Where Are Indian Institutions Going Wrong?

BY **NIKHIL GOVIND** ON **03/01/2018** • **2 COMMENTS**

Pankaj Chandra's new book provides a detailed analysis of everything that is faulty in higher education in India and how the corrosion can be stemmed.


The book is a rare, necessary, comprehensive and action-oriented book-length studies in the field. Credit: PTI

Higher education will never quite have the immediate urgency of healthcare (for example, the shocking reports of a live twin being found in a plastic bag). But in its own way, it too is equally about the kind of mental 'death' that literally millions of college-going students suffer in the travesty that is college education today.

It is even more unfortunate that media reports on the issue with inadequate understanding – rankings make it to the first page, even though it is always the same sorry story of how few Indian institutions do well. Yet, just as the story of the twins is only the tip of the iceberg of the healthcare industry, so too are rankings only a superficial indicator of what is wrong with colleges and universities.

In contrast, *Pankaj Chandra's Building Universities That Matter: Where are Indian Institutions Going Wrong* (Orient Blackswan, 2017) is an impressively detailed look at the ordeal that higher education is for the country.

This comprehensive account takes into account many dimensions – Chandra's book chapters self-explanatorily refers to these dimensions. There are chapters on reminding us of the original purpose of education; on the current and extreme vulnerabilities of this special type of institution; on the organisational and governance issues; on pedagogy (it is often completely forgotten that universities exist primarily for students, not just research); on the spreading culture of "un-inquiry" and cynicism and the consequent physical decay of campuses and infrastructure; on the urgent need for a stronger civil society movement to stem this (again, editorialising and hand-wringing in the media is insufficient); and on the way forward, and how some of this corrosion may be stemmed.
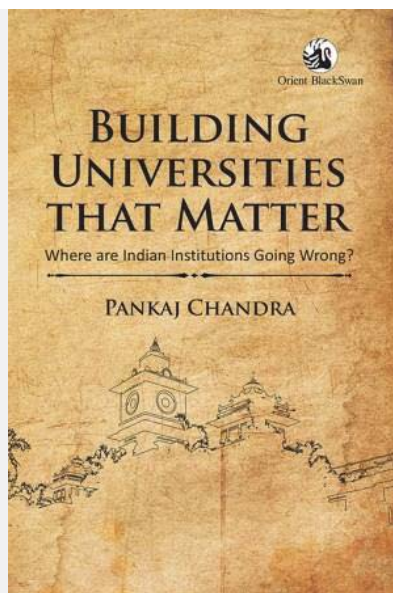
Pankaj Chandra
Building Universities That Matter: Where are Indian Institutions Going Wrong
Orient Blackswan, 2017

Chandra's is one of the larger books on the subject, totalling nearly 350 pages. The passion that informs the subject occasionally makes it a tad repetitive. But the passion is understandable as Chandra is well-equipped to take on the subject –he is a practitioner in the arena as a current vice-chancellor at Ahmedabad University, and had earlier been a director at an Indian Institute of Management (IIM), a member of the Yashpal Committee and so on. So he does have many sides covered – policy, institutional level practice, experience with new as well as established institutions, apart from notable academic and research qualifications. All of this feeds into the book, and this review can only do justice to a few of the major strands.

A missing link

One of the key issues Chandra flags from the preface itself is the lack of trust between all stakeholders – from the individual student with their anxious parents, all the way up to the highest governmental body.

This lack of trust has stymied all efforts at decentralisation-led innovation – indeed, this lack of trust has been used as an excuse by the worst selves of all bodies. Over-regulation has led to a corresponding hardening of bureaucratic minutiae on the part of the most conservative aspects of all managements (public and private), deeply retarding a love of learning in classroom pedagogical practice, syllabi evolution, evaluations, admissions process etc. When there is a lack of trust, the first casualty is any attempt at modifying the current, stale classroom atmosphere. Chandra's insight is that it is the genuine student/ faculty/progressive governmental/employer/management that suffers. And it is the student/faculty/management which has an instrumental, indifferent or cynical attitude to college degrees that profits.

This is why reform is so hard – all parties are internally split, and the status-quo has a large number of adherents across all stakeholders (managements, regulators, faculty, students, parents) who profit greatly from the current inertia. A direct line of continuity traverses industrial-scale coaching centres, and the university classroom itself.

Pankaj Chandra. Courtesy: Ahmedabad University

How then can the classroom be protected, and allowed to grow? Chandra argues that regulators must encourage different institutions to develop their own individuality (in terms of courses offered, research trajectories, social outreach and so on).

Here, regulators need to build trust in institutions that they would be given resources, time and opportunity to individuate in terms of content (the research university is different from the liberal arts college which is different from the mass professional college which is different from the state university). Chandra remarks:

"Why should experiments in higher education be approved by the President?..Such a system makes organisational leaders either subservient to a false structural hierarchy or remain in perpetual conflict with policymakers and regulators…The weakness of such a governance structure is that it treats good and bad institutions alike. The better ones suffocate in this environment, which impact their quality. The bad institutions, whose behaviour these structures are meant to control, continue to mismanage their institutions or coast through at a low equilibrium".

A leadership vacuum

At present, there are too many regulatory bodies, dominated at key decision-making levels by non-academics who have little experience (and hence understanding) of how the best international universities work. How can one hope to be an internationally ranked institution when the leadership of these bodies has hardly anybody who has studied in a top-ranking university?

Chandra mentions the case of his own bathetic appointment as director, IIM (Bangalore):

"Search committee did not have a single academic scholar, and the meeting was held in a public sector unit office in Delhi…'How could they assess my academic credentials?' I wondered then, and continue to do so. Did the committee know what the campus needed and what kind of leadership characteristics would best suit this requirement? The 'discussion' lasted barely twenty minutes."

The same kind of extra-academic input vitiates all evaluations, be they appointments or syllabi and research content. Chandra comments:

"These bodies (UGC and AICTE) were supposed to operate independently of the policymakers. Their role was to help institutions seek excellence while promoting access. In reality, the UGC and AICTE have become the implementation arm of the MHRD, rather than remaining independent think-tanks on higher education policy."

Thus not only the classroom level, but equally the highest policy level, is bedevilled by the fundamental lack of trust. Instead of being a nurturing environment, it is a punitive one, and consensus is sought on the lowest level of bureaucratic convenience (mountains of Excel spreadsheets signifying little), rather than academic excellence and student joy at learning.

No doubt many institutions have offended, but instead of swift justice being meted out to offenders and a moving-on, there is a perennial state of uncertainty for all. Ideally, space, time and goodwill should be freed up so that these bodies further nurture the many non-commercial goals that are their mandate: access, support for the basic sciences and humanities, insistence on more contextual and relevant India-specific research, need on improving the quality and design of all-India exams for students and faculty, building all-India peer databases of experts and research resources, insistence on more credible academics on boards, regularly communicating

decisions to universities by consultation rather than by fiat, and so on. We are a young country with a last shot at sustainable and meaningful growth, so concerned students and their governments must learn to read such complex works as Chandra's for problems that are also indubitably complex – and then one needs to act with understanding, speed and a spirit of collaboration.

One awaits more such heartfelt, necessary, comprehensive, practice and action-oriented book-length studies in the field.

Nikhil Govind is the head of the Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities, Manipal University.