Distinctive Roles of Universities

What is the issue?

Given the distinctive social role played by universities, here is why Universities are not comparable to corporations and the reforms needed to fulfil their role.

Why are universities unique?

- Universities are inimitable social organisations.
- They are not corporations.
- They are not think tanks, research organisations, NGOs, media organisations, government agencies or civil society organisations either.
- Universities perform roles that may reflect some intentions and goals of these other entities.
- But they are uniquely situated in the larger context of the society.
- If at all a practical end must be assigned to a University course, it is possibly 'training good members of society.'
- It is the education which gives them a clear, conscious view of their own opinions and judgements.

Why are Universities not corporations?

- **Principles and role** - Corporations are founded on the principles of profitability and return on investment, which shape most of their decisions.
- The social expectations from a corporation are very limited.
- In contrast, universities are founded on the twin principle of creation of knowledge through research and its dissemination by teaching.
- Regardless of the public or private character of a university, they are universally expected to pursue the vision of a common good.
- Universities are thus endowed with the responsibility of providing access to education and are involved in the democratisation of knowledge.
- They provide opportunities for teaching, learning, and research as public service to society, especially to its youth.
- **Assessments** - In assessing the social impact of a corporate entity, quantifiable parameters define the level of success.
- E.g. money invested in CSR initiatives annually, reduction in the carbon footprint, etc
- However, universities, largely, drive individual-specific intangible outcomes

of intellectual growth and holistic development.
- So, there is a need for a long-term horizon to understand their pivotal role in accelerating socio-economic growth and building a knowledge society.

- **Priorities** - Corporations measure sustainability in terms of profit, which requires maximising revenues and minimising costs.
- Universities, on the other hand, are constantly working on improving their faculty-student ratio.
- This indicator reflects the importance of specialised attention to students.
- Another factor is the time at the disposal of faculty members to pursue original and impactful research.
- For example, two of the oldest universities in the world, Oxford and Cambridge.
- These two have a tutorial system of learning and mentoring where faculty and students engage, mostly on a one-on-one basis, discussing the written work of the student.

What are the challenges to Universities?

- One of the greatest challenges that universities around the world face today is in relation to their governance.
- Indian universities are no exception.
- University governance has become complex due to the multifaceted nature of the organisation.
- There are social expectations on it from different stakeholders.
- These include staff, students, parents, accrediting bodies, government departments, regulatory agencies, international partners, and donors.
- It is in this context that the need to recognise the role of universities in society arises.
- They are to be governed in a manner that will fulfil these expectations from a diversified set of stakeholders.

What are the priorities now?

- It is important for universities to reimagine their role and impact in society.
- India needs to make its universities, public or private, more committed to their stated mission.
- This requires a different paradigm of recognising their contributions to the society.
- The three ways to accomplish this are:
    - promoting excellence in teaching and research
    - creating favourable regulatory structures
    - financially empowering universities to fulfil their mission

- Universities should strive to -
    - improve their faculty-student ratio
    - establish more research centres and schools
    - generate more socially relevant knowledge
    - provide an interdisciplinary learning environment
- At these ends, universities cannot function within binding organisational structures that breach the very academic freedom and autonomy that drive them.
- While public universities receive government funding, private universities to a large extent depend on private, philanthropic funding.
- Corporations can provide resources through CSR initiatives and philanthropic donations for universities.
- But, the dependence on financial resources should not weaken the autonomy or independence of the university.
- This has also been underscored in the National Education Policy 2020.
- The pursuit of excellence in teaching and research ought to be the most important objective of a university.
- The students remain at the centre of institutional governance and all efforts need to be taken with a view to fulfilling their goals and aspirations.
- The accountability of a university is to be achieved on the basis of its own commitment and capacities to fulfil its stated mission.
- This, in turn, must be benchmarked against global standards of quality.

Source: The Indian Express

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