What a World Class University Is Not

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We have learned much about the attributes of world class universities from my distinguished colleagues on this panel. As the last speaker, perhaps you would allow me to mention in these five minutes a few characteristics that such universities do not have.

First, a world class universities does not simply deliver high quality undergraduate and professional education to its students in their chosen fields. In addition, it takes seriously its responsibility to attract highly talented young people to its graduate programs, and prepares them to become inspiring teachers and innovative scholars to help build the future of society. If they do not, Einsteins of India will continue to sell soap.

Second, a world class university does not live by a sense of entitlement to financial support. Instead, it convinces its society—people, government and business—by its performance that spending their taxes and philanthropy on university is an excellent high return investment in their own future.

Third, it is not possible for a world class university to function neither as a civil service organization run by the rules of a bureaucracy, nor as a business seeking to earn a profit by selling diplomas. Instead, they are successful only when operated by a third administrative model unique to higher education.

Fourth, professional education such as engineering, business, and computer applications which delivers readily marketable skills to students and high tuition fees to institutions are the dessert—rosogollas and jalebis—of higher education. They are sweet and attractive but do not form a wholesome diet for a society. For building a healthy society, we need language, mathematics, sciences, humanities and social sciences—the daal, chapatti and vegetables of education, so to speak. Diet of desserts is attractive, but gives you diabetes and kills you a few years later. A world class university is not a halwai shop offering such unbalanced, unhealthy diet.

Fifth, a world class university is not an employer of the friends and relatives of the powerful. Operating a university by any principle other than merit is the easiest way of making sure that it can never approach the world class status, no matter what else we do.

Sixth, a world class university (and its faculty) do not operate as publication and citation machines. They have a larger goal of advanced instruction and frontier innovation. Publications and citations arise only as byproducts of the pursuit and achievement of such broader goals. Absent such goals, pursuit of publications and citations is barren and fruitless.

Finally, a world class university does not keep its resource flows and finances confidential. It shares them with the society in which it is rooted, from which it draws its sustenance, and to which it devotes the fruits of its hard work to earn its respect and support.

Thank you.

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1 Remarks at Panel Discussion on Building World Class Universities in India, Delhi, November 22, 2017.