

## 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.

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