

# View from the podium

The curricula at B-schools across the world may be converging, but the learning experiences remain unique

A team of Wharton School faculty recently visited India to meet with leading industrialists, political leaders and fellow academicians. They will use the insights that they gathered here to develop new course content and research activities. Like for Wharton, India, with its growing place in the world economy, is a hot spot for academics across the globe. Meanwhile, Indian professors are increasingly travelling the globe to garner global perspectives. So, are we headed towards a flat world MBA? Faculty members who have experience of both Indian and foreign B-schools share their insights.

"I hope they (B-schools across the globe) do not head towards a 'mean'," says Pankaj Chandra, director at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Bangalore. "B-schools must develop their own perspectives and provide diversity in their learning ambience, so that they can serve the different needs of students and organisations in a more effective manner."

Chandra points out that while schools abroad are now trying to address global development issues in their curriculum, underdevelopment and social issues have been the context of Indian management



Pankaj Chandra

schools since their inception. "Indian schools, on the other hand, are trying to bring globalisation into their learning frame, since India is strongly liberalising and its firms are going out in the world. This evolution is normal, but the learning experiences at different schools are unique, even though the issues may look similar."

Chandra, who has been visiting professor at the Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell University, says that culturally, institutions in India are very different from those in the US and Europe. "Students here are younger, more analytical, more impressionable, more accepting, more adept at learning around the classroom. What they need is more soft and inter-personal skills development. Here we are more like other Asian schools and Asian societies," he says.

Like Chandra, Saikat Chaudhuri, assistant professor of management at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania and visiting faculty at Indian School of Business (ISB), Hyderabad, points out that commonalities in the fundamentals covered across programmes and institutions are natural. He adds that since they all play in the same space, they can be expected to "analogously pursue major opportunities, such as globalisation and a focus on emerging economies at present".

But Chaudhuri believes that different B-schools are ultimately characterised by different strengths and specialisations. "These distinctive hallmarks are the result of different histories, pedagogical philosophies, research approaches and basic missions," he says.

Chaudhuri describes the current state of affairs in the B-school industry as "an era of widespread experimentation" where institutions are "experimenting with varying the length and curriculum of the hallmark MBA



Saikat Chaudhuri

programme, online offerings, as well as campuses, partnerships, or research centres abroad".

He perceives differences between the leading foreign and Indian B-schools in three core areas: thought leadership, student background and alumni networks. "While these differences persist at the moment, I do believe they reflect the different stages of evolution of Indian versus foreign business schools at this point. Ultimately, the best faculty and students will be attracted to the best school, whether foreign or Indian," says Chaudhuri.

Ravi Bapna, professor of information systems, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota and executive director, Srinji Raju Centre for IT and the Networked Economy at ISB, feels that the course



Ravi Bapna

content at some top Indian B-schools like ISB is along the lines of what one would expect at top 20 business schools anywhere in the world. And the quality of students at the elite schools in India, he adds, is exceptional. He also believes that Indian schools will quickly catch up in terms

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Anup Kumar Sinha

of physical infrastructure.

The biggest difference that Bapna sees is that most Indian B-schools are not research-oriented. "By this, I mean that the faculty at these schools lacks presence in the knowledge creation process and therefore, has to rely on rehashing knowledge created by somebody else." Lack of practical experience that comes from consulting engagements, Bapna adds, is another big weakness. "Without grounding in theory that comes from faculty engaged in research, students will be less prepared to handle unstructured scenarios that are a fact of business and society," he says.

Anup Kumar Sinha, professor of economics at IIM Calcutta, agrees that the research output of the faculty at Western B-schools is higher and also that the composition of faculty there is "truly global, giving it a diversity that is attractive and synergistic". But on teaching skills, Sinha thinks Indian B-schools compare very favourably. He adds though that the sheer population pressure and the regulator's relentless pressure to expand often convert Indian B-schools into teaching shops. "Good B-schools in mature market economies are run very professionally. There is very little intervention by government and regulators," he says.

Sinha, who has been visiting faculty at the Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis, does see an increasing convergence

of things taught at B-schools all over the world. The difference, he points out, lies in examples and cases that are used to simulate business situations calling for a decision. "There is still quite a bit of reliance on cases compiled in Western B-schools and a paucity of good cases from say, Indian companies or Chinese companies. I believe the gap is being reduced and may not be significant five or six years from now."

According to Charles Dhanaraj, associate professor of management, Kelly School of Business, Indiana University and executive director, centre for leadership, innovation and change at ISB, what is emerging at B-schools across the globe is more by way of a common structure. This, he feels, is partly driven by the accreditation process of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS). "You can expect a certain common base in the MBA programmes across nations and it is easier to predict what is being taught when you hear the title of a course. However, management challenges have an incredible amount of local nuances and the cultural uniqueness that individuals bring to managing the organisations," says Dhanaraj.

He adds that institutional contexts vary widely across countries. "To that extent, there is innovation that is highly localised and new ideas are emerging. I believe India will be a platform to drive new innovations in management education, which in turn, will migrate overseas," he says.

Dhanaraj points out that the openness and flexibility experienced in a



Charles Dhanaraj



S. Raghunath

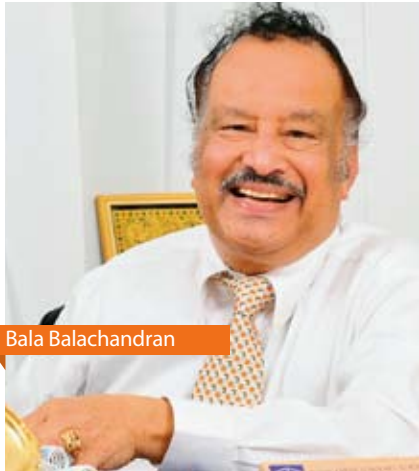
Western institution is still to emerge in Indian institutions. But the openness of corporates to involve with students at student-led workshops and conclaves is unique to India, he feels. "To some extent, these offset many of the deficiencies in other sectors."

S. Raghunath, professor of corporate strategy and policy at IIM Bangalore, is of the opinion that American and Indian management education curricula have a lot in common in terms of functional and analytical orientation and that there are three critical gaps in curricula that management education the world over, including India, is grappling with. "They relate to corporate ethics, social responsibility and global business," says Raghunath.

"The managerial challenges that a typical American business school and our institutes of management prepare students for are not necessarily the same," adds Raghunath. He goes on to explain why: "Institutions of higher learning imparting management education are nested in global, yet local context. They seek to prepare students for a local context, which is subjected to global impact."

Raghunath, who has been a visiting faculty at B-schools like INSEAD and School of Business, University of Buckingham, points out that "cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness in a business context, that is connecting seamlessly with people from and in different geographies, is essential".

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Bala Balachandran

Indian B-schools, he says, must develop this as “an essential course requirement that focusses on conceptual understanding, behavioural and inter-personal skills to work effectively in alien cultures”. Foreign B-schools, he adds, “need courses that focus specifically on risk management, behaviour of complex systems and socially responsible leadership”.

Arvind Sahay, professor of marketing and international business at IIM Ahmedabad, who has taught for around eight years at London Business School, feels that ‘Western B-schools’ have an ‘operating model’. The Chinese, he says, have copied it lock, stock and barrel, while Indian B-schools still have an opportunity to be different. “But we need to have a plan on whether we want to be different and what the nature of this difference should be and whether there is a market for this difference and then execute. At this point in time, I am not sure that we have any strategic thinking on this. The window for maintaining this difference is closing. It will close in another five to seven years,” he says.

Sahay is also emphatic that we are not seeing the emergence of a flat world MBA. One of the reasons, he points out, is that almost half of the cases that many of the faculty use in Indian B-schools are ‘local’ – written by them or their colleagues. The research here is also more practice-oriented, he says, unlike the ‘basic’ research of Western B-schools. According to Sahay, “There is almost

a complete disconnect between the bulk of the business research that gets done in Western business schools and the pedagogical usefulness.”

Bala Balachandran, founder and dean, Great Lakes Institute of Management, Chennai, and executive professor and strategy advisor to the dean, Bauer College of Business, University of Houston, raises an interesting point. Balachandran says that business education is following a ‘mean’, but who the ‘followers’ are and who are the ‘leaders’ may change. “The curriculum will blend US thinking and trends in India and China. Commonality for all B-schools will be the core, with eclectic electives.”

Citing examples like Enron, Worldcom and Satyam, Balachandran says that business education and governance of this sector has become morally bankrupt. “Today, business education is at the crossroads. I believe that the next stage of development and a hybrid model will emerge from Asia and not from the US, as has happened so far. And I feel strongly that more than China, it will be from India.”

Great Lakes, incidentally, introduced Chinese from its very first year of functioning in 2004. Balachandran explains why: “Indians are strong in English. But Chinese is spoken by at least 38-40 per cent (of the global population). If you want mobility, speaking Chinese and understanding the Chinese culture is



K.S. Ramesh



Arvind Sahay

very important.”

According to K.S. Ramesh, senior advisor, executive education programme (India), Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh, there is not much cross fertilisation between Indian and foreign B-schools at this point. “How much input do we have from foreign universities and faculty exchange? We are just starting,” he says.

Ramesh, who is also visiting professor at IIM Indore and S.P. Jain Institute of Management & Research, himself is involved in facilitating a programme between the University of Pittsburgh and IIM Indore. “This involves students spending a whole semester in Pittsburgh. We are also planning to bring visiting faculty to IIM Indore to teach for a full semester,” he explains. He adds that most faculty members from top US B-schools do extensive consulting for corporates and combine the richness of industry experience with academic rigour.

According to Ramesh, though, the more pressing need of the hour is to have experienced people from various industries participate in academia. “We must offer people over 45 years the chance to do a part-time PhD programme and take early retirement to move seamlessly into academia,” he says.

♦ MEENU SHEKAR with inputs from PADMA RAMNATH