



## HEALING OURSELVES TO GAIN HEIGHTS

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In my experience the stark contrast a modern Western University offers to the old Indian average one is that the former invariably occupies a critical place in the future. They are vibrant experiments in the future than obsolete places from the past. Very few Indian Universities come across as such "places in the future". The modern Western Universities guide even their governments, change policies and are producers and distributors of knowledge. In this aspect we do have some success but I think we are, by and large, lagging behind. I will address specifics now.

In my very recent experience, Veterinary and Animal Science education in our State suffers from deficiencies of three speciations.

- (1) Generic crisis resulting from under funding and lack of quality control due to failures in regulation at ICAR and VCI level (please see my article 'Link Labs to the Fields' available in <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Link-labs-to-the-fields/Article1-678286.aspx>).
- (2) Specific academic management issues like poor or no assessment of teaching, research or extension; stiff resistance to accept any sort of accountability mechanisms often linked to administrative issues.
- (3) Student centric issues like less interested students, low self esteem, candidate capability insensitive employment patterns leading to low incentives for academic achievement and a larger than requisite focus on extra curricular activities.

I will prefer to address the last two here since we are in a position to address them mostly by ourselves. Nearly the entire issues in Veterinary Education spring from inadequate faculty development. I don't think that all of it was due to neglect of Veterinary Education in the Kerala Agricultural University. There was parallel leadership failure in the Veterinary faculty. How else do we explain the near total decay of basic infrastructure in Mannuthy the mother campus in comparison with either Horticulture College or our own Wayanad College?

Mannuthy officials told me initially that routine repair funds were not being given, but discussions with KAU revealed that they were neither being sought timely nor followed up adequately. In Veterinary Faculty itself enterprising heads of units have been able to attract even non-KAU funding. A pervasive bureaucratic culture of dealing with teachers and students with negativism and contempt has come to stay. To my mind the present crisis come from this severely short sighted leadership we have unfortunately had. Part of the remedy is to usher systematic reforms in the selection process of leaders - Heads of Departments, Directors and Deans. We need to bring in more turnover, limited firm tenures and overall more competitiveness in selection of leaders. HODs and Deans need to be in rotation and with clear administrative oversight from the officers of the University. We cannot afford a weak or disinterested leadership. They will leave a trail of nemesis and it would take a decade to rebuild even the work culture of the organization.

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Leadership needs to be totally proactive, committed, strong and apolitical. Caste-religious-communal neutrality is critical to effectiveness. If the Deans and HODs are perceived to be objective, proactive and result oriented, then the teachers get automatically motivated. Deserving young researchers are there and they need hand holding and encouragement. Deficits in infrastructure need to be addressed then and there through annual maintenance works before they fulminate into full blown crisis.

When I visited Mannuthy many years later this January, I found that possibly students don't have even adequate functional toilet facility in campus. These are small but highly important things. Officers were not possibly reviewing the status of very routine repairs. I must say that even the College office looked pathetically out of maintenance. For me these things are very important. I insist on spic and span offices and facilities. They reflect capability without uttering a word. Some things need not be said, they have to be demonstrated.

I found that we have not insisted on points based assessment system for career advancement so far while implementing the UGC pay scales. Similarly, Indian Veterinary Council's Teachers' assessment modules and instructions have been quietly shelved. The new University will have to insist on these. We cannot escape the requisite accountability matrix. In Government all officers have to go through some sort of performance evaluation. As a budget supported institution now getting GoI's budget support as well, we will have to demonstrate these elements of accountability. ICAR is going to insist on teacher assessment as part of support and continued accreditation of our courses. We must have all teachers assessed through 360 degree system by year end and throughout.

Some opposition is bound to come, but we cannot be pioneers if we wait for ever. GoI has awarded the one time assistance grant since they

assess us to be a centre of excellence and not a laggard who implements reforms last. When my career was attacked recently as being merely clerical, the biggest defence was the very encouraging and sometimes critical comments my superior colleagues wrote on me during the last thirteen years of a diverse career. Accountability and leadership go together. One stems from the other. With systematic reforms, an ICT based high speed networked administration and manpower training in academic management issues, these are easier to handle provided an acceptance of change is there.

Re-establishing the lost primacy of student centric teaching is critical. Mind set change is the biggest challenge for the academic community. I found a stark difference in attitude and speed in Wayanad than Mannuthy. Too many interpersonal issues are floating around. I must say that we have been very juvenile in handling these with maturity. Many of us have become compulsive complainants. Almost everybody is a rather wounded animal. We would point to our scars and complain endlessly of past unfair treatment. New Institution or an individual cannot heal the past. Cure lies in a better future. For that academic leaders must behave as if there is indeed a future they shape. Sometimes taking the team synergistically forward is like taking children through a forest!

I am afraid too much focus is on "MONEY MATTERS". All conversations with academicians end in percentiles of DA and possible decimal differences and "ARREARS" in huge letters. What about the lost teaching and research opportunities? To cite an example, we produced just 36 PhDs in the last 10 years while we could have comfortably done 200. As a result we have a vicious circle where we don't have qualified teachers to recruit. What could be the social cost of this lapse? Today we don't have enough teachers even to man the requirement of present teaching load. When deputations to fill it up temporarily were considered, masters students wanted vacancies to exist till they graduate. How can we develop an aggressive research agenda without infusing enough numbers even to



teach? We need to be flexible and must allow near perfect solutions. There are no silver bullets in this game.

Nobody has any concrete answers. My general request to academics is to get back to their core competencies research, teach, publish, extend. They are not really strong elsewhere, and that has been proven time and gain. When they dabble in administration they generally fail and politics makes them still bigger failures. They are best with their core area, which they do admirably well when they are focused. Students have slipped quite a bit. Though we are better off comparatively than many States, mature civilized life. the uneven quality of post graduates and even final year graduates was clear in my brief interactions with them. They are not readily employable. PGs need to strengthen basic manners while interacting with a selection board. Here too we are at fault. A College or University is not a place where just some knowledge transfer takes place. It reaches a raw individual some mature civilized life.

All round tightening of instruction and academic standards are required. I am told that allegations of severe academic dilution do exist. Teachers come under pressure to change grades of even failed students. This rot shall be definitely stamped out. Academic process has to be insulated from any sort of student organizational or external interest. It takes much more than sheer theoretical knowledge to be respected as a professional. From this year onwards finishing training and conditioning will be given to final years. Altogether I think too much of extracurricular activities

are on and for many days academic activity is suspended. This has to be reduced to the bare minimum.

University plans to introduce a Screening Aptitude Test for its graduate programmes. Without students with a basic aptitude coming in, neither education nor profession will flourish. The physical plans and new courses are all too easy to achieve if we arrive at an atmosphere of all round positivity in the first year. As a new institution, many road blocks have to be overcome deftly.

I believe that the VC's role is to mentor and empower not to rule. We need to find and inspire at least a dozen leaders who are going to make the elements of the plan for development a big success. Some I have already spotted, some I am looking for. I have been a fairly successful spotter. Coming May we start an intensive manhunt for talent that will take the university into its next level. They will hopefully emerge as the new leaders of KVASU in the next ten years. A very scientific assessment and screening process is underway.

Money is not going to be the binding constraint in this gallop. It is going to be ignited minds that we will be possibly short of demand. Mediocrity and negative thoughts are not welcome in this effort at all. We need to purge them for a vibrant institution harbouring the best Veterinary and Animal Science education in the country if not entire South Asia and counted very highly in the global map of education in our sector.