

## **Reflections on UCEA Conference 2019; The HE Workforce exploring global perspectives at London, UK**

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It all started with an email from ACU (Association of Commonwealth Universities) informing that UCEA (Universities and Colleges Employer Association), UK is organising a two-day Conference at London on 9 & 10 July, 2019 on HR in the field of higher education. ACU invited applications from academicians and educational administrators working in Indian universities for three spots of bursary covering return air fare, registration fee and conference accommodation. The offer being very alluring I was intent on participating in such a conference to know more about HR practices in universities of Commonwealth countries. Public-sector universities in India need to review their managerial framework and practices and should imbibe more systematic and organised models of internal governance and administration. The Conference provided an ideal platform to know more about HR practices of Universities in Commonwealth nations.

The ACU application was lucid and to the point. It asked me, who I am, why should I attend the conference and what shall be its impact. Few days of drawing room activity and the draft application was ready. In came the acknowledgement from the ACU that the application has been received and the results about selection shall be shared by 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2019. Indeed, it was exactly on 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2019, the ACU informed me that my application is through and I am one of the three participants from India travelling to UK for the conference in July. I was delighted!

The pre-conference preparation by UCEA was systematic and highly professional. Participants were given a secured online window to access the Conference programme and other material. A list of workshop themes was shared with the participants for selection in advance. Invited speakers shared their abstracts as a curtain raiser. An optional Study Tour to Imperial College of London & University of Surrey on 11-12 July, 2019 was a value addition to the event.

### **The Arrival .....**

The weather in London was as good as it gets in summers. Moderate temperature, spells of bright sunlight and showers with occasional breeze. It never looked different from my home, Kashmir. A straight question & answer to a leading question to an Immigration Officer at Airport lead me into UK territory. The UCEA guide was helpful in getting me on tube (underground train) and I got off at Russell Square. A Five minute walk and I reached Tavistock Hotel, where the organisers had arranged the accommodation. A day's rest helped me to synchronise my biological clock to the new time zone.

## Day 1.....

The Conference venue was just a walk away at BMA House. Customary registration and pleasantries over coffee started the proceedings of the conference. We had academicians and educational administrators working in HE from UK, Canada, Australia, South Africa and India as delegates. I was glad to meet Ms Consola Evans at ACU Stall prior to conference. It was wonderful to hear her speak about different initiatives being taken by ACU to make institutes of higher education better places to work at.

The session started formally with Prof Mark E. Smith, Chair UCEA welcoming the guests. Plenary session on Global and Mobile Academic set the theme of the conference in context. Prof Alison Wolf spoke on evolution of modern universities as transnational entities with less dependence on church and state. Latin in early days and English in modern times have been the dominant mediums of instruction. In the US, Universities are more keen on focussing on science based research resulting in technology outputs which can be commercialised. This trend is catching up globally which is pushing social science and humanities to the fringe. Science academics are more mobile globally than their counterparts in social sciences. However, there is a grey side to this global trend. Universities are losing their connection with their local communities.

Prof D V Damme pointed out that Scientists who undertake research abroad and return to the economy in which they first published contribute to raising the overall quality of domestic research by 20% on average. Prof P Kopelman stressed that knowing the faculty and engaging them is crucial in managing the international academic workforce. Sensitivity to local and cultural factors are equally important.

The plenary session was followed by individual workshops and I walked in to attend one on individual aspirations vs/and institutional missions. The workshop was conducted in the backdrop of a research study by University College London in United Kingdom. Their findings revealed that Younger staff are more proactive in managing their careers and are less reliant on formal career structures. They do often move up the ladder with the help of local managers such as HoDs.

Prior to lunch, we returned for the 2<sup>nd</sup> plenary session on 'balancing institutional autonomy with government and political agendas.' Dr Michael J Mahon opined that universities in Canada are experiencing increased Govt regulations over the university affairs. The trend seems to be similar in other countries also including India. Well, in a way, Governments are well within their rights in asking the universities to fulfil their agenda if the former is contributing to university grants. The universities should therefore look forward to diversifying their funding options and becoming less dependent on govt grants so as to enhance their institutional autonomy. In India, a similar scheme (UGC Categorisation of Universities for Grant of Graded Autonomy) has been rolled out by the Government, granting institutional autonomy in lieu of internal revenue generation.

Prof Andrea Nolan expressed similar feelings asserting that universities in UK are gaining greater political attention as they are seen as key to productivity, economic growth and social justice. As is true of any other public service, public sector HE is accountable for its conduct.

We wrapped the day with a workshop on use of social media in our workforce. We all are privy to the fact that social media can be a potent tool to overcome communication challenges especially during critical situations such as staff/student strikes. The key lies in

not ignoring the crisis and leading from the front. Administrators in universities need to engage with the protesters and consider their legitimate demands. Going live to communicate with the audience has been made easy by the social media tools. Colleagues from University of Glasgow had some rich experiences to share regarding the handling of protests and strikes by staff and students.

And yes, we had a conference dinner and an eloquent dinner speaker, Rt Hon. Lord David Willets, Former Higher Education Minister, UK. He spoke on the current scenario of higher education in UK and possible changes it may experience in case Brexit happens.

## **Day 2.....**

The day started with a plenary session on academic freedom and free speech. Speakers from University of London, Wilfred Laurier University and University of Western Australia stressed that Universities should have institutional statements and comprehensive policies on academic freedom and free speech. There should be a conflation of academic freedom and freedom of speech and there is a need to define these and educate the community about the difference between them.

First workshop of the day was based on the real-world experiences of University of Northampton which has taken the lead in moving to Education 4.0, where students are treated as partners and learning is active, augmented and personalised. This is in contrast to the conventional lecture theatres and staff offices. Teacher has to move to the role of an enabler, leader and a mentor and teaching has to be adaptive, creative and context-sensitive. In such a context, learning locations have to be purposeful, AI-enabled and diverse.

#Metoo campaign did find a slot in this conference. The second plenary session of the day focussed on Metoo in HE. Participants agreed that there is a need to create awareness and impart education and training on gender based issues at workplaces including HE sector. Adequate resources have to be provided to universities to continue ongoing work on gender equality.

I attended the last workshop of the Conference themed on Alternative Campaign Tactics and Student Involvement. The concept revolves around the point that the higher education is a 'student-centred' affair and the universities are realising that apart from core studies, students need to spend more time and effort on other educationally purposeful activities. This needs support from the institutions by framing elaborate policies on student engagement and directing its resources to run various programmes aimed at enhancing the student involvement.

The Conference closed with a roundtable discussion and a session on conference reflections where some of the leading academicians of the UK, Canada and Australia were part of panel. The conference ended with an open discussion on the HR leadership challenges where participants presented their point of view and the expert panel expressed their opinion. Closing remarks of the Conference were made by Prof Stuart Corbridge.

## **Study Tour of Imperial College London**

Arrival at Imperial College London (Imperial) was as overwhelming as I had expected it to be. We arrived at its main Campus South Kensington. It has 7 other campuses and all are located in London. Imperial is home to 17000 students and 8000 staff. Over 6700 degrees are awarded annually. It has a diverse international community with staff and students from 115 countries. Imperial has been consistently ranked among top 10 universities of UK, Europe and World. Members of Imperial include 14 Nobel laureates and 03 Fields Medallists.

Imperial has an ambitious College Strategy (2015-20) which is focussed at maintaining the quality and excellence which Imperial has achieved in research and education. At the heart of this Strategy is the principle of maintaining world-class core academic disciplines and encouraging multi-disciplinary research. Collaboration with business, academia, and non-profit organisations, healthcare and government institutions across the globe is of prime importance. To support this Strategy, Imperial is continuously working on strengthening and diversifying its revenues. Further, realising the importance of College HR as a partner in achieving its vision, Imperial has a comprehensive policy called "HR Vision 2020". The underpinning motive of the HR Vision 2020 is to make Imperial a great place to work. A strong reward and recognition framework is in place to attract, motivate and retain the best people. Imperial aims at providing best-in-class support in physical and mental health and well-being. Imperial has a holistic and strategic support for workforce planning and succession planning, which is supported by data and integrated with talent and development activities.

Diversity of its workforce is something that Imperial is very proud of. Out of total 8385 staff members, 22.8% are BME and 44.34% are females. Although, 60% of its staff community come from UK, a significant percentage is from other European countries (26%), Asia Pacific (6.95%) and Americas (3.92%). Remuneration and other incentives for the staff are globally competitive. Except for the researchers, majority of the staff has been engaged on full time-open ended contract type.

Imperial's Learning & Development Centre (LDC) offers a comprehensive range of training and development support to its staff. The objective of the LDC is to enable individuals to excel and the College to maintain its position as a world leader in education and research. Consultants work in collaboration with managers and institutional leaders to deliver key interventions that add value to the College and staff. Imperial does have a comprehensive career management framework and the staff is provided guidance for taking charge of their careers. Options of career progression/transition range from within Imperial to outside organisations. Targeted and selective programmes are delivered for enhancing the leadership capability of the professional services staff. As an additional support, one to one Coaching is offered through a Coaching Academy established in 2009.

One of the unique and important HR initiatives of the Imperial is Postdoc Development Centre (PDC) which provides support and development opportunities for postdocs, fellows and clinicians. The core principle of the PDC is that no post-doc should leave Imperial unemployed unless they choose to be. PDC imbibes the belief in fellows that post-doc is not a career but a plan to succeed and for achieving this, PDC assists and supports them. This support covers all aspects of post-doc career including courses, workshops, individual support, working with departments, providing online resources etc.

The visit to Imperial concluded with a tour to White City Campus where Innovation Hub (I-HUB) and Molecular Sciences Research Hub (MSRH) are major attractions. I-HUB provides space for companies to work alongside researchers and turn scientific and technological innovations into new products and services. MSRH brings together nearly 800 scientists, clinicians, engineers and business partners.

### **Study Tour of University of Surrey**

Away from the hustle and bustle of London City, University of Surrey is located in a quiet and calm environment of Guildford, Surrey. The University has 15700 students on its rolls with 2900 staff members. The University is consistently ranked among top 10 Universities of UK. One of the major attractions of the University is Surrey Research Park where 110 companies are hosted. Some of the flagship research areas of the Surrey include satellite technology, mobile telecommunications, chronobiology, food and nutrition science, hospitality and tourism management etc.

Our day started with a formal presentation on Surrey HR Strategy. At Surrey, appraisals are at the heart of the HR processes. The University has achieved an impressive 98% completion of appraisal processes. The appraisal protocols are tailored to fit the core competency of the staff. A good researcher shall be adjudicated on the basis of research credentials while a teacher shall be assessed on the basis of teaching success. Appraisals are used as a guiding tool for performance improvement, promotion and communication.

Academic Leadership is taken as People Planning Process at Surrey. Foundation of this process is laid by a comprehensive mechanism of knowing the people. Who they are and how long they shall be at Surrey. What are their performance and potential ratings and what are their future goals. All this information is primarily taken from appraisal reports.

Leadership Development Programme at Surrey is focussed on Executive Board Development and Heads of the Departments. The plan is to improve the leadership effectiveness at the top management level and to improve the leadership capabilities of HoDs who are critical to leading and managing change & delivering outstanding performance.

We concluded our day with a tour to University Veterinary School. The site is a state of the art building equipped with latest equipment and technology to train vet students. An extensive network of partners in clinical practice, industry and research provides unique learning opportunities to students and researchers.

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***Note: Inputs in this write-up have been taken from presentations and other material provided by the organisers.***  
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