FOSTERING SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: COVID-19 & BEYOND

WEBINAR

Co-convened by PRIA International Academy & Association of Indian Universities

8TH APRIL, 2020

The UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education and PRIA co-convened a webinar on "*Fostering Social Responsibility by Higher Education: COVID-19 and Beyond*" with the Association of Indian Universities (AIU) on April 8th 2020.

Higher education institutions can take social responsibility during this challenging time and in the aftermath of the pandemic by disseminating accurate health and hygiene information, carrying out trans-disciplinary research post the crisis to understand the physical, mental, social and economic repercussions, and building capacities of local institutions to effectively deal with such crises.

KEY MESSAGES

In this situation of the pandemic, universities, colleges and other higher education institutions must demonstrate their social responsibility by mobilizing their huge intellectual, human and physical resources to respond in meaningful manners.

1. ***IMMEDIATE MEASURES***

As the most important challenge during the lockdown is to prevent and arrest the spread of infection of corona virus, higher education institutions can mobilise their 37 million students and more than 2 million faculty/staff through these measures:

- To spread awareness of key health and hygiene messages amongst communities and neighbourhoods where these students and faculty live. Staying at home, maintaining social distance, wearing masks, washing hands with soap, stop spitting, etc are several measures that central and state governments' health departments have been propagating. There are a number of simple posters and message videos that can be shared by HEIs through their current and past students to raise awareness wherever they live during this lockdown.

-Likewise, this situation has resulted in sudden loss of employment and income for millions of daily wage earners, construction workers, domestic workers, vendors and others in each city and community. Food camps and shelters are being arranged by governments and other NGOs and students and faculty of all HEIs can be alerted to ensure that no one remains hungry, and delivery of essential supplies to such families can be facilitated.

-In addition, all governments have announced a number of welfare packages including additional supply of PDS rations, cash transfers, advance payments for pensions and quick start of MNREGA and other public schemes for generating employment. Sine a large number of informal sector workers lack awareness, digital capacities and access to such service providers, once again, this large body of students, staff and faculty of HEIs can play important roles immediately, in locations wherever they are.

-The pandemic and sudden lockdown has created a sense of panic, fear and isolation amongst people. Many are living alone, in shelters or quarantines, with limited personal connections. There is a need to provide help, help-lines, counselling and other support services to many who are facing mental stress and related anxieties today. Special attention to women and children may be necessary, since new conditions for abuse and harassment may have arisen. Many HEIs have already started such support services for their own students and faculty/staff; perhaps these can be extended to their families, neighbours and local communities.

2. MEDIUM-TERM

When universities and colleges would open, possibly after summer break, in July, there would be an opportunity for HEIs to undertake teaching and research in an engaged manner within their neighbouring rural and urban communities. Several steps can be planned in advance to support national and state governments, local administration, Panchayats and municipalities, businesses and NGOs in creating opportunities for livelihood and improving public health:

- Redesign curriculum of current courses to introduce a component of field study to monitor current situation in those communities and neighbourhoods

- Engage with local administration, panchayats, municipalities to support them in identifying poor and vulnerable families and persons who have not been able to access various government benefits, and share the same with relevant agencies.

- Undertake widespread mutli-disciplinary studies on public health practices and situations in such communities (both rural and urban) in partnership with local communities, including competencies and skills of frontline workers and community leaders, and innovate solutions for the same

– Participate actively to support frontline health and sanitation workers in spreading awareness and behavior change communication

– Undertake analysis of loss of employment and livelihood due to pandemic, and innovate locally appropriate solutions for sustainable livelihoods

– Build capacities of panchayats and small nagarpalikas for disaster-preparedness such that they can be robust institutions for addressing any future situations

– Review domain knowledge systems in light of pandemic's long-term message for changes in design and use of space, local resilience, water savings, local production for food security etc.

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FOSTERING SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY BY HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: COVID-19 & BEYOND

DISSEMINATION OF PROPER HEALTH AND HYGIENE INFORMATION

Students and Faculty at higher education institutions can play a role in debunking myths related to COVID-19 and disseminate key information in prevention of the same.

TRANS-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Carrying out trans-disciplinary research post the crisis to understand the physical, mental, social and economic repercussions of the pandemic is essential and important for dealing with future crises.

CAPACITY BUILDING

The capacity of frontline workers and local institutions makes a difference in situations faced on ground. Higher education institutions can support these local bodies bystrengthening their capacities.

(Founder-President of PRIA, Co-Chair UNESCO in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education)

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities and educational institutions across the country have been shut down. Thus, the main focus of these institutions has been towards finding new mechanisms to complete the learning process that has been disrupted. Various online platforms and other support systems have been established in these efforts.

While the hurdles in the teaching role of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is being addressed at present, there is another aspect where more thought needs to be put: the social responsibility of the HEIs.

Most of the educational institutions in India are involved in some form of community engagement, either through independent efforts or through the National Service Scheme (NSS). Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA 2.0) has also enabled community engagement of HEIs in recent years. One vital step towards mandating the social responsibility of HEIs has recently been announced by the University Grants Commission (UGC) policy *"Fostering Social Responsibility & Community Engagement in HEIs in India"* launched in January, 2020.

This policy mandates the engagement with society as a fundamental principle of teaching, research and service rather than an after-thought. It encourages the students to learn with the community and respect the local culture and knowledge. With the pandemic, the implementation of the policy has become even more urgent and critical, but in new ways, perhaps...

So what roles can students, faculty, staff and institutions of higher education play in response to COVID-19, both in the short and medium terms?

India's higher education system is huge, perhaps the third largest in the world. It has more than 1000 universities and nearly 42000 colleges (under UGC), more than 10000 technical and professional institutions (under AICTE); nearly 37 million students and 2 million faculty/staff are participating in this system around the country. The human, intellectual, physical and material resources available in this system need to be mobilized at this juncture in ways that the needs of communities, urban and rural poor, migrants and others can be responded to. In addition to a public health emergency, COVID-19 is also causing severe economic impacts already as millions have lost daily income, food and shelter.

We invite you to participate in this discussion, to share and learn about ways in which Indian Higher Education system is, and further can, contribute.

DR. PANKAJ MITTAL

(Secretary General, Association of Indian Universities, former Additional Secretary, UGC & Vice Chancellor, BPS University, Haryana)

Dr. Pankaj Mittal highlights the need to understand that the responsibility of the HEIs does not end solely by being responsible to the people within the boundaries of its campus, but rather there is a need to go beyond. The institutions are responsible for the people residing in the communities surrounding the institutions and this holds true especially during the times of a pandemic such as this.

While it is not mandatory for education institutions to engage in social responsibility, Dr. Mittal reflects on recent initiatives that have been undertaken to facilitate institutional engagements with the community.

One such step has been through the Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA) launched by the Ministry of Human Resource Development in 2016. Through this programme, universities have been engaging with local communities through the Panchayats and District authorities. The aim has been to identify the problems prevalent in the villages and in formulating solutions for the same, whether it be through development of new technologies or through customisation of the existing ones.

Another key policy initiative undertaken by the UGC is through its' policy of "Fostering Social Responsibility in Higher Education Institutions in India". This policy also features a two-credit mandatory course for undergraduates and postgraduates wherein they engage with the rural communities. This step was undertaken to ensure that students develop in a holistic manner, appreciating the traditional knowledge existing in the villages and combining the same with the knowledge attained in their classrooms.

Dr. Mittal also discussed another possible avenue of aligning the existing courses with community engagement, giving the example of how students of chemistry could help the farmers by conducting soil and water tests in their labs such that the deficiencies in the same could be communicated to them.

She then provided the example of BPS Women University, Haryana and elaborated on how engagements with the community can lead to positive social impacts.

PROF. ANAND MOHAN

(Registrar, Dayalbagh Educational Institution, Agra)

One of the key questions that lies ahead of the educational institutions in the current situation is that of the upcoming academic session- *"Are we ready to lose on this session?"*

Discussing the steps undertaken by Dayalbagh Educational Institution (DEI), Prof. Anand Mohan shared how they have worked to ensure that there is no gap in the education of the students. The institution has adopted the means of online platforms and open book exams for the upcoming semester.

Another factor that needs to be considered under this lockdown is the ability of the parents to pay for the college fees. To address this matter, DEI has designed a novel scheme: *"Earn while you learn and learn while you earn"*. Under this, the students are involved in various activities, volunteering to help in the dairy work, in the

cleaning or by providing security services during their extra time. In exchange, the institution has decided to waive their fees.

Prof. Anand reminds us that the goal of education is that of reaching the *last*, *the least and the lost*. Thus, one cannot solely be content with solutions provided by the e-learning platforms. There is a large section of the community which may not have access to these technologies or may not have capacity to engage through the same. Thus, efforts need to be made to reach this bracket of the society as well.

While there is an emphasis on practicing social distancing under the current circumstances, Prof Anand reminds us that there is also a need to be more humane and to think beyond oneself.

With the aim to serve the society, the institution has set up 24-hour health care centre. This health centre is managed by 2 doctors with the purpose of providing the service of testing to the common public and further in preparation of the future influx of students on the campus.

DR. NEELIMA GUPTA

(Vice-Chancellor, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, Kanpur)
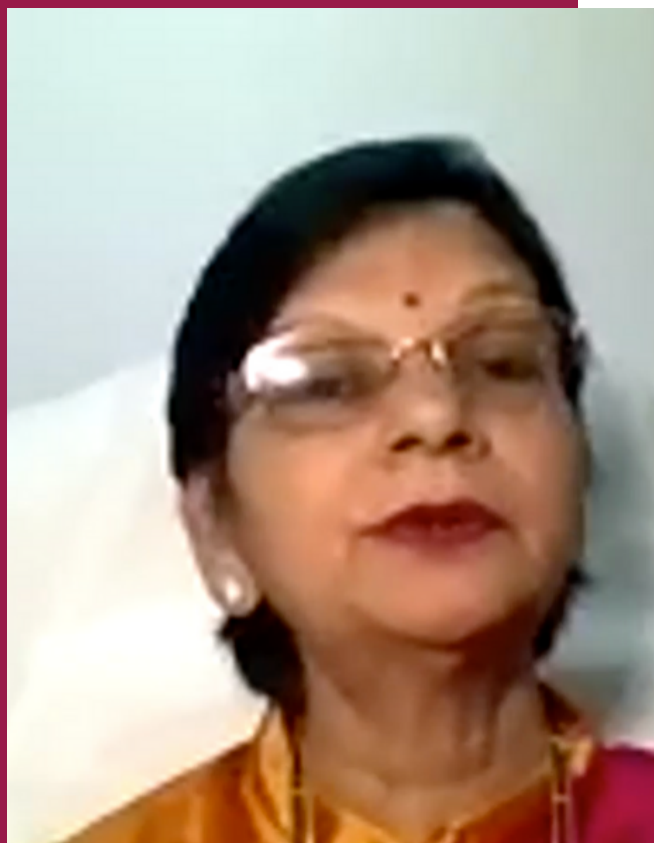
Dr. Gupta believes that as HEIs, there is a need to think very deeply on this issue since the students come from this society and go back to this society. Providing the numbers from Kanpur University, she stated that there are 11,000 affiliated colleges and around 8 lakh students under the university in 11 districts of the state. If one could enable these students as well as the faculty to take up action then a large mass of the society can be reached out to.

Describing some of the initiatives taken by the Kanpur University, Dr. Gupta reemphasizes on Dr. Mohan's point of reaching to one and all. The university started the '*Vidyavani Programme*' which is broadcasted on a regular basis on the radio, thus allowing students in the villages without access to the internet to continue their studies.

One of the critical areas of concern in the country is that of the access to healthcare facility. Health sector remains a major priority under the current situation. With problems faced in both the urban and rural areas in accessing medical facilities, Dr. Gupta highlights the need to improve the resource generation in the country such that improvements in the healthcare infrastructure, in diagnostics and in therapeutics can be achieved. She further discussed how the local rural bodies such as the Gram Panchayats could play a major role in reaching out to the rural community and providing them with these facilities.

Dr. Gupta reminds us that this pandemic is not a one-day problem, rather it is a matter which will continue to persist and thus, it is critical to think beyond COVID-19, it is critical to analyse the aftermath of this pandemic on the community and ponder on what can be done on this matter. As the fear present within the community is something that would continue to persist, CSJMU has set up a counselling center for its students and the community.

PROF. DINESH SINGH
(Chancellor, K.R. Mangalam University,
former Vice-Chancellor, Delhi University)

Prof Dinesh Singh begins by sharing his personal belief that education is the 'search for the self'. In this sense, he believes that Universities exist to provide platforms for the young minds to find their inner calling. This is where he believes the university's engagements with the society can help. He believes that for one to find themselves, they must first understand the needs and challenges of the society and the nation.

The current state of the education system in the country is one which is facilitated solely within the bounds of a classroom. There is a dire need to reorient the current curriculum such that the HEIs build themselves around the needs of the society, allowing for a more hands-on practical method of learning as well as adopting a trans-disciplinary approach. He reminded us about the relevance of the approach adopted by Mahatma Gandhi in linking head and the hands, learning while doing practical work.

Linking knowledge and action together contributes to both enhanced learning and improved solutions for societal challenges.

Prof Dinesh shared an example from his own experience of how such a practical approach helps in the growth of students. Under an innovation centre established under the University of Delhi, Prof Dinesh taught a course on BTech of Innovation with Mathematics. The coursework for the same consisted mostly of project work. During the course, the students read about a village in Aurangabad wherein around the clock water supply system had been built. The students then visited the village and studied the model. They went onto build a mathematical simulation of the same and created a start-up which provided the same system to other villages. Thus, a change in the curriculum could help in not only improving the learnings for the students but also help in the solving the problems of the communities.

Many ideas, practices and queries were shared during the webinar. Given the enthusiastic response of HEIs, further discussions and sharing on this theme may be useful during this period.