

# New India needs free and quality higher education

Corporates, alumni and the government can work towards creating strong philanthropic support and tax breaks



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At a time when the demand for quality education and research in leading universities in India and advanced nations is on the rise, the staggering tuition fees demanded by universities of repute, besides deterring the meritorious from pursuing their degrees from world-class universities, create compulsions to turn professions into business propositions rather than opportunities to serve and excel.

Carving out a niche in the annals of the global education architecture, New York University's NYU Grossman School of Medicine announced that from the 2021-22 academic year, it will pay the tuition fees for all its students admitted in its MD programme, regardless of their financial needs, thereby becoming the first major American medical school to do so.

Kenneth G. Langone, Chair of NYU Langone Health's Board of Trustees, who made his U.S.\$3.5 billion fortune as a co-founder of Home Depot, with his wife Elaine, has given U.S.\$100 million to fund the tuition package. NYU has al-

ready raised more than U.S.\$450 million of the U.S.\$600 million it needs to fund the programme.

In India too, the burden of tuition fees in professional courses is becoming unbearable. Besides, it is causing a serious concern of reducing quality professional education to a commodity rather than the noble service that it ought to be.

Educational loans, even with government collateral guarantee, are no answer, as the mounting debt of educational loans will cripple the economy of development and public welfare. What we need is a university system that fosters an environment of learning in which world-quality education can be provided without taxing learners with the burden of tuition fees.

## The Nordic model

The Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – provide free higher education to their people, and overseas students were able to study for free until recently. In Denmark, however, tuition fees were introduced for international students from outside the European Union and the European Economic Area, in 2006. Sweden followed suit in 2011. Only Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Germany do not charge international students tuition fees. This ensures that students receive quality education in the streams



that they desire rather than pursuing streams that allow them to earn highly so as to repay their student debt.

As an article in January 2022 says: 'the Nordic model has attracted a significant amount of attention from other nations. Many people wonder if it provides a template for smaller countries where citizens are more homogeneous in terms of their opinions and experiences, yet live in poverty or repression as a result of government policies'.

Despite some attempts to impose fees, all these countries are outliers in a world where international students are frequently a valuable source of revenue for institutions. Last year, the topic resurfaced in Finland when the government recommended that institutions be allowed to charge tuition for international students from outside the European Union. Following a heated public debate, the Finnish government opted not to proceed with the proposals.

All Nordic countries have a

strong legacy of equality, extending to equal opportunities in the education system. The Nordic countries have measures in place to promote gender equality and assist students from lower socioeconomic categories to gain access to higher education. It is no wonder that these countries continue to figure in top of the world happiness index (Finland at No.1, Denmark at No. 2, Iceland at No.4, Norway at No.8 and Germany at No.14, as per the World Happiness Index 2022).

## It reshapes student choices

A ray of hope for evolving a progressive university system in professional education has been provided by NYU's Grossman School of Medicine. In its announcement, the NYU had pointed out the fact that "overwhelming student debt" is reshaping the medical profession in ways that are bad for the health-care system. Such debts prompt graduates to pursue high-paying specialties rather than careers in family medicine, paediatrics, and obstetrics and gynaecology. The lead taken by the NYU is bound to inspire many other leading universities to consider and value the student's intellectual acumen rather than financial investment.

But then, universities need funds for education and research. Education is a noble service and an investment to charter a bright

future for humanity. If students pay for education, they would be forced to earn from the degrees they acquire. The profession then becomes a privilege to earn rather than a privilege to serve and excel, as it ought to have been.

There is a strong case for reviving philanthropy and community support for higher education in India. Corporates, generous alumni, and people at large can join in to create strong philanthropic support for higher education and make quality education tuition-free. The government, for its part, should be generous enough to declare such philanthropic donations to the cause of higher education and research tax-free, now that the treasury is full of funds from the ever-growing list of income tax and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) payers.

Can we, then, make the prophecy of the great management guru, Philip B. Crosby, come true in higher education, who, during the quality revolution in the late 1970s, advocated that "Quality is Free!"

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