

Management Education: From 2010 to 2011

2010 will be remembered as the year of sounds in the field of education in India. Let us revisit the year and the developments in the field of education at the school, graduate and post graduate levels.

The nursery school admission fiasco continued in the metro cities with donations being a norm. It did hit the headlines, as usual, like the seasonal rains.

Xth Boards: No more on board

Two scrapings hogged the lime lights at the beginning of the year. Exams were scrapped for classes up to the 5th standard. And Board exams were made optional at class X level. It is the latter decision which had prominent educationists expressing alarm and dismay at the HRD Minister's approach. This populist measure will dilute academic standards in the country and will allow a large number of pleasure seekers to move ahead without studies and hard work putting unnecessary burden on class XII examination as Board examination at class X level is a buffer that prepares the students for the hard work ahead and shakes up and wakes up the non-serious students. This will throw gates open to dilution of the education standards. Doing away with the Xth Board examination will make a mockery of selection of specialized streams for students for students are offered Maths, Biology, Commerce and other streams based on Xth Board results which act as a common and standard parameter across students from different schools and states. Doing away with a Xth Board will make the process hollow- and making it optional will make the whole scenario confusing. This will be inviting money power and corrupt practices to the system even at the tender and sensitive stage of selection of education stream knowing that seats for Sciences and Commerce are limited in most of the schools. This will play havoc especially when students change schools.

Lowering of education standards because of this one decision alone will eventually affect the quality of professionals in the country in 6-8 years drastically.

Mr. Eric Lane, a visiting professor to First India School of Business, Gurgaon from USA had warned that the measure would lead to fall in demand of Indian students abroad. According to Eric, academic circles outside India held Indian Board examinations in high esteem and had faith in their sound education level and standard. Disbanding the Board at class X will reduce the demand of Indian students as they will be considered to have reached a high level without competition and studies. This will take away a parameter the world has to judge Indian students academic caliber. "This impression is bound to reflect adversely on Indian student's education and employment prospects abroad", Eric said.

Further commenting on the populist measure which is being planted on to the Indian students and parents under the garb of preventing 'suicides', Mr. Pramod Bhatnagar, a professor at First India School of Business had commented in his article in the institute journal said that the need was to educate and counsel parents, teachers and students in being able to handle pressures of life better rather than taking a path of least resistance. The Indian school education system is rated among the most credible in the world and

taking away the rigors of the X standards without understanding all the issues and their implications will only push the suicides to two year later, Mr. Bhatnagar wrote.

Foreign Universities Bill

The foreign Universities Bill, put up earlier in the year had generated noise and heat among the educationists. Prominent educationists had expressed strong views at HRD Minister's proposal.

Most experts had termed the proposal "an isolated & incomplete measure" that will not address the issues related to foreign university education for Indians let alone the higher education in India. The objectives behind the move seemed to be multiple- controlling the outgo of foreign exchange from India towards education, holding back talent, making foreign university education more accessible and affordable in India itself and driving excellence and competition among university education.

It was generally felt that some of the aspects of the Foreign University Bill may not be palatable to leading foreign Universities. "The 50 Crore upfront deposit with UGC may be too much for the cash-strapped foreign universities. They may also detest the approval from UGC. The foreign universities would not be allowed to repatriate profits from their operations here and this- given the situation where a large chunk of their revenues come from Indian students studying in their mother campuses- which could suddenly dry up if they opened their centres in India does not present a very appealing scenario for them.", Mr. D. Mahato, an XLRI alumnus, Director academics at First India and a former Head of HR at ICI had written.

Other experts also felt that the measure could lead to a situation where the India higher education market could be flooded by third grade universities from abroad.

Mr. A. Dinkar, an IIM Ahmedabad alumni and a visiting professor to First India School of Business, Gurgaon had warned that the measure seems incomplete. There is a large number of Universities in India which are not permitted to offer their courses outside their state whereas the foreign universities will be allowed to offer their courses outside their country in any state in India. This seems to suggest an uneven playing field for different universities. "This move smacks of a partial thinking on reforming the Indian higher education system", Amit had noted.

Further commenting on the measure which is being referred to as the equivalent of 1990s economic reforms in the education sector, Ms. Candy Singh, a faculty member at First India school of Business commented that the need was to improve the quality of education in Indian Universities where the education is far removed from employment realities, external exposure is rare and rote and examination focussed learning thrives. In most universities, classes are not held and courses are run almost like correspondence courses where the students are only seen at enrolment offices, canteens and examination centres.

Ms. Bridgit H. from Birmingham University and a visiting faculty to First India School of business felt that this move by government of India may not get support from governments from the countries where the targeted universities are based. “The brain-gain or employee-gain for countries like USA/ UK/ Australia/ Canada and New Zealand may disappear. Furthermore, their interests lie in earning from Indian students who are charged very high fee compared to locals and not necessarily contributing to improvement in India’s higher education system”.

Also, quite a few aspects remain answered. Will a foreign university education in India be treated at par with the education at the parent campus? What about employment opportunities in home countries of foreign universities which create a major motivator for students travelling abroad for education? Will the degrees be accepted by Indian universities, corporate organisations, governments for employment and further education? How will the students be compared across different university systems following different timelines, durations, syllabi, evaluation methods?

The response so far from the foreign universities has been guarded. They have not queued up for registration nor has there been a beeline to acquire land and academic premises in India. On the contrary, the statements emanating from some of their spokespersons have indicated that ‘university education can not be franchised like hamburgers’. This may not be difficult to decipher particularly when one is used to offering the same hamburgers at a higher price in the home kitchen which may run the partial risk of drying up if the students instead prefer the franchisees

The other developments included the continuing scams at regulatory bodies, Medical Council of India and AICTE, latter’s slow death and setting up of the Knowledge commission.

Higher Education: Cry my beloved country

The higher education continues to be in doldrums.

Government institutes and universities across the country, set-up centuries ago and today sitting on thousands of crores of real estate in prime areas, present an appalling picture. The historic building crumble, the only thing no happening in these erstwhile centres of excellence is education. A few journalists had visited some leading lights in North India and commented that they didn’t have working toilets. They forgot to add that each of their campuses resembled one.

Numerous conferences were held during the year on ‘higher education’. The events are nothing short of Nautankis with the very people who have been responsible for this state of affairs as former secretaries, chancellors and directors are now sermonizing the country as chief guests, key note speakers and subject matter experts.

The economic recession of 2009-2010 has taken a heavy toll on the higher education enrollment. The number of aspirants for Engineering and management education dropped by over 30% even as the number of seats rose significantly resulting in some interesting developments:

1. Admissions executives visiting students at their homes to counsel them;
2. Private institutes running up to 200 seater call-centres for admissions tele-calling and counseling;
3. Institutes in a city coming together to pool together all the students they individually have so that a sizable batch could be created;
4. Institutes offering students job guarantees on stamp paper;
5. Coaching institutes earning more from being admission intermediaries and providing marketing support to institutes than from coaching;
6. Institutes offering bikes and mobile phones on admission;
7. Emergence of admissions consulting as a new sub sector- something which provides a moonlighting/ double agent opportunity to everyone employed with the education sector;
8. New approaches to counseling, read brainwashing/ fooling a prospective student at campuses through scripted play back with the right gender, experience, emotional setting, personalized service founded on a backbone of a CRM.

The genesis of this demand supply goes back the 2000-2010 era when setting up business schools and Engineering colleges emerged as a great opportunity for landlords, politicians, money lenders, black marketers and local mafia to only become respected but also wealthier. So sprouted like sugarcanes the multiples institutes, replacing fields, brick kilns and country liquor manufacturing sites, with big campuses and bigger brochures promising the moon to gullible small town students. They also arranged the loans the students will require for ever willing and greasy PSU bank managers. Thus was born a new breed of institute chairmen who leap frogged to the highest levels in education management from nowhere. This bubble burst when the companies that were supposed to hire the products of these institutes realized that the product was available in plenty and in spite of its inflated ego was no better than the raw material who they could pick up at much lower price points. This resulted in the MBA and Engineering graduates being offered salaries lower than minimum wage for laborers. In many cases, the salaries were actually sales commissions.

Foreign Universities: students as customers

The economic recession also left its indelible mark on the way the foreign universities began approaching the Indian students. Under pressure to get more full-fare students compared to the locals, universities turned marketers, their professors salesmen in India and the students as customers. How your people behaved with Indians back him played a big role in the prospective students hitting back by voting with their feet as it happened in Australia. The Increasing dependence of foreign universities on Indian students for their survival could not have come at a worse time.

The HRD minister who makes the right noises

We finally have a education minister who says whet everyone wants to hear on education save for some controversial decisions. He speaks the right principles, questions the right issues, criticizes the trends and generally makes the right noises. But if if the leading executive authority is going to question and crticise, what roles are the lesser mortals- the public to take on- may be execute and administer!!

There were also some across the board changes in the sector. Social media particularly 'youtube' may change the way education is delivered in India. Marketing in education was no more an oxymoron. Corporates continue to wait to enter the educational space even as VC funds can wait no longer. Education continues to be a no-for-profit space in India officially but everyone knows its not government auditors reports notwithstanding.

What does the new year hold- some shake up, demand-supply gap corrections, academic rigors in academic institutes, setting up a knowledge commission, and the imminent entry of explicit market forces- the corporate, corporate managers & VCs.

After all the sounds in the year 2010, the year ahead may see some light as well. Wishing you a very happy, healthy and education new year.

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