

CII Conference on Innovation in Higher Education. Kochi February 21, 2012

Speaking Notes of

***Former Ambassador T.P.Sreenivasan, Vice-Chairman, KSHEC**

My association with the CII has been long and deep. It began with a 'Made in India' show in Nairobi in 1996, continued in multiple ways in Washington in the late nineties and more recently with the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas celebrations in India and abroad. It has also been on my mind in the context of the decision of the KSHEC to devise a mechanism by which the industry and higher education institutions in Kerala can work together to mutual benefit. I am grateful that CII has taken the initiative to organize this conference on innovation in higher education and that I have been invited to participate in it.

Innovation is a word that industry has bequeathed to us to mean the adoption of a new idea, a new method or a new device that creates a new dimension of performance. In higher education, it should mean successful exploitation of new ideas, a new way of doing things, a change that improves administrative or scholarly performance, a transformational experience based on a new way of thinking.

Interestingly, the recent debate on innovation has identified what are called 'mature enterprises', which are institutions, in which it is hard to innovate. They are increasingly risk-averse, at times self-satisfied and under fiscal pressures to maintain status quo. Education certainly falls in this category as it is averse to change, it has a certain sense of accomplishment and it is unduly expensive to bring in innovation. As a 'mature enterprise' by definition, it is hard to introduce innovation in the field of education.

One should readily concede that higher education in Kerala has had its accomplishments. It has catered to the changing demands by creating courses, institutions and modern methods of teaching. Facilities for professional courses have multiplied over the years and the quantitative needs for education have been largely met. The best graduates of our institutions have proved competitive outside the state and the country. Having come back to the field of education in Kerala after 40 years, I am truly impressed with our accomplishments within the constraints of resource crunch, extreme competition and politicization.

Whether we call it innovation, reform or upgradation, there is no doubt that higher education need immediate attention. First and foremost, education must be an equalizer in any society. We are unable to provide a level playing field to all as the best education goes to the most paying, not the most deserving. The variation in the availability of infrastructure, by itself, imposes discrimination in

the facilities available to different students. In speaking of reform, we cannot ignore the need for massive infusion of resources to provide the necessary infrastructure to all institutions, whether in the public or the private sector.

Quality enhancement necessarily demands improvement of the faculty across the board. The first requirement of retaining teachers in higher education has been met to the extent that the pay scales have been increased. But we still do not have any linkage between wages and productivity. Continuous assessment of productivity of the faculty is important and the necessary incentives and disincentives must be offered for acquiring new skills and adopting technology to meet the current needs. For this reason, the Higher Education Council proposes the establishment of a State Assessment and Accreditation Council.

Teaching methods in the higher education institutions have to be distinctly different from those used at lower levels. University education should encourage the spirit of enquiry and self study rather than give them prepared lessons. Such an approach should lead to research, which should become the centre of post-graduate education. A total transformation in the relation between the teacher and the taught, the teacher and the researcher and the teacher and the technician must come about at the university level. The university faculty should be the engineers, the philosophers and architects of change.

In most developed countries, important knowledge creation takes place inside the Universities, while here, the Universities merely imbibe ready-made knowledge and expect the industry to absorb their graduates without any inputs from the industry. The Universities should be able to guide investments to the right destinations, create new products and processes and evaluate industrial applications of knowledge generated in the campuses. Educational institutions can be self-sustaining if it can generate surpluses from the technology it develops. Research efforts across institutions can cultivate excellence and avoid duplication. Our universities should not be content with reinventing the wheel. Research in universities should not be an excuse for idleness or a pastime between a degree and a profession. Here, the Council has established a Committee to devise methods for the industry and the universities to work together on research and curriculum.

University education should combine face to face learning with the use of technology as technology cuts costs by sharing assets among different institutions without travel. Universities with large campuses and a considerable student mass will also be economical if technology is appropriately deployed.

Integration of learning with work is another reform that we ought to develop. Applying knowledge is the best way to learn and the teachers themselves should become the best practitioners. Soft skills of collaboration, teamwork,

entrepreneurship and communication are best learnt through practice. Moreover, earning while learning is more crucial in developing countries than in the developed ones.

From Plato's Academy of Ancient Greece to online programmes today, educational institutions have been innovating and reforming themselves. They are under constant stress forced by boards, accrediting agencies and governments, who demand transparency, accountability and tangible evidence of success. In the ultimate analysis, however, success depends on quality, excellence indicators and adoption of technology.

The KSHEC, entrusted as it is with policy reforms in higher education, stresses continuity and change as we have to build on the past accomplishments to shape a system that meets the needs of the future. Whether we call it innovation, reform or change, education should aim at the development of the various faculties of our students so that they may contribute their best towards the progress of the society.

Thank you.

*T.P. Sreenivasan, (IFS 1967)
Former Ambassador of India and Governor for India of the IAEA
Executive Vice-Chairman, Kerala State Higher Education Council, Thiruvananthapuram
Member, National Security Advisory Board,
Member, India-UK Roundtable,
Director General, Kerala International Centre, Thiruvananthapuram.
Cell (91) 9847721656
www.ananthapurimusings.blogspot.com
www.tpsreenivasan.com
twitter.com/sreeniv
J-3, Jawahar Nagar,
Trivandrum-695 003
"Videsha Vicharam" Live on Internet www.asianetnews.tv
Wed 530 pm, Fri 330 pm and Sat 930 am