

## Who Will Drive Innovation in the Education Sector?

A creative challenge



Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank | 22 Nov, 2019



WHILE SIPPING TEA one cold January evening in 2010, I was explaining to M Krishna Erramilli, director of a management school in Chicago, the complexities in organising the Kumbh Mela. In fact, I was seeking his suggestions to overcome the event-related challenges. The situation was complicated by the fact that we were a young state with limited resources and with little experience in hosting any mega-spiritual congregation. I explained to him the mechanism we had created for seeking suggestions from stakeholders for the Kumbh. "That's what open innovation is all about," Erramilli remarked. I must admit this was the first time I had heard about 'open innovation'. Since then, I have been fascinated with the enormous power of this idea. It was mere coincidence that when we were involved in this open-innovative exercise for the Kumbh, the Obama administration in the US had called for new forms of collaboration to enhance the efficiency of public service delivery as part of its Open Government Initiative. The idea

was to work together to ensure public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation and collaboration. I am of the strong view that the effectiveness of any government policy is very much enhanced by public participation. In my three decades of public life, I have seen that public engagement has a huge impact on quality of decisions. Open innovation assumes that since not all the smart people work for us, we must find and tap the knowledge and expertise of bright individuals outside our organisation/company. It encourages collaboration and supports the belief that if we make the best use of internal and external ideas, we will be in a win-win situation.

One of the major challenges that I see is that many of us mistakenly believe that innovation has to do with the use of technology or inventions. Unfortunately, we have not been able to teach our students that innovation is all about doing things in a new and different way. To do something differently requires coming up with an approach, process or strategy. Crafting a strategy, ensuring its successful implementation and sustaining it are key. It's all about developing a whole new creative environment. Teachers need to keep their students engaged and excited to learn new and different things. They have to create a safe environment for children to make mistakes, take risks and ask questions. Without the right attitude, innovation would just be a glamorous word and the field of education would miss out on some great accomplishments and discoveries. The question then is: what is the need to recognise and support innovative ideas and who will drive innovation in the education sector?

We all will agree that education, being a social institution serving the needs of society, is essential for social sustainability. It's very important that education should not only be sustainable and comprehensive but must also evolve continually to meet the challenges of a dynamic environment.

This evolution must be systematic, consistent and replicable; therefore, all teachers—in schools and colleges, administrators, researchers and policymakers—are expected to innovate to ensure quality preparation of all students for life and work. Teachers are one of the most crucial elements of the education system: they know the system, the flow of work and, most importantly, the needs of students better than students themselves. As a teacher myself, I am certain that the key to unlocking solutions for long-standing problems in education lies primarily with teachers. A strong network of energised teachers, principals and administrators mobilised to take innovation as a route to solutions can create a wave of positive changes in the education system. A few months back, we honoured 65 innovative teachers from various parts of the country under a collaborative project called Zero Investment Innovations for Education Initiatives (ZIIIEI) initiated by the Ministry of Human Resource and Development and the Sri Aurobindo Society. The ZIIIEI is one of the world's largest innovation

initiatives in government schools. Its aim is to find 'the scattered, isolated and unrecognised, but effective solutions' created by teachers at the grassroots and systematically scale them up to hundreds of thousands of schools every year. As India's President has himself appreciated the programme, describing the ZIIEI as a "beginning of a new era in education", with more than 1.7 million teachers registered with it, around 850,000 ideas submitted and more than 700,000 ideas adopted by teachers, the initiative is unleashing the immense potential of educators by instilling self-belief in them and making innovation a core value. To meet the challenges of the fast-changing and unpredictable globalised world, our teachers need to find innovative solutions, thereby making education a joyful and interesting exercise. The creation of an efficient system is necessary for this. We need to find more creative ways to raise the happiness index of children, teachers and guardians. All the stakeholders concerned should collaborate and co-create a concrete system to develop a student's interest in research, equity, conservation of the environment and scientific advances aligned with cultural values through economic growth and social development.

Regardless of their size or location, education institutions today face critical business challenges. The best way to answer these challenges is to build new capabilities and keep improving. We have to keep asking ourselves: Who is currently responsible for developing and improving these capabilities?

In education that void can be filled by our teachers who can seize the opportunity to play a leadership role in strengthening organisations to meet global challenges. With rapid expansion of global markets, institutions are struggling to balance the paradoxical demand to think globally and act locally. They need faculty and students from foreign lands in order to perform well in international rankings. Educators must innovate dynamically so as to add new and important ingredients to the mix when making strategies and implementing them. During the past few years, most educational institutions have been reengineering, delayering and consolidating to increase efficiency and cut costs. The drive for revenue growth, needless to say, puts unique demands on an education organisation. Educational institutions seeking to acquire new capabilities must be creative and innovative and must encourage the free flow of information and shared learning among students, teachers and administrators. They must also become more result-oriented and be more in touch with the fast-changing needs of their students. Institutions seeking growth through mergers, acquisitions or joint ventures require other capabilities, such as finely honed skills needed to integrate different organisational work processes and cultures. It's true that technology has transformed our world into a global village with massive amounts of information available to our students. The challenge for teachers is to make good use of that technology and innovatively figure out how to make it a viable and productive part of the school setting. As educators, we need to stay ahead of the information curve and should be able to master the art of utilising information for the betterment of our students. Perhaps the greatest

competitive challenge companies face is adjusting to and embracing non-stop change. Constant change means organisations must create a healthy discomfort with the status quo, an ability to detect emerging trends quicker than the competition, to make rapid decisions and to seek new ways of doing business. In other words, to thrive, companies will need to be in a never-ending state of transformation, perpetually creating fundamental, enduring change.

Retaining a strong knowledge base has become a direct competitive advantage for organisations competing for students and an indirect competitive advantage for all companies attempting to differentiate themselves in how they serve customers. From now on, successful academic institutions will be the ones that are the most adept at attracting, developing and retaining individuals who can drive a global organisation that is responsive to both its students and the burgeoning opportunities of technology. Thus the challenge for organisations is making sure they have the capability to find, assimilate, develop, compensate and retain such talented individuals. As Swami Vivekananda said, "The education which cannot enable an ordinary man to face the struggles of life, which cannot inculcate character, strength benevolent behaviour and courage, that education is not true to its spirit." He further said education expresses the holistic attitude that is present in all humans. To achieve this we need to adopt a practical approach to orchestrate collaborative innovation among stakeholders, which brings together their viewpoints and goals thereby enabling in-depth and holistic understanding of educational issues. This is the education required for creating a New Bharat and open innovation can definitely play a catalytic role in this.