such as infrastructure, health, power, aviation, management of ports and highways, etc.

Statistics, sectoral developments and field level experiences show that each department/ministry, such as Human Resource Development and Education, has operated in a silo so far. Each has independently pursued a charter of reforms. This would, to an extent, explain the glaring disconnect between the reforms undertaken in the key sectors of the economy and those undertaken in the educational sector.

In order to support flagship employment/health/rural/infrastructure programmes such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), Bharat Neman or JNNURM, the government will need to devise a two-pronged action plan.

It will have to create interdependency between ministries so that they work in tandem with sectors that have huge employment generation potential.

It will also have to forge alliances with higher technical institutions, so that the intellectual capital can be effectively

transferred from the government departments and corporate sector to higher technical institutions.

Role of regulatory body

The Ministry of HRD has viewed the 'role-alignment-orientation' dynamics of the regulatory body purely from a perspective of regulating the following:

- Unbridled growth of academic institutions.
- Ensure standardisation across basic requirements covering intellectual capital, infrastructure, resources and facilities, governance systems and process, etc.
- Prevent commercialisation of education.
- Check irregularities and ensure quality.

Perhaps the missing link in the regulatory framework is the student's perspective. Students' perspective will lead to greater autonomy to offer contemporary courses and stimulate academic innovations.

Solutions

■ Legislative support: This will enable the effective transfer of domain knowledge and skill sets from government departments and the corporate sector to technical institutions and provide compulsory in-

ternships. Enacting The Employment Exchanges (Compulsory Notification of Vacancies) Act (1959) is a contradiction in terms for only if we increase and realise the employment potential can we effectively utilise the legislative mechanism to notify the vacancies. The Act came into force in 1960. It is a good example of placing the cart before the horse.

The other suggestions would include extending the provision of the Apprentices Act (1961) to all technical graduates and across all sectors of the economy and enacting professional legislation for managerial and technical personnel along the lines of The Advocates Act (1961), The Chartered Accountants Act (1949), The Pharmacy Act (1948) and the like.

■ Endowment to technical institutions: Endowments have not found favour either with the government or the corporate sector. Perhaps, the time is now right to establish endowment chairs to carry out industry relevant research and thus strengthen academia-industry links.

■ Levy of cess on corporates who fail to provide internship opportunities to technical graduates.