We need to customize our education provided to students in a flexible manner: M Jagadesh Kumar

Chairperson of the University Grants Commission, M Jagadesh Kumar.

NEW DELHI: Education sector cannot remain isolated from the rest of the developments and for the new chairperson of the University Grants Commission, M Jagadesh Kumar, online education and use of technology in the physical setup is going to be a focus area. Kumar spoke to the TOI on a range of issues including the common university entrance test filling up vacancies in teaching positions and as well as his term in Jawaharlal Nehru University.

You have spent six years as the VC of JNU during which you have faced many controversies as well...

My stay in JNU has been wonderful for the simple reason that JNU has outstanding scholars and highly aspiring students. That is why it was possible for us to introduce very diverse academic and research programmes and also bring in reforms in the administrative restructuring and admission policies of the university.

In any organization, including educational institutes, growth and reform had to be an intrinsic part. When changes are brought, it is quite likely that people may not be used to those changes. But once the changes have taken place and the results are seen, people will definitely appreciate those changes. And the same thing has happened in JNU too. I wouldn't say I had any brush with controversies because the majority of the students and the faculty members were open to many of the changes that we have introduced. For example, shifting to a computer based test for JNU entrance examination. Today as part of the national education policy (NEP) we are talking about a common entrance examination and it becomes easy for us to transition.

Your plans as UGC head?

There are many challenges, for example, constructing new educational institutes takes time and then you have restricted options for the aspiring students, because there is so much competition for limited seats, lack of access and equity. So now, more than ever, there is a greater need to integrate our education with the knowledge economy which will address many of these challenges. And today with the digital technologies that are coming into various spheres of our life, the education sector also cannot remain aloof from it. We need to reimagine our teaching learning processes in the universities, we have to restructure our governance systems for better efficiency. That's the reason why my first priority will be to implement NEP.

What needs to change in our universities?

They need to recalibrate the way they are imparting teaching and learning, the financial capabilities and diverse cognitive abilities of the students. We need to customize our education provided to students in a flexible manner. India is ahead in introducing digital technology, be it the health system or the facilities provided to the citizens using the online platforms. So why digital technologies cannot be part of our educational system to provide customized high quality anytime, anywhere education at the doorstep of our students?

Your focus priorities areas will be...

To make sure that the higher educational institutes are prepared to absorb this digital technology so that students are enabled to have better access to higher education.

The NEP talks about imparting education, including professional education, in Indian languages. And there are scientific reasons for that. How can we create a system where students have access to the lectures, to the materials that are required for their education in multilingual format? We should also encourage the states and other educational institutes to offer their educational programs in the local languages and these materials should be available freely on the digital platforms. So, this is going to be another important area that I will be working on.

We also need to seriously look into reforming the undergraduate education in our universities. Thanks to the NEP, we can now actually offer four-year degree programmes. The idea is to provide flexibility for the student and provide a wide gamut of choices to the students.

Aren't we over emphasising on online education? Also the four-year undergraduate programme and graded autonomy to institutions, as per critics, will lead to commercialisation of education. Your thoughts?

The four-year program or introducing technologies in education is something that is happening as a part of the evolutionary process. Technologies are part of our lives, we cannot just wish away and the education sector cannot remain isolated from the rest of the developments that are taking place. I agree, as a teacher myself, that physical interaction cannot be replaced by technology as of now. But who knows in future, if we introduce artificial intelligence and virtual and augmented reality. But that is for the future. Now, what we're trying to do are two things – in the physical classroom the students need help in terms of resource materials. So how do you provide this? Now we have various digital platforms. So in order to enhance the learning process that is happening in the physical classroom, you will need to provide all these facilities to the students.

There are 300 million students in the country. And currently only about 40 million students are part of the higher education system. What about the remaining students who would like to get into these colleges? There are many reasons for which they are unable to get into these colleges including limited number of seats in the limited physical universities, financial and personal reasons. But imagine, the same child registers for a degree program online from her home, uses some of these digital platforms and the TV channels and gets educated and gets a degree and becomes employable. So don't we want to provide these skills to our students who are unable to come to a physical campus? And that's the reason why I think we need to focus on both things, develop both the physical and digital infrastructure.

With the kind of digital university which is going to come up, as announced in the budget, to provide flexible access to high quality education it will be very difficult to commercialize the education. When does one commercialize education? When there are limited resources, and there are too many people competing, there is a possibility that people can misuse that situation. But let me tell you that we will not let commercialization of education happen in our country.

The common entrance test is also being looked at with a lot of doubts by the critics?

Because it is a computer based test, there is going to be a lot of flexibility in terms of taking care of the diverse needs of various institutes. Any online test is completely error free. Already some state universities in remote locations are saying this test will be helpful. So even students aspiring for these universities can participate in the common university entrance test. And once the scores are available to the local university, and when the local students apply, use the scores to rank them. We know that admission based on these Class XII examination marks is creating a challenge to us, because there are so many Boards across the country. And there are so many ways of evaluating the students and the percentage is varying across the country. Many universities are keen to come on board.

Internationalisation of Indian education is another focus area of NEP. What is the status?

There is so much talent in our country and high quality educational institutes. There are many countries which highly respect the educational systems of India, for example, in some countries in the African region, in the Middle East, in Central Asia, even in South East Asia. We have many candidates who would like to have access to the higher educational resources that are available here. And it is under the chairmanship of space scientist Dr Radhakrishnan. I am also part of that committee and we are working and discussing with the ambassadors of our own country in various cities and we are planning to discuss with the ambassadors of those countries who are in India on how we can set up our own educational institutes in these countries.

Many countries are interested in even providing the entire funding to these institutes in terms of building the infrastructure and providing the equipment. So, we can ask the host country to completely fund the educational institute and our teachers can go there and teach their students and give the degrees. There are some countries which are not well equipped in terms of providing full support. So, in those cases, they are willing to provide a part of their university to run our programmes. The other interesting model and this is where digital technology becomes handy is some countries are interested in having completely online education. Our teachers will sit in India, teach the students through online mode in the host country, there could be a joint degree or it could be a degree given by our institute or by their Institute. So, you can see that through this process, India can become a hub in providing higher education.

And the other thing that we are working on is inviting the best educational institutes from across the world to come and set up the campuses and there is quite a bit of progress that is being done in contacting these Institute's and we hope that sooner we will have such campuses in India.

The issue of vacancies has been plaguing our institutions for a long time?

That is an ongoing challenge, because you don't want to select somebody who is not well prepared in the sense that they should have a good academic background, demonstrate their research capabilities through their PhD. Therefore, both things will go hand in hand, the educational and research standards in the universities have to be improved so that more high quality PhD students will come out of these institutes. Also the universities had to proactively advertise and shortlist in a shorter time and recruit the faculty. And this is another area where I will definitely be sitting with all the Central University vice chancellors to begin with, and make sure that the vacancies are filled up at the earliest.