Crisis in the university system

Three issues relating to the university system in India have been the subject of intense debate among academics recently. These are the international rankings of our higher education institutions, institutes of eminence and graded autonomy to some Universities. Much of the debate focuses on recent history but, sadly, overlooks the impact of implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission that came into effect in 1992. The implementation has been a spectacular success in terms of providing access to students from such social backgrounds who never hoped or dreamt of it. Independent of social background, students can now take access for granted, thereby transforming the higher education landscape. A manifestation being that it is common to see Ph D students whose parents are daily wage earners or casual labourers, or from families that did not have this kind of access. This has been accompanied by an increase in the number of universities in the country. A situation peculiar to India is the proliferation of colleges with almost no mechanism to regulate their quality. It has long been realized that mere affiliation to a university and following the syllabus laid down by it does not ensure quality. The quality of students is, of course, strongly dependent on the quality of teachers available which is in turn dependent on parameters such as qualification, selection procedure, salary, etc. The infrastructure in these colleges can, at best, be described as pathetic in most cases. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that universities offering postgraduate (PG) education are at the downstream end of this quality chain. It appears that the previous generation of academic leaders were unprepared for the change in demographics of students accessing higher education over the last 25 years, and did not foresee the situation that exists now. The need to resolve conflict between academic and social correctness is a case in point. The current academic leaders have, as a result, inherited systems whose relevance in the present set of circumstances is debatable. One example is the large number of litigations about faculty recruitments which has led to majority of vacancies being unfilled in most State and Central Universities, with the spectre of departmental closure looming large in some cases. This must also be seen in the context of expectations of resource generation, depleting financial support for public-funded institutions and impact on the quality of education being provided thereof.

As an alumnus of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, I am proud of its achievements and international ranking. However, it is difficult to fathom how, IISc or a handful of such institutions can carry the burden of making the entire higher education ecosystem world class. A fact that is often forgotten is that majority of the top-ranked universities of the world have strong undergraduate, PG and Ph D programmes in social science, humanities and creative/fine arts, in addition to science, engineering and medicine. Another fact is that the best-ranked institutions in India are science and technology (S&T) based, which makes the national rankings questionable, since they compare apples and oranges. A third fact is that these S&T institutions are at the downstream end of those very low-ranked universities, as their own students rarely continue for PG and Ph D programmes.

Clearly, the university system is in a crisis and the morale of the stakeholders is fairly low. While it is necessary to make the system more accountable, this cannot be achieved by starving universities of funds leading to sub-standard infrastructure, resulting in below-par education. The need is to strengthen the university system without which the downstream institutions might collapse under the weight of upstream mediocrity.

M. Ghanashyam Krishna

School of Physics,
University of Hyderabad,
Hyderabad 500 046, India
e-mail: mgksp@uohyd.ernet.in

CSIR institutions in SIR 2019

The SCImago Institutions Rankings (SIR) cover research-focused institutions in the Government sector globally. The 2019 version of the report has appeared online recently[1]. SIR uses a composite indicator set on a scale of 0 to 100 that combines three different sets of indicators based on research performance (50% of the total weight, using primary bibliometric data from SCOPUS), innovation outputs (30% of the total weight, based on PATSTAT) and societal impact measured by their web visibility (20% of the total weight).

For several years now we have reported in these pages the progress of Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) institutions within India and globally[2–6]. Ranking is based on results generated each year from the data retrieved over a period of five years ending two years before the edition of the ranking. For instance, rankings for 2019 are based on results from the five-year period 2013–2017. The web indicators are calculated based on the last year. Institutions must have published at least 100 papers in the SCOPUS database during the last year of the selected time period. Here we track rankings of leading CSIR institutions from 2015 to 2019. In the 2019 report, 6459 institutions are ranked globally, of which 297 are from India (i.e. 4.6%). The government sector in India accounts for 69 institutions (up from 62 last year)[6]. Among these, 29 are constituent laboratories of CSIR.

Table 1 shows how the global rankings of CSIR and its top institutions have changed in recent years because of global competition. Except for the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology,