

Pallikkutam, The Education Observer

Mar 2024



Horizons

Comprehensive & Flexible Higher Education



Western education has been flexible as it has followed a multidisciplinary approach for many years, it helps in professional growth & enable lifelong learning.

The noted politician, scientist and diplomat Benjamin Franklin stated, "The noblest question in the world is what good may I do in it." Attributes such as leadership, diplomacy, confidence, and collaborative spirit to solve complex problems are much valued. In this multipolar and competitive world, my own experience in academia has shown many a times that the rigid higher educational system, which focuses on specific field may not yield solutions to the requirements and expectations. A holistic approach which gives opportunity to

gather multidisciplinary skill sets is needed. This aspect is emphasized in the National Education policy 2020 of India which came into existence this academic year.

In the light of these situations and planning for the future beyond 2030, this article looks at some benefits for a flexible learning experience. As I was penning this article, it was pleasing to know that Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft has visited IIT-Delhi and spoke about the importance of innovation for global good. Bill Gate's view on the importance of knowledge for the common good emphasizes the need for multiple skillsets such as soft skills, communication, and writing, etc. I have had the pleasure of discussing the issue of career support for youngsters with two IT-professionals who moved from India and honed their skills from additional learning experience both in formal and informal set-ups. They have been successful parents with their kids growing up in the United States and entering prestigious institutions like Texas A and M. Both of them agree that academic learning is not enough, and many interpersonal skills are needed. Based on their experience, they have endeavored to impart these skills to their children. "From my experience, academic studies alone aren't enough. The company that I grew up with taught me that a positive attitude and an open frame of mind are key qualities to professional growth.," stated Frisco-based Anand Gopalakrishnan, Digital Partner for Wipro.



Anand Gopalakrishnan Agreeing with this view, another technical professional Frisco-based Seshadri Dehalisan, Distinguished Architect at Oracle Corporation stated, "While one can't undermine the importance of academic studies, it is not sufficient. There is more to one's life than just academics. In today's context, resilience, emotional quotient, spiritual balance, healthy lifestyle, and so many other factors play an equal, if not major role in leading a contented life."

Flexible Education for a Multipolar World Western education has been practicing flexible education policy at higher education level for many years. This is possible due to the comprehensive nature of these universities consisting of Colleges of Arts and Sciences, Engineering, Law, Architecture, Law, and Medicine. Mostly all these colleges are within one umbrella. For example, at Texas Tech University, these colleges are on the same campus providing opportunities for cross fertilization and collaboration. The new NEP in India aims at providing flexibility for students to enable creative mixes of courses. A credit-based system helps to focus on core subjects and based on the interest and the need of the hour, vocational or elective subjects can be taken. This credit bank system helps students to avail different levels of diploma solely based on the circumstances and the need of students. The new education policy is aimed at providing a broad learning experience and equip students to have multidisciplinary skill sets. Such cross-fertilization experience enables the development of new products, manage projects well and propel the economy. For example, Apple Corporation has teams of engineers, designers and communication experts who collaboratively engage in

new product development. In my academic experience in the United States for 25 years in a comprehensive research-intensive university, I have found academic flexibility helps both the faculty and students. As a case in point, last year a graduate student in my department had to opt for master's degree in interdisciplinary science (MIS) which gave credit to field specific courses and remaining courses to fulfil the total required credit hours were from different fields. The student was successful in getting a high earned degree, while having a feel for other disciplines—a beneficial outcome indeed. The availability of flexibility under NEP will train students to be global citizen scholars while gaining a subject expertise as well broad-based skills. Continuous education and short-term courses always help to broaden the skills and improve employability stated Anand Gopalakrishnan. Giving his own experience how he needed to have a short fix after his degree to equip with skill sets necessary, he stated candidly, “With my aspiration for a high paying job abroad, I underwent full time software training that costed around INR 50K in '97, which was high those days. The training was a gateway to a high paying job abroad; I got a job in UK in a year from the completion of training, and this was during a time when getting a job abroad in late 90s wasn't easy.” Flexibility to join courses irrespective of age will be much sought after by professionals to move up the ladder in jobs. Anand Gopalakrishnan said based on his company experience, “Once I ascended to middle management in my professional career, I completed a part-time post graduate program in marketing from Symbiosis Institute, India. While my personal situation was that I couldn't pursue higher studies right after my graduation, I pursued it once I was financially independent.”



Seshadri Dehalisan Emphasizing the importance of flexibility and providing resources to children to chase their dreams, Frisco-based Seshadri Dehalisan, Distinguished Architect at Oracle Corporation opined, “In my view, strategic planning is required to expand the thought horizon of the child as opposed to helping in cherry-picking a college or degree. While some hand-holding is needed during early childhood development, it is imperative that the child's academic planning be not compartmentalized with specific college, degrees in the parent's mind as opposed to children.” “Once we find our interest, our next key step is to develop the skills needed to succeed in the chosen career path. We must upskill ourselves and it should be continuous learning,” added Seshadri Dehalisan.

Educational Village and Growth

Our shastra states a student gains one-quarter of knowledge from teacher, and the remaining comes from family, interaction with the society and from experience. Our ancient civilization has realized the importance of gaining from various credible and reliable sources, “Aano bhadra krtavo yantu vishwatah,” emphasizing the importance of contributions from society. In my own experience, a mere structured learning experience may not be adequate to manage complex scenarios. Also, flexible learning opportunities, which enrich broad and

multiple skills will enhance employment opportunities. While broader skill sets are essential, it is also important that an in-depth knowledge in a specific discipline such as engineering or medicine. "Navigating an organization towards career development is an art. From my experience, every transition to a higher level requires a different skill. I have grown faster in some levels; however, I have stagnated in many levels. As I compared myself with some of those that moved to the next level, I was able to leverage learnings from my peers, superiors. My experience has been that whenever I had a capable mentor who was well networked within the organization," briefed Anand Gopalakrishnan. It is pleasing to see that NEP supports strengthening social sciences and humanities disciplines in world-class technological institutions like IITs, which will prepare students with broader understanding of global issues.

Parental Support and its Necessity As has been the ancient wisdom in India, family, teachers, and society are important. In Taittiriya Upanishad as a convocation speech to students completing their study, it dictates students to respect parents, teachers and visitors which can also be interpreted as society at large. What an apt message put in a mellifluous language! The fact that the text dictates to respect these people giving high credit to mothers and fathers is a mark of acknowledging the sacrifice of parents in child's upbringing and growth. In highlighting the importance of a guru or mentor, Anand Gopalakrishnan again from his professional experience in a corporate world stated, "As I compared myself with some of those that moved to the next level in my organization, I was able to leverage learnings from my peers, superiors. My experience has been that whenever I had a capable mentor who was well networked within the organization." As a father of a middle school child, I am convinced that children at an early age model after their parents and hence in addition to preaching, it is vital to serve as a role model. Parental support and guidance right from foundational course (3-6 years) till college will set a good foundation in the child's personal and professional growth. This is more than essential when there are so many distractions such as addiction to screen times. A well-grounded foundational education involving academics, sports and arts will give better perspective to children. The holistic education that involves field related study such as science, engineering, agriculture coupled with languages, humanities and social understanding would cultivate life skills needed to face a complex and competitive world. As parents we have the solemn responsibility to put our time and provide resources as much as possible even if it happens to be a sacrifice. It is the parents and the surrounding ambience that can be a better life skills coach. Life skill education has become an industry as this aspect is the need of the hour. Nations have realized the need for comprehensive education that involves a broader understanding of the society. India is emphasizing this kind of integrated approach which can propel India to be an advanced country and an economic might by 2047. In addition to the policy related to educational development, parents and society have respective roles to play. It is the responsibility of grass root organizations at local levels such as PTA take charge and contribute towards the academic and overall development of school systems. Next phase of educational development should provide options for flexibility, continuous and lifelong learning opportunities at affordable cost. Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

 **Seshadri Ramkumar**



The author holds a PhD, CText, FTI (UK), FTA (Honorary) and is presently Professor, Nonwovens & Advanced Materials Laboratory, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA