The Third Annual
EDU’S VCs’ RETREAT
76 leaders from 17 states across India came together to deliberate on the theme “Benchmarking with the Best: Rankings, Accreditation and Beyond” in Gurgaon

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It’s a great initiative on the part of 9.9 to bring together people from academia to discuss issues that are becoming very important for our growth as well as ensuring that quality is maintained in the coming years. This is an exceptionally important opportunity for us to share our thoughts as well as come to some conclusions.

—BN Jain
VC, BITS Pilani

I think this conference has been a great experience. There’s so much we’ve learnt from each other and there is always a need to meet and share our views. I think that an annual conference like this is an excellent idea.

—Malabika Sarkar
VC, Presidency University

Normally, Vice Chancellors are engaged in routine work. This retreat gave them an opportunity to interact and introspect and learn from others. A lot of new things emerged - there might be some specific outcome of this conclave. Each VC who participated will go home much richer, more well-informed and maybe with some plan of action for his or her university. The discussion here will definitely impact policy making and five year plans.

—BK Kuthiala
VC, Makhanlal Chaturvedi Rashtriya Patrakarita Vishwavidalaya
It’s an excellent break for us from files and routine discussions. It was very good for us to connect with people - the exchange was educative, the discussion meaningful and the topics of great relevance to the education system at large. The interactive sessions, especially, were extremely enjoyable.

—Ratnam V Rajakumar
Rajiv Gandhi University of Knowledge Technologies

I’ve especially enjoyed the keynote sessions. Every intervention is an opportunity to learn; the discussions have planted some thoughts in my head and I’m sure I will pursue them in discussion with my colleagues.

—Amarlal Kalro
Provost, Ahmedabad University

I believe this is the first time that Amrita University has had a representation here. Several things have struck me—one is the high level of interaction—all the participants have been very open to sharing their opinions and giving inputs. I think that all these perspectives will be very helpful to all of us. We have a lot of food for thought thanks to these three days of discussion. I thought the café session was particularly brilliant in bringing lots of people together.

—Sriram Devanathan
Coordinator, Accreditation and Quality Assurance Cell, Amrita University
In the third edition of the VCs’ Retreat, *EDU* chose “Benchmarking with the Best: Rankings, Accreditation and Beyond” as the theme of the Retreat. By the end of the Retreat, the participants unanimously agreed that the topic, by virtue of provoking some serious thought on the quality of higher education institutions, could not have been better chosen.

But let’s start at the very beginning...
In his keynote address, “Assessment and planning in India’s higher education — a view from the top”, Ved Prakash, Chairman of the UGC, set the tone for the Retreat. With remarkable foresight, he brought up several of the issues that would be discussed at length by the participants over the next three days.

His speech revolved around the 3Es that higher education must strive for—expansion, equity and excellence. These three, he said, must be achieved together—for instance, a single-minded pursuit of extension is as harmful as an obsession with equity which might confine the pursuit of excellence. He spoke strongly for the need for meritocratic research institutions led by able administrators but also emphasized the importance of teaching in skill-development, especially for first-generation learners.

But one message underscored Mr. Prakash’s address, the message that collaboration is the key to the 3Es. Private initiative in education, of the kind that the Tatas, Tagores and Syeds fuelled, needs to be revitalised. Public regulators should not be viewed by institutions as adversaries.

“Together we can achieve it much faster. Collaboration is the key to the 3Es.”

Ved Prakash
Chairman, UGC
In its September issue, EDU had presented the results of a survey it had conducted across educational institutions. Respondents of the survey (university administrators and professors in India) had been asked to both objectively and subjectively share their views on benchmarking, accreditation and ranking. Many of the discussions at this retreat was thus an extension of this theme.

Since the VCs’ Retreat brings together some of the stalwarts of Indian higher education, it is the ideal forum to discuss issues around benchmarking, accreditation and ranking, which are all seen as drivers or indicators of quality.

Focused on looking at practical solutions the VCs’ Retreat held at the Pullman Hotel from 6-8 September helped institution leaders to think out of the box.
EDU recognises that to leverage its demographic advantage, India must infuse quality into its higher education institutions. Since the VCs’ Retreat brings together some of the stalwarts of Indian higher education, it is the ideal forum to discuss issues around benchmarking, accreditation and ranking, which are all seen as drivers or indicators of quality.

The survey lent itself easily to discussion. Only 32-36% of respondents across subsets had said that international ranking criteria were applicable to India. Ved Prakash echoed this sentiment in his address, dissecting the problems of global ranking and accreditation and propounding the need for an indigenous method of ranking. He explained that the government and regulators are concerned about quality, and that although assessment has its limitations, they would strive to evolve widely acceptable parameters that will put a seal of quality on Indian institutions.

As the sessions progressed, this theme formed the backdrop of many discussions. In the panel discussion on “Translating Policies into Action”, the moderator Ashok Saxena, the VC of Galgotias University, highlighted the importance of rankings in instituting a virtuous cycle wherein high rankings attract good students, who in turn, attract good faculty, which lends itself to greater financial support and a high morale, all of which feed, once again, into high rankings. Pawan Agarwal, Advisor in the Planning Commission, opined that a major rethinking of benchmarking, accreditation and rankings is in order. For example, mass-scale accreditation often dilutes the quality of institutions. Accreditation must be about self-improvement like it is in the west. Dinesh Paliwal, Member Secretary of the National Board of Accreditation (NBA), pointed out that since the Indian economy is inextricably linked to the global economy, its institutions must be comparable to those abroad. He also stressed the importance of research at the undergraduate level. H.A. Ranganath, Former Director of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council, cited the National University of Singapore as an example of a university which has developed into a world-class institution in a few decades. Indian institutions too must recognize quality gaps; enhance the quality of
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“Credibility in ranking is the need of the day”
Prem Vrat, Vice Chancellor, ITM University

Teaching, learning and evaluative methods; attract post-doctoral students; focus on recharging faculty by instituting performance-based pay and more promotions; and improve publication status of research. Finally, Prem Vrat, the Vice Chancellor of ITM University, very succinctly sketched out the differences between benchmarking – an internal process emulating best practices, accreditation – an evaluation of the minimum standard, and ranking – the process of comparing one institution with another. He vehemently opposed mandatory accreditation and lamented the crisis of finding credible, capable assessors in India. Credibility in ranking, according to him, is the need of the day.
“The world’s oldest democracy and the world’s largest democracy are facing similar problems. They need to, as Obama mentioned in his speech on higher education, increase access, equity and quality.”

Ian Solomon, Vice President, Global Engagement, University of Chicago

“In India power lies increasingly with the state governments”

Sumantra Bose, Professor, International and Comparative Politics, London School of Economics

“There is no substitute for excellence”

Jane Ohlmeyer, Vice President, Global Relations and Professor of Modern History, Trinity College

On Day 2, Ian Solomon, the Vice President of Global Engagement at the University of Chicago, in his incisive keynote address, expounded, among other things, the pros and cons of rankings. He observed that rankings often have several failings – 1) in their inclusion and exclusion of certain variables, they may not have universal applicability (and therefore, may not necessarily make sense for India); 2) the data they use may be poor, unreliable and biased; and 3) they might have an adverse impact on institutions by distorting pedagogical integrity or encouraging their use as a mere threshold instead of as an incentive to do better. Yet, rankings, he opined can also be immensely helpful by providing powerful information to stakeholders like university leaders, students, parents, policymakers, investors. Thus, Solomon advocated the need for transparent methodologies, the recognition of separate categories within rankings, the use of multiple measures, the incentivizing or mandating of better data (perhaps through penalty for fraudulent disclosure) and the freedom for institutions to sculpt their own objectives.

Jane Ohlmeyer, the Vice President for Global Relations and Professor of Modern History at Trinity College, in her keynote speech on Day 3 provided an overview of some of the most respected global ranking systems (Shanghai Rankings, QS, Times Higher Education, Leiden) and explained the methodology behind them. She then presented the experience of her own institution to illustrate how rankings, by allowing an institution to benchmark against other institutions, can be a powerful signal of the efficacy of policies. She suggested that if an institution wants to participate in the rankings game, it should establish a strategic planning unit, an external communications unit, maximise publications and citations, institute open access for in-house publications and put in place international mobility programmes to create a network of global ambassadors.
Research and Teaching: Is there a choice to be made and how can excellence be achieved?

Right through the Retreat, a subject of much debate was the place of research in an academic institution. In a panel discussion on Day 2 entitled “Research output and orientation as indicators of quality”, MK Surappa, the Director of IIT Ropar, clearly laid out the importance given to number of papers published and number of citations per paper in international rankings. He then showed that although many Indian institutions rank very high on the former, their research impact is very low. Thus, he concluded, average citation per paper needs to increase. Rameshan agreed that research was essential for any academic institution because it leads to knowledge creation, as opposed to simply knowledge dissemination. However, several of those present were of the opinion that institutions can be teaching institutions and do not have to engage in research. K Ramnarayan, the VC of Manipal University said that some universities are intended only to teach. ORS Rao, VC of the Institute of Chartered Financial Analysts of India University, agreed that first the main stakeholder, the student, needs to be served. Nikhil Sinha, the VC of Shiv Nadar University, exemplified the sentiment using the status of Swarthmore College as an excellent teaching institution which teaches its undergraduates to do research but does not feel the need to have a postgraduate research facility. Excellence, in his opinion, should be the only focus. While every faculty member should teach and research, the institution itself can decide what to focus on. However, GRC Reddy, the Director of National Institute of Technology Goa, strongly opined that research and teaching go hand in hand, a belief that KK Raina, the Acting Director of Thapar University, echoed by suggesting that the dichotomy between teaching and research has been created by academics.

In another discussion on “Why quality faculty is the key to determining the quality of an institution”, the VCs shared their insights on how to attract and develop quality faculty. Malabika Sarkar, the VC of Presidency University, spoke about her university’s efforts to ensure quality faculty by inviting interviewers from outside West Bengal to select the newly created university’s first faculty. She emphasized the importance of research capabilities, communication skills and mentoring abilities in a professor. She also suggested the use of faculty feedback forms and awards to motivate faculty, and the need to make their research output public. RK Mittal, VC of Rajendra Agricultural University put forth the problem of supply—very few people want to become professors because they are attracted instead by job opportunities along the way. In this context, Manoj Datta, Former Director of Punjab Engineering College, expressed the necessity for private universities to pay good salaries to those entering academia. A plethora of other solutions were put on the table – while S Sreenivasa Murthy, the VC of Central University of Karnataka, said that autonomy was the key because in the current system, there is over-regulation by the AICT and the UGC, R Perumalsamy, VC, Noorul Islam University said that workshops should be conducted with professors to ensure skill development. Gautam Sinha, Director of IIM Kashipur, suggested industry-academia osmosis: practising managers should be placed in academia, the system should allow good practitioners to take time off to pursue degrees.
Another recurring motif at the VCs’ Retreat was technology. On Day 1, in a discussion on “How technology has transformed from being an enabler to a driver of quality in higher education” the moderator C Rajakumar, the VC of Jindal Global University, asked if technology is an integral part of teaching. KK Raina the VC of Thapar University said that technology has helped education by providing important tools. GRC Reddy, the Director of NIT Goa, listed the benefits of technology in removing communication barriers and building skills through virtual classrooms. BN Jain, the VC of BITS Pilani, shared an example from his institution of a multi-campus videoconferencing mechanism that gave faculty members more time to engage in research. To the question “How can technology keep the idea of the university intact?”, he responded that disintegration of the university was not the major issue; the major issue was how to make technology more inclusive. Rich Rice, the Director of Texas Tech University’s English Media Lab, agreed that every person in the university needs access to technology. However, Kamalesh Misra, the VC of Auro University, and Bhuvanesh Sharma, the VC of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi Vedic Vishwavidyalaya, wondered if by using technology, we would lose the human touch, their reservations culminating in the question: “How do you teach electrical engineering in a virtual classroom?”

Later in the day, in his keynote address, Rich Rice showed the congregation some very interesting examples of the Media Labs in his university, which by encouraging BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) and setting up alcoves where students have to face each other, actively promote peer communication and learning. He also made a number of interesting suggestions that Indian institutions could adopt as best practices (while acknowledging India’s more serious problems of poverty and access to electricity) – 1) Graduates could teach undergraduates 2) Innovative teaching methods such as asking students to write photo-essays instead of traditional essays 3) Making syllabi and course material available online 4) Encouraging independent learning by giving students computers and letting them figure things out for themselves.

The following day, Daphne Koller, the founder of Coursera, the world’s leading MOOC (Massive Online Open Course)
joined the Retreat via videoconference, to address the participants on “The Online Revolution: education for everyone”. She shared the story of Coursera from its inception in 2011 when two computer courses were made available online, to its current status as an education hub where top private and public universities across the world teach courses of every kind in a multitude of languages to the world at large. Professor Koller regaled the audience with stories from across the globe—of a group of American women from underprivileged backgrounds passing an MBA exam, of a seventeen-year-old Indian boy without the privilege of a “good education” completing two MOOCs, a professor from Princeton saying that he had gained more from his interactions with his online class than with the homogenized groups he was used to lecturing to. She also explained some of the processes in place—computer grading, instant feedback and verification.

Edupreneurs, Corporates and Quality

In a fascinating session called “How Edupreneurs define quality and set benchmarks for their institutions”, HP Rama, President of Auro University and Prabhat Jain, founder of Pathways respectively spoke about the need to create private institutions of worth. In the context of his own two-year-old private institution, Rama said that quality must be a moving target; an institution must be progressive and dynamic. Jain said that the difference between an edupreneur and entrepreneur is that the primary motive of the edupreneur is to create quality, not make profit. In his view, an edupreneur has to be patient with his capital because returns will not come in the first few years. In the Indian context, corporate best practices must be married with quality.

An equally stimulating discussion on “How corporates measure and influence the quality of educational institutions” saw all the academic leaders vociferously propose a change in thinking that will make students more “employable”. Nikhil Sinha quoted the AAC&U Survey of International Employers to accentuate an employer’s need for innovation, critical thinking, problem solving skills and capabilities that cut across majors in his prospective employees. Employers recognise the importance of a liberal arts education, which will impart both field-specific knowledge as well...
as a broad range of skills to its employees. Amarlal H Kalro, the Provost of Ahmedabad University, agreed that one reason students are “unemployable” is that they have no exposure to the arts, humanities and social sciences, and criticised the present system for forcing students to specialise prematurely. Both he and Kamlesh Misra propounded the need to restructure the curriculum and introduce a more general education. Anoop Swarup, the VC of Jagran Lakecity University, and Prafulla Agnihotri, the Director of IIM Trichy, each made a strong case for experiential learning. Agnihotri spoke specifically about the need to change the pedagogy in business schools—for instance, case study methodology which simply prompts shallow answers like “increase the ad budget by 5%” from fresh graduates should be replaced with a practical orientation that suits the Indian context. RS Grewal, the Chief Adviser of Indus International University, echoed this sentiment—institions should not blindly copy IIM methodologies.

Un-conferencing and Unwinding

VCs’ Retreat 2013 gave its participants the opportunity to break away from the traditional lecturer-to-audience and panel discussion modes by organising the Ideas Café and the Un-conference.

In the Ideas Café on Day 2, the academic leaders moved from one table (where only the moderator was a constant) to another in groups of 5-8 and discussed for fifteen minutes each, a series of topics ranging from the potential evolution of accreditation to the formalizing of benchmarks to the need for IIM Trichy, each made a strong case for experiential learning. Agnihotri spoke specifically about the need to change the pedagogy in business schools—for instance, case study methodology which simply prompts shallow answers like “increase the ad budget by 5%” from fresh graduates should be replaced with a practical orientation that suits the Indian context. RS Grewal, the Chief Adviser of Indus International University, echoed this sentiment—institions should not blindly copy IIM methodologies.

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In Conclusion

The Annual Vice Chancellors’ Retreat 2013 had it all – fiery debates on the use of technology in classrooms, heated discussions on the place for research in an academic institution and impassioned arguments for and against the use of international rankings. But what was particularly striking was the prescriptive tone for rankings. Ideas flowed freely at each table while scribes from EDU took notes so that these ideas could be formulated later into a policy note for the government.

The Un-conference on Day 3 had an equally interesting unformat. Ten attendees submitted topics of their interest on Day 2. These were then put to vote and the six that came out on top were taken up for discussion in small groups, in an entirely informal setting.

At the close of Day 2, Sumantra Bose, Professor of International and Comparative Politics addressed the house on “Transforming India: challenges to the world’s largest democracy”. His assessment of the transformation of party politics was both clinical and nuanced, and gave delegates the chance to digress momentarily from issues around higher education, and ask questions instead on politics in West Bengal, Mayawati and the participation of the middle class in the political system. Dr. Bose’s lecture was followed by a “Sufi Night” where Fareed Hasan and Nizamuddin Khan mesmerised the crowd with his music and even sang numbers that the audience requested.

Un-conference on Day 3 was a new format that was well received.

Sufi singers Fareed Hasan and Nizamuddin Khan accompanied by their troupe mesmerised the crowd with their music and even sang requested numbers.

Cover Story

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