JGU vice-chancellor calls for regulatory and governance reforms in higher education

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The 43rd Annual Conference of the National Progressive Schools Conference (NPSC) themed “A Learning Revolution for Sustainable Development Goals”, was held on 16 and 17 February 2016 at the Air Force Auditorium, Subroto Park, New Delhi.

The two day informative and interactive forum was attended by leading educationists, public policy practitioners, senior government officials and industry leaders from across the country. The symposium hosted an eminent panel of experts comprising of Prof. C Raj Kumar, Vice Chancellor, O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU), Mr. Anant Agarwal, CEO, edX, an online learning destination founded by Harvard and MIT and Dr. Yajulu Medury, Vice-Chancellor, Bennett University, Times Group.

Delivering the welcome address, Mr. Ashok Kumar Pandey, Chairman, National Progressive Schools Conference, said, “We are delighted to host the 43rd edition of the NPSC and privileged to welcome such august dignitaries on this important occasion. I am hopeful that our deliberations during this two-day conference will help start a conversation that will not only broaden our engagement with education but also aid in
achieving the goal of an equitable, inclusive, harmonious and sustainable society.”

Professor (Dr.) C. Raj Kumar, Vice-Chancellor, JGU, was the keynote speaker at the conference and his dialogue focused on different aspects of the highly relevant theme. Enunciating that quality education is the foundation to improve people’s lives and sustainable development, he emphasized that widening the reach of education in the country, correcting existing imbalances and overcoming impediments are some key measures needed to create a sustainable future for the country and its citizens.

Prof. Kumar’s in his engaging narrative broadly defined ten leading challenges and opportunities confronting the educational institutions of the country and urged audience members who comprised of leading educationists from across India to recognize and address the issues. His unique ideas to usher a ‘Learning Revolution’ in institutions across the country received a spirited response from the audience.

The ten broad challenges and opportunities that will help educational institutions in the country to transform into world-class institutions include;

1. Quality and Excellence: The first and foremost challenge in the realm of education is to achieve a maintain a degree of Quality and Excellence, far too long we have emphasized on building more schools, colleges and institutions to meet the demands of a growing population, but the need to the hour necessitates quality over quantity
2. Hire the Best Minds as Faculty: The second big challenge is the ability to draw and retain the best and brightest minds into academia, it is imperative to attract and nurture the top 20% of students to take up faculty positions in educational institutions across the country
3. Promote Diversity and Interdisciplinarity: The third task involves promoting diversity and interdisciplinarity in our academic engagements a situation that warrants radical changes
4. Learning Pedagogy and Outcomes: The fourth challenge is to define the learning pedagogy and learning outcomes, the current focus of our education system is primarily centered on increasing student enrollments and recruiting with little or no emphasis on the learning outcomes
5. Regulation and Governance: There is a need for India to learn from other countries. Currently there are 20 different regulators of higher education at the state and central level in India and even courts which have given numerous judgements in conflict with other courts and other regulatory bodies, the current system is essentially destroying the institutional imagination in our country
6. Accreditation and Assessment: The accreditation and assessment mechanisms needs to be radically redesigned and the school community has to shoulder a large responsibility for it
7. Rankings and Benchmarking: Not a single Indian University ranks amongst the top 200 in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, as a country we are somewhat insecure when it comes to rankings and attempt to resist them. Rankings may not necessarily reflect everything that institutions do, but they certainly cannot be ignored altogether. Independent rankings and benchmarks are
a fine way of being self-criticism and will undoubtedly contribute in creating and promoting a degree of quality across institutions

8. Developing a Sense of Curiosity and Critical Thinking: Developing a certain sense of curiosity and critical thinking will help establish a foundation for learning amongst students, there is a strong need to infuse these aspects and values as they represent strong pillars of any education system

9. Global Engagement and National Impact: Almost all major issues that we face today, ranging from migration, public health, infectious diseases etc. have a transnational impact. These larger challenges cannot be ignored while dealing with our education system. It is important for educational institutions to take responsibility for the learning revolution that we plan to embark on needs to put global engagement at the center in the academic and intellectual discourse in our country, but more than anything the attitude and minds of individuals needs to be shaped towards recognizing the global engagement

10. Social change and Transformative Learning: Is a critical element for institutions of learning across all spheres, as long as we do not seek the social change and transformative learning, we will not be able to address the challenges of our education system.

Prof. Raj further called for developing a more nuanced understanding of the fundamental challenges surrounding the education system in the country and highlighted an urgent need for action, he said, “It is imperative that we not only recognize but urgently try and address some of the most deeply embedded challenges, we are facing in relation to education in all its manifestations. The need of the hour necessitates the introduction of radical ideas that will not only address our most pressing issues but will also help transform existing systems in institutions across the country.”

In conclusion, Professor Kumar highlighted that it is the youth of the country that will play a critical role in bringing about any kind of transformation across disciplines, he said, “We have 800 million people of less than 35 years of age in our country seeking education and empowerment and these very people will be key in transforming the future of not only India but the world at large.”

The Guest of Honour at the conference Dr. Yajulu Medury, Vice-Chancellor, Bennett University, Times Group, also delivered a thought provoking dialogue on the theme of creative curriculum: Ideation and Transformation.

Professor Anant Agarwal, CEO, edX, an online learning destination founded by Harvard and MIT was the Chief Guest on the occasion. Anant taught the first edX course on circuits and electronics from MIT, which drew 155,000 students from 162 countries. He has served as the director of CSAIL, MIT’s Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, and is a professor of electrical engineering and computer science at MIT.

The central theme of the conference was based on the Sustainable Development Goals, which is a set of 17 goals adopted by the United Nations that seek to end poverty, hunger, ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning
opportunities for all among others. Each of these goals has specific targets to be achieved over next 15 years.