Comments from the UNESCO Chair on Policy Document and Draft Guidelines & Regulations on Establishment of World Class Institutions in India

As mentioned in the policy document, historically, Indian universities have been the seat of knowledge production and dissemination. Their role as knowledge producers assumes particular importance in the face of current developmental challenges (for eg., climate change, food insecurity, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, poverty, social exclusion etc.) that the society is facing today. Ensuring inclusive development, democratic governance and sustainable growth requires new knowledge, enhanced human competencies and new institutional capabilities in the country. It was expected that education would contribute solutions to these problems to some extent. However, in spite of enhanced investment on expenditure, leading to increased enrolment, these issues remain largely unattended. The role of institutions of higher education in societal development seems to be the potential missing link (Tandon, 2014).

Therefore, if we are to replicate the successful model of ancient universities like Nalanda and Takshila; it is important that we also go back to some of the ethical components of those ancient universities; most important among them being, '*their responsibility towards the society'.*

How this aspect gets highlighted in the policy document

As also emphasized in the policy document, one of the essential characteristics of a world class institution/university is its '***tangible and intangible contribution to the society'.*** The document also emphasizes the importance of the universities striving to achieve '*social impact by engaging in applied research and innovation in issues of concern to developing societies'.* Further, the document further urges the '*faculty of universities to engage academically with issues of concern to society'.*

Brief overview

Social Responsibility in Higher Education is manifested in a number of different ways both inside and outside the higher education institution. In some cases it involves partnerships with communities and programs geared towards engaging students with communities. In other cases it involves an orientation of curriculum or a general focus of academic programs towards the resolution of society's problems. Therefore, adhering to its social responsibility is one of the essential criterions for any university aspiring to become a world class institution. This aspect has also garnered a lot of global attention lately, with UNESCO mentioning in its communiqué (2009 conference on Higher Education), that, '*Higher education has the social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted issues...and our ability to respond to them'* (UNESCO, 2009). Further, Agenda 21 and SDGs also refers to *education as an essential tool for achieving sustainable development.*

Socially responsible higher education institutions carefully manage their relationships with communities and external stakeholders. In many cases, community engagement or engaging with the community is a requisite for being considered socially responsible, while for others it is the quality and nature of these partnerships that determines the level of social responsibility being demonstrated. Community University Engagement

(CUE) is way more than the value it generates for students, communities. It has relevance for larger public good and contributes to broader goals of socio-economic development. It is generally understood, however, that both the higher education institution and the community should benefit from the interaction and that partnerships support social and economic development goals. Therefore, the question is, importantly, one of integration of knowledge – bringing together education and work, theory and practice, university and society.

Taking forward the similar thought process was the 12th five year plan (2012- 2017) of India. It proposed an innovative aspect of furthering the quality of higher education in the country in terms of strengthening community engagement and promoting social responsibility (Singh & Tandon, 2015, p. 117). It states:

> *"In the face of growing isolation of HEIs from the society, there is a need for renewed effort for HEIs for genuinely engaging with the community, conduct socially relevant research and education and foster social responsibility amongst students as part of their core mission. For this purpose, a National Initiative to Foster Social Responsibility in Higher Education would be launched. An alliance for community engagement, an independent association of practitioners, academics and community leaders would be created to support its implementation."*

The University Grants Commission (UGC) also acknowledged the importance of CUE in its XII plan guidelines on the Establishment of Centres for Fostering Social Responsibility and Community Engagement in Universities (2012-2017) (UGC, 2014). As per the guidelines,

> *"Engagement is a core value of the university…It is a fundamentally mutually educative practice…while community-university engagement contributes to the public good, it also reflects a changed economic and social context in which the concept of community has superseded the broader notions of social."*

Further, according to Hall & Tandon (Parsons, 2015):

> *"Demand for public accountability and local relevance of higher, post-secondary education is growing rapidly in many societies; this demand is being responded to in many different ways by different types of institutions. Some respond through service learning and student internships; some by co-production of knowledge where local communities act as partners; some others bring in the experiences of communities and practitioners in designing curricula and teaching new problem and issue-centred courses. This social responsibility is expressed both inside and outside the institutions."*

Therefore, the key issue here is, learning of responsibility and citizenship while acquiring professional knowledge and degrees. Francois Vallaeys (2014) calls it educational impact of social responsibility:

> *"Responsible universities ask what kind of professionals and citizens they are shaping and also reflect on the proper organization of education that ensures socially responsible students. What kind of professionals and citizens we are educating? How would we structure our educational system to*

build citizens who care for sustainable human development? Will our graduates be able and willing to redirect the currently unstable and unjust course of global development or will they simply want to find a job?"

Action points

Considering the above mentioned literature, it is uncontested that expectations from world class institutions are high. Some crisp action points for realizing community university engagement in academia, which can help them emerge as world class institutions are:

- ✓ Modification of curricula and methodologies of learning through appropriate research and development to incorporate elements of problem solving, creativity and relevance' *(*the policy document mentions of the *flexibility to fix curriculum and syllabus of such interdisciplinary courses in sync with the development concerns of India; this point also finds mention in the National Education Policy, 1986*).

- ✓ Students should be given credit for undertaking field placements in communities, Panchayats and municipalities during senior years of Bachelor's and Master's course (the document mentions paying *special attention to teaching and research in emerging areas of knowledge, including interdisciplinary areas, important for strategic needs of the country, but ones which are not necessarily pursued by conventional institutions*).

- ✓ All researchers (students and faculty) must be given compulsory training in community-based participatory research methodology so that they can learn from local communities (document's repeated emphasis on *engagement with issues of concern to the society* outlines its importance; since the *communities can serve as the first line of knowledge for students attempting to address societal challenges;* this point also finds a mention in the *XII Plan Guidelines for Establishment of Centres for fostering Social Responsibility & Community Engagement in Higher Education*)

- ✓ Universities to engage practitioners/experts (such as civil society actors, local community elders, women leaders, professionals from independent researcher institutes from different fields as teachers/faculty (document outlines this point, as it mentions that the world class institutions would be permitted to *hire personnel from industry, etc., as faculty, who though being experts in their area, may not have the requisite academic qualification*)

- ✓ Inclusion of community based research/participatory research as a regular component of the curriculum cutting across all streams, such as sciences, humanities etc. and training the students/next generation researchers in the same. (Bestowing of *autonomy to universities for fixing the curriculum* will help ease this process. Global examples and key pedagogical principles

for such training are outlined in the book on '*Knowledge & Engagement: Building Capacities for the Next Generation of Community Based Researchers*'[1]).

✓ Cultivating research partnerships with communities and civil society organizations is way of maing sub-altern knowledge visible. Such co-creative acts of knowledge production are at the heart of university's contribution to deepening knowledge democracy and cognitive justice (Bivens et. al., 2015, p.6). The *UGC's XIIth Plan Guidelines* also talks of promoting community-university partnerships to develop knowledge for improving the lives of the people.

✓ Research materials so generated should be included in curriculum to make it more locally relevant. Further, efforts must be made towards making this new knowledge generated, available on an open-access basis for the society in general (this contributes towards increased knowledge sharing with the community; one of the forms of community-university engagement; and would have immense *intangible contributions towards the society*).

✓ Performance of faculty must also be assessed on the criterion of promoting community engagement (this will incentivize the faculty to *engage academically towards issues of societal concern).*

Therefore, the concept of social responsibility implies the relevance and contributions of the universities to the future development of individuals and societies; it implies that teaching and research as the core functions of the university are linked closely with the elaboration and promotion of shared societal visions and common public goods.

Quoting the 5th GUNi Report on Higher Education,

> *"The recovery of indigenous intellectual traditions and resources is a priority task. Course structures, syllabuses, books, reading materials, research models and research areas must reflect the treasury of our thoughts, the riches of our indigenous traditions and the felt necessities of our societies. This must be matched with learning environments on which students do not experience learning as a burden, but as a force that liberates the soul and leads to the uplifting of the society. Above all, universities must retrieve their original task of creating good citizens instead of only good workers (Escrigas et. al., 2014, p. xxxviii)."*

Therefore, the concept of '*social responsibility of higher education needs to be given more weightage in the draft guidelines & regulations, and be mentioned more specifically as to how it is important for institutions vying for achieving the world class status'.*

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[1] Tandon, R., Hall, W., Lepore, W., & Singh, W. (2016). Knowledge and Engagement: Building Capacity for the Next Generation of Community Based Researchers. Available at: http://unescochair-cbrsr.org/pdf/resource/Knowledge%20&%20Engagement_26-09-16_pdf%20ver-mail.pdf

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