

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE
AT THE PRESENTATION OF VISITOR'S AWARDS – 2017

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1. To begin with, let me congratulate the winners of Visitor's Awards, 2017 – Jawaharlal Nehru University, which has been adjudged the Best University; and the scientists from the Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Banaras Hindu University and Tezpur University, who have been awarded in the categories of innovation and research. The honours conferred today lend due credence to their single-minded devotion and painstaking work in the pursuit of excellence. The recognition should, on the one hand, inspire them to higher levels of performance, and on the other, spur researchers and scientists in the central university system to explore wider domains of human understanding.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

2. A lot has been said about the quality of India's higher education system. Many have debated that standards are declining as a corollary of the vast expansion seen over the past few years. Yet, many have argued that increasing our capacity to provide higher education is a dire need in the context of a growing youth population. There are over 250 million young people – one-fifth of the country's total population - in the age group of 15-24 years. The onus is on the higher education system to realize their aspirations and perfect their scholastic potential. I, for one, do not see any dichotomy between greater access and better quality; or between higher equity and superior standards. It is entirely possible for the attributes of quantity and quality to move in the same direction at the same time.

Friends:

3. The concept of 'world-class' institutions have engaged the minds of policy-makers, educators and academic experts lately. The jury is still out on what elements a world-class institution constitutes. And whether some features of such institutions can be specific to the context of a region or an economy. But, presence of certain key traits is essential to label any institution world-class. Let me outline a few of them:

- (a) A sizeable presence of meritorious students and faculty: This does not happen all of a sudden as institutions have to attain a certain degree of maturity before it starts gathering a pool of talented people. Many of our institutions of recent vintage may face problem in the beginning on this account. But policy catalysts may help. Under the Global Initiative of Academic Networks (GIAN) programme, about 780 foreign faculty experts have enrolled to teach in Indian institutions. We are also witnessing a favourable economic climate pulling Indians working abroad, back to their motherland to seek the opportunities emerging here. Our institutions would do well to leverage this 'brain rain'.
- (b) Adequacy of financial resources to boost physical infrastructure and academic resources: Institutions have to look beyond government funding to innovative mechanisms like industrial projects, sponsorship of chairs, and tie-ups for setting up research facilities.
- (c) A governance model that allows institutions to respond quickly to change while enforcing a mechanism of critical analysis and honest reflection: Such a system requires strong institutional leaders who can enlist the cooperation and commitment of all in driving the vision of the institution. It also calls for building a cadre of academic leaders who can inspire followership amongst students and fellow educators. Drafting alumni and industry experts in governance structures, too, can bring in a fresh perspective to the academic environment.
- (d) An eco-system that supports research and innovation: A challenge for our institutions has been to retain bright students after education to do research. Good students either leave formal education to enter the corporate, government and other sectors, or pursue a higher degree in universities abroad. To arrest this trend, we need to make holistic changes in our education system. The pedagogy in our institutions at all levels has to promote creative thinking, novel learning and scientific scrutiny. An atmosphere where learning modules are supplemented by inquiry-based project work will be necessary. This will build in students an inclination to do research and to innovate. If we have a large pool of meritorious researchers – complemented by top-notch research laboratories, tie-ups with industry, collaborations with foreign institutions, and an attractive compensation system – our institutions could be involved in doing more cutting-edge research.

Friends:

4. Areas for research activity should align with the developmental challenges of our nation. The best minds in our universities should apply themselves to work out solutions in areas like sanitation, urban transportation, sewage disposal, clean river systems, healthcare and drought-resistant farming. They should also convert new knowledge into innovative products that are directly beneficial to the common population. Innovative minds should create tools and implements that alleviate the drudgery of farmers, workers, artisans and weavers. The number one barometer for successful outcome of research and innovation should be its beneficial applicability to a wider section of the population.
5. I am happy that the awardees for both Innovation and Research adequately meet this benchmark. The award winning innovation of Dr. Deepak Pant – a reactor for direct conversion of waste plastic to LPG – has great potential for meeting the energy requirements at grassroots as well as protection of the environment. Dr. Shyam Sundar's ground-breaking research in the diagnosis and treatment of Indian Kala-azar has relevance in improving the health profile of the population. The pioneering work of Prof. Niranjan Karak in the field of chemical science has scope for wide application, especially in the context of resource conservation. It is gratifying to note such good quality research and innovation taking place in our central universities.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen:

6. JNU has been adjudged the best university for its unrelenting pursuit of academic excellence. It has shown outstanding performance in all key parameters like quality of students and faculty, training of faculty, citations, publications, research projects, foreign collaborations, seminars and innovation exhibitions. I urge upon the university to continue the good work.
7. Many central universities that have been set up in recent years may not be in the reckoning for top honours immediately. But they must start participating in the rankings seriously. This would provide them a framework for academic management along global best practices. The new universities have to take off successfully overcoming the nascent-stage hurdles. A robust management focused on institution-building is the key. The book released today containing the memoirs of 18 former vice

chancellors would provide valuable lessons to our current academic leaders. Do remember these words of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru (which I quote): "*Loyal and efficient work in a great cause, even though it may not be immediately recognized, ultimately bears fruit*" (unquote).

8. In the end, I compliment the awardees once again. The Visitor's Awards, I hope, will motivate the central universities and the academic communities therein to work relentlessly towards excellence. I wish each one of you the very best for your endeavours!

Thank you.

Jai Hind.
