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University rankings

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US News and World Report, British Times Higher Education Supplement (THES), Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China, and German Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE) usually provide university rankings globally based on surveys of thousands of experts. In the recent 200 rankings announced by THES, only two IITs figured. Is it possible for our academic institutions to climb up the ladder?

I have some experience with the Chinese students. They are really a very strongly motivated lot. They do not let go anything that is taught to them without proper understanding. They hunt for the teacher, books in the library and dive deep into the Internet and they do not give up until they have the feeling of completeness. They are very sincere. However, the Chinese students are not very sharp, especially when they are making their studies in a foreign language such as German or English.

I have some experience with the German students. The first thing a German student says in the morning, when he gets up from bed is not 'God' but 'Versuch' (experiment). Unless he does some experiment studies and analyses the data on a daily basis, he feels restless. Their university curriculum runs with a heavy dose of 'Übung' (exercises) and 'Praktikum' (practicals). Written examinations are few and students are tested extensively by 'Mündlicheprüfung' (oral examinations).

German students are very proud of their own educational system and hardly anyone moves out of the country for higher studies. The German educational system, including Engineering and Medicine, is free and is largely supported by industry.

I have some experience with the American students. Their studies are mostly individualised in the form of projects and case studies. Classroom teaching is nominal. The universities are blessed with the faculty who do not normally indulge in either hypocrisy or sycophancy. So the students also turn out to be genuine to the core.

Regarding the Indian students, no doubt they are very sharp. They grasp things very fast because the English language is their biggest asset. But they do not touch anything that is not useful for the examinations. They are after marks, grades and ranks and their learning is superficial.

Intellectual child labour

Their attitude to study can be traced back to the coaching centres they come from. These centres practise rote learning, which takes precedence over the spirit of enquiry, analytical skills and conceptual assimilation of knowledge. Childhood is enlivened through fun, games and hobbies. Some ambitious parents deprive their children of their childhood by sending them for tuitions and coaching at a very young age, which is a kind of intellectual child labour.

Indian students make choices of courses based on market forces without being conscious of their internal urge. I know one student, who has tremendous aptitude for Physics but joined in Medicine. The reason given by his father is that an M.Sc. degree does not fetch a good alliance with a good dowry compared with MBBS. While the universities strive for excellence, they are handicapped by poorly motivated students.

Moreover, our universities have a moral obligation to perform. They follow reservation policies stipulated by the government from time to time to provide social justice to the needy. Hence the universities have limited control over the quality of the students. The university rankings announced by the foreign agencies are worth a dime, when compared with this noble task of offering equal opportunities to every Indian citizen.

Wherever we go, knowledge, skills and social commitment appear to be the three components of any educational system. Even if one is denied adequate attention, the system is bound to remain ignominious.

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