Diagnosing the HR Practices within a B-School System in India

Alok Kumar

Professor and Founding Dean, Faculty of Management Studies, GNS University, Rohtas, Bihar, India

Abstract

There was a phase in the early to mid-nineties of the 'mushrooming' of stand-alone B-Schools, that could be called as first generation B-schools owing to their incarnation as an institution deliberately manufactured to manufacture the input materials for the 'about to be scaled up' Corporate sector considering the Liberalization policy of the then existing Government. Three decades following this, another round of mushrooming is being witnessed again, but this time a more broad sensed University system aimed at offering a relatively bigger basket of more technical courses under the colossal propagation of the New Education policy of the Government. Universities are crossing the 1100 mark now in India, thereby, resulting in a rapid surge in demand of different kind of human resources to cope up with the speedy trajectory desired for positioning the Institution under the leader category! This article tries to find out whether approaches towards the fulfillment of HR acquisition objectives have a conducive directional flow or an erratic one, and also how the demand-supply is being managed! It tries to suggest effective ways in which requisite manpower for B-Schools can be had keeping in mind the emerging academic and industrial environment not only in India but across the Globe!

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Introduction

Management education has always been the talk of the day in almost all academic realms, reasons obviously known, and this has been happening for the past four decades. A large pool of dedicated teaching professionals (industry stalwarts included!) are needed to guide the youngsters, the mobile and laptop generation of learners, towards the fulfillment of the national objective of making the country a developed one when we all join to celebrate the Independence centenary. Not all the B-School or University churnings are meant to be absorbed by the Industry; instead quite a good number of them now are opting for an academic career that could prove satisfying if the teaching and training hunger persists with them.

A separate body was intentionally and rightly created for technical institutions who may have thought about the basket-bearing fruits of Technology, Management, Pharmacy and the like. We later termed it as a regulatory body called All India Council for Technical Education which was supposed to function differently and manifold away from the big daddy regulatory and funding body popular by the name of University Grants Commission. The reasons were simple. The domains

of traditional and technical fields of study had to be different as their trajectory and destinations were different. Then there came up a debate about why only such specialized institutions should run these technical courses. Why not these courses be run under our University system which definitely had an upper hand in numbers, establishments, funds and facilities for teaching and research! And then when it got realized that the public sector alone could not build up such Institutions at scale, the private sector was roped in to create such centres that could excel in the future in terms of their multiple expected outcomes.

So, we witness the different kinds of Institutions in India right now – the Central Universities (run by Central Government grants), the State Universities (grants

also supplied by the respective state Government), the Deemed-to-be-Universities, the State-run Private Universities, the standalone specialized Institutions (both under public and private categories), State Technical Universities (now happening to be one of the largest affiliating Institutions across the country) and obviously the Colleges, all under the common genre of Higher Education Institutions or HEIs. Institutions like IITs or IIMs or those of eminence represent a different category altogether.

Number-wise speaking, as per the UGC and other regulatory bodies, there are 56 Central Universities, 478 State Universities (both in public domain), 125 Deemed to be Universities, and 452 state Private Universities functional in our country (totaling 1111). There are also 20 fake Universities as per UGC website information. The AICTE approved Institutions for 2023-24 happen to be 8264, down from 10974 in the year 2019-20. 211 new Institutions came up in 2023-24 against 950 that got actualized in 2019-20, says AICTE dashboard.

HR Practices

By the term 'HR practices', we mean the entire structural 'hard' HR practices along with the soft HR practices that are necessary to gel up the different units in a typical working system. Mainly in all such Institutions, there are two broad categories – academic or teaching staff and non-teaching or administrative, supervisory and support staff. The biggest of such acquisitions is definitely the teaching staff in terms of value propositions. We call it faculty recruitment and such drives have become common now and keep rolling throughout the year. This calls for special attention amongst practicing HR publics as to what shall be the strategy to keep the faculty basket intact?

With a certain amount of embedded flexibility in the maintenance of the cadre ratio and also the student-teacher ratio, the Institutions seem to be troubled nowadays hunting for 'suitable' faculty round the clock, round the year. Churning out 'qualified' (as per norms) human resources suitable for faculty intake has grown up multifold in the past decade but then not everyone suits what the Institutions want. There is a robust academic performance indicator (API) mechanism covering broad dimensions of engagement parameters for a typical faculty in a HEI. And this is certainly needed as we find in a country like ours, the standards of HEI education has a large spread from highest to lowest levels depending upon what DNA the Institution carries and how much has been injected into the candidate seeking education there.

We do not have a system in HEI as to segregate the Teaching Institutions and Research Institutions since every Teaching Institution has to have some kind of Research parameters to supplement its academic palette. Research Institutions are mostly engrossed in bigger Research projects where teaching and training go on simultaneously but at PG or Doctoral levels only. The question then arises up to what extent we need the Research inputs for College or University going students and then what could be level of teachers we need to look into such an issue!

There are set norms for appointment of teaching staff under the broad categories of Assistant professors, Associate Professors and Professors irrespective of standalone B-Schools or Departments or Institutions under the University banner. The only strange thing is that across all streams, irrespective of their nature or applicability, the norms are static. How can an elephant climb up a tree or how can a rabbit swim? So don't we need to develop the rubrics separately for separate educational streams? B-School education is meant to ease out the corporate functioning by providing them with a trained workforce who can be team leaders, excellent liaison professionals, efficient strategic planners and more so developers of a sustainable ecosystem that is highly needed by our society. B-School education should also look at providing skilled youngsters who create an ecosystem for entrepreneurial ventures through proper incubation of ideas at the institutional level. A third dimension is providing a brilliant and analytical mind to teach and train youngsters in all aspects of a typical business life and also double up as problem solvers for issues arising in the work environment across different industry verticals through Research. Now the question arises are we doing it?

CoViD has added another dimension to faculty recruitment. Many Universities and Institutions are still relying on online faculty interaction for all levels of different cadres. The reasons are simple! By just emailing, the potential candidate shares his or her intent to be a probable recruit and not across one but multiple institutions and interacting online is the easiest of all ways sitting at one place, having cost efficiency and reaching far destinations within no time thereby gaining bargaining power in a pay structure less gamut of such institutions, specially the non-public ones. Institutions are also happy connecting to experts and candidates online saving money that would have been otherwise expended on the visiting experts. This has become the bane of such Institutions.

Also, the requisite numbers in faculty bench strength is never cared for by the Institutions. Managers recruited for the sole purpose of developing Industry contacts for training and placements of students are also given the 'burden' of teaching and training. Since such professionals meet the minimum norms necessary for faculty appointment at the first level, Institutions are happy to register them too as faculty although they may not be involved in any academic activity or get little chance to share their thoughts on academic matters. There also exists a very thin line separating Associate Professors and Professors and many institutions are flexible in this while others are too harsh which shows that 'situational' temperaments matter a lot.

In a typical Management Institution, although PhD is not mandatory for entry-level, yet few Institutions do prefer a Doctoral program, and qualified faculty. It has never been proved formally that Doctoral programs always create good teachers although such intent is expected. Most people misunderstand PhD and Research to be the same. A true researcher, nevertheless knowledgeable and updated, can develop into a good teacher but then teaching needs many soft HR skills to gel up with the young learners who are better-off with technology and gadgets but can never get through such gadgets, the experience sharing by qualified teacher who can deliver lots of values in their discourses.

The government has clearly mandated that slowly affiliations shall go and hence all Institutions should grow to handle their own academic endeavors and thus an accreditation becomes mandatory that signifies, basic processes are followed properly and hence later on the Institution can qualify to get itself marked as a University with a better value laden basket. Under such circumstances, it becomes crucial for a Management Institution to hire teachers for a significantly longer period of time so that both sides can contribute towards the organic development of the Institution. For this, a policy framework for procedures is imminent. Short-cut mechanisms, although undesirable, are adopted by Institutions for some immediate issues that need to be addressed to.

So coming back to the basic HR practices, especially for teaching staff, we still rely on three pillars of acquisition, maintenance and retention. Considering the current environment prevailing across our country, let us discuss ways to effectively address these three issues for a better system of education that is intended to churn out skilled professionals for consumption also as teachers (*discussed earlier in this section*).

Need of the Hour

Management is a stream that needs vibrancy and this is possible only with different field specialists teaming up together, social scientists, psychologists, language and communication professionals, entrepreneurs, anthropologists, international relations, technology experts and the like are to be brought in for a wide canvas that needs to be made available for students and scholars to ideate upon. Only simple Management-educated persons won't suffice! Starting from the top, what could be done to find able persons to run the entire show, that is Director or Dean or Departmental Head or Principal or whatever nomenclature one could give.

Such persons who suit the aforesaid positions, in my opinion, carry a lot of experiences of diverse nature as they generally have traversed through multiple responsibility centers before. From a small administrative basket to a larger one, they necessarily need to possess a temperament to be a cool person expecting a lot of turmoil to surfacing every time. They need to play the 'duck' role paddling under water which no one sees except the management or apex body of the Institution. The person should be attuned highly to the local environmental needs including language and social skills necessary to converse with masses even outside the purview of the Institution. The suitability tests vary with the locale and market (students). Moreover, the interaction with the Board members should be at length to understand the Vision of the person for possession of the 'quest for excellence' over the years. Tenures need not be defined earlier. If the person sets at the position well, understands both the organizational culture and climate, has a zest for self-education and adds a blend of synergy and innovation quotients to the team, allows the shedding of traditional rigidities in everyday functioning, then a better person need not be looked for. The sense of camaraderie needs to be forged irrespective of the level of staff in the team. Even non-teaching staff members should feel proud in having a leader who happens to possess a judicious mix of management functioning styles suiting the occasion. If the visions of both the management and the leader appear to coalesce somewhere in the long run, it should be understood as an ideal situation. And definitely, the topmost seat needs a problem solver, not a creator!

While the acquisition is understood to be robust, still many Institutions do not understand why senior experts, both from industry and academia, are needed to gauge the applications for the apex position. Merely fulfilling the norms may end up in a selection that could be disastrous as objectives shall begin to clash within the

system resulting in dilution of efforts aimed at building organizational robustness. Once acquired, the next step is more crucial. How to make the person work towards organizational achievements for a longer duration? How can the person develop practices aimed at performance and retention without losing work-life balance? How to showcase the talent in the marketplace? What other perceptual makeovers can be implemented via the personality? For all these an Institution should develop maintenance parameters aimed at retention finally. Merely package enhancements do not work for long, neither do makeshift policies. So, we need to find challenging assignments that could be proactive in nature and may be able to guide the Institution to higher echelons in the class layers. The performer should be set free to work because a true practitioner will never be working within boundaries defined by time or scope, instead, the person shall find more oxygen with greater academic and administrative freedom. Also, the person needs to decide about the maintenance policy of the institution regarding the team members.

Retention is of a prime concern today. Practically it is witnessed that many institutions wish to have a formal stamping authority with no power delegated to the person who needs to be made responsible for the helm of affairs within a typical B-School set-up. Some institutions look for passive personalities who do not interfere (even if needed) with the management. Such a situation shall make both parties happy but for a short stint only. This proves detrimental to the entire Institutional functioning. Moreover, more than one decision point working simultaneously in a single system will necessarily rob the Institution of developing systems that could be fruitful in the longer run and ruin the work culture. If culture takes a back seat performance gets affected and this could lead to a disaster very soon considering the fragile nature of the structure which is bound to be hit and dismantled by stronger and more visionary competitors. Retention strategies could be a financial reward for those able to stay longer, facilities and amenities for entire families

and dependants, decisions to match the aspirational needs of the person that has developed as a result of the passage of fruitful time, development of a robust second line of administrative personnel who could just manage the running show while the premier line moving towards further expansion plans! In fact, the idea should be 'handled with care'! A similar mechanism needs to be worked out for every layer of the Institution with the intention to make the system robust through strategic planning and implementation. In the era of greater complexity and flexibility, we should think of ensuring a smoother HR flow and that could be the only factor to garner competitive advantage amongst peer Institutions.

CONCLUSION

Universities are being increasingly set up in the current scenario. The private sector seems to have taken the lead with more and more corporate funding pouring in to establish Institutions with a better brand value and imparting professional and skill-based education that ought to be sustainable for learners. In such dynamic circumstances, finding suitable HR, especially on the academic front is increasingly becoming a tedious job. Stability, excellence, aspirations, selflessness, proactiveness, soft power and prowess, multi-processing, team spirit, empowerment, visionary, positive attitude, collaboration, and corporate affinity are some of the attributes that should be taken care of while going in for building a decent faculty pool within a B-School environment. Systems of acquisition, maintenance and retention when made robust through enduring policies will always fetch an edgy result that could be the game changer across the B-School spectrum in India. This shall lead us to a better supply of not only teachers in the management education arena but also corporate publics and budding entrepreneurs.

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