Innovations in Undergraduate education - A beginning, an end or more

This case study outlines the path traced by a collaboration of three government bodies, an innovative initiative taken up in the State of Karnataka in India. It unleashes the beauty of collaboration among different setups for a cause of increasing employability quotient in the undergraduate students of Karnataka Government Colleges. This brought together three different state government bodies in a uniquely collaborative mode, and also involved private training organizations in its implementation. A path has been designed to impart life skills and vocational training to students graduating in non-professional courses, so as to make them more employable in the current competitive and globalized economic environment.

This case study has been commissioned by Karnataka Knowledge Commission and prepared by faculty members of IBS Bangalore. It is meant to serve the purpose of illustration and information dissemination and could also be used for academic and pedagogic purposes. It is not meant to be an evaluation of the collaborative project and it does not intend to present collaboration in either a positive or negative light.

A researcher is known for a lot of reading that he/she does and in the due course brings in new insights into the field that he/she is into. As a researcher, all the readings on innovations in management made Mr. Pranav understand that it is about creating a new idea or the act of conceiving and implementing a new idea. Mr. Pranav, a BA graduate educated in one of the Government Colleges, was pursuing his M.Phil degree in Public Administration. He had been in the system in the capacity of a student of the Government College and always wondered why innovations were not seen in the public services arena. Most of the studies that Pranav went through gave him a feeling that if he is talking of innovation, it has traditionally been associated with the private sector, since effective innovation equates to organizational and commercial growth and even emergence of new industry.

Just when he was arriving at this conclusion, his eyes fell on some literature that said that innovation in public services is also not unheard of. He discussed this in length with his faculty Mr. Sharas who said, “We do see the footprints of traditional values of public services with principles of modern management; promoting open and responsive forms of administration, improvements in governance, efficiency and management innovations. This I feel has helped the public services to create value and produce improved social outcomes. I am referring here to the first electronic wave that hit Indian Public administration from the 1980’s up to 1999, when the emphasis was on computerization through data base creation. Indian Railways, the banking sector, telecom sector and stock exchange were the first to initiate.” Pranav felt nice for the first time, hearing about the happenings in public services. When he came out of the faculty cubicle, he met some of his colleagues, who either seconded his opinion or who contradicted his opinion on the innovations is public services. They also discussed about the technological infrastructure as a constraint for innovations.

Authors: Commissioned by Karnataka Knowledge Commission prepared by Dr. S.C.Poornima & Prof. R. Harish, faculty IBS Bangalore.
Pranav was confused and with a not so convinced frame of mind walking in the university corridors he met a few more friends. The discussion took a serious turn. Shanthanu opined strongly that the Government of India is emerging as the fourth largest vertical spender on information technology after the telecom, manufacturing, banking and finance industries. Preethi said “Come on friends, do you know the pressure to be IT savvy is to keep up with times.” She was concerned about the senior staffs who are at the last few years of their service. Janhavi pitched in and added, “Okay, but what about the issue of keeping people and authorities informed?” it is about transparency and knowledge was the argument of his friends. With mixed opinions about the issue of transparency and knowledge, Mr. Pranav led himself to the library, located in his university campus. He researched about knowledge and delivery systems, and got a bird’s eye view of the education system in India. He felt nice about the big numbers, but a point started worrying him. What about the quality of students coming out of these colleges?

**Investigation:**

During his library visits, he read a lot of articles, news write ups on public services and initiatives taken by the Government. His eyes fell on the first set of recommendations given to the Government by the Karnataka Knowledge Commission, it said that the most notable fact, as far as the student is concerned, is the proposal to upgrade the level of skill-training, and re-align various State policies to suit the evolving needs of the education sector. According to the recommendation, this is an “extremely urgent requirement.” “The job market and the industry have undergone a sea change over the years, and it is necessary for the Government in fact, to step up from the existing framework to meet these demands. The Member Secretary of the Commission says “We wish to take these proposals as far as we can.”

Looking at this news reports and many such reports on the Karnataka Knowledge Commission, Pranav decided to explore this further. He took an appointment and met with Member –Secretary of the Commission. In his interaction, he could understand the objective of the Knowledge Commission was to bring in a paradigm shift in the outlook towards education. He also voiced out that to see this shift happen in reality, it was necessary to work at the grass-root levels. This was the reason for the Government of Karnataka to take up the initiative of setting up the Karnataka Knowledge Commission to respond to the knowledge era in a proactive manner. He recollected the meeting held on the morning of 26th March 2009, which saw a lot of action. The members gave deep thought as to how to harvest the available knowledge. The question was how the depleting knowledge that needs to be harvested should be put on track. He also mentioned that “the months of June and July 2009, formed the period of brainstorming and discussions about issues relating to employability and being in the teaching profession we are aware of the fact that the graduates fall much below on the employability scale, because they are not updated with industry skills.”
He continued, “In any context, heterogeneity brings in synergy. The Karnataka Knowledge Commission, at the time of drafting and submitting the first set of recommendations to the Government, had not mentioned about any association with other departments. But, as planning for the project progressed, could see that they had contacted the Karnataka Vocational Training and Skill Development Corporation Ltd., (KVTSDC) which is a specialist organization set up by the Government for providing training to make the youth employable”

Pranav met the Executive Director, KVTSDC who said, “Ours is a Government of Karnataka undertaking, set up to reach a huge target of training 5 lakh youth in the State. The Corporation provides training for making the youth employable. It enrolls students ranging from 10th class drop outs to post graduates for vocational training. In the present globalized environment, it is important to equip the youth with vocational and life skills.” He went on to say, “Thus, when Karnataka Knowledge Commission presented a blueprint of the proposed training project to KVTSDC, we started working on it.”

Pranav interacted with Senior Research Associate at the KJA who said, “Though they had decided to start the process by the end of August 2009, after about three or four meetings between KJA and KVTSDC, it was observed that they also needed to discuss the project with the Department of Collegiate Education (DCE) as this was the agency that could facilitate in the conducting of training programs.” The DCE when contacted showed lot of passion and enthusiasm towards the project. They seem to have had already a similar plan in mind; the Special Officer, DCE said, “At the DCE, all of us are well aware of the challenges that academicians face in equipping the students in our Government colleges. Thus, we too have a vision of making the graduate students employable. This made us put our best foot forward and we accepted the recommendation given by the Karnataka Knowledge Commission.”

When Pranav went to the office of DCE he observed that Officers at the DCE were sensitive to the fact that the student communities that come into Government colleges are predominantly from the lower socio-economic background. They said, “Most of them are first generation learners in their families. They are the students who could not make it to the private aided colleges because of their limited economic capacities.” Pranav could see that, when an opportunity knocked at their door step, they plunged into it.

Mr. Pranav was in the office of the Commission going through the signed agreement between the three agencies of the Government. The Karnataka Knowledge Commission assisted in procuring computers and related items for the selected colleges in the pilot project and facilitating the start of the project. The Commission also prepared the Life Skills manual modeled after the UNESCO Life Skills modules (Refer www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user) While reading the MoU he noticed that the three bodies also played a great role in finalizing the training modules and constituted a Project Team to look into the details of project implementation and successful completion. At one of meetings that Pranav attended at the KJA, he observed that all members of

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the project implementation committee knew that for any training program, a need analysis is a must. Thus, they decided to conduct a focus group discussion and a survey among students to elicit their interest and expectations. One of the members in the meeting suggested conducting a skills assessment test to extend a helping hand to the students for taking the right decision. The members in the meeting arrived at a consensus that, being bi-lingual was also one of the basic criteria to be a trainer for this program.

**Joining the Knots:**

Pranav thought that the journey should be smooth with such a well discussed course of action. But, to understand the effectiveness of the initiations made, he felt that he needed to check the kind of knots tied between the parties involved. He decided to venture out into the campuses after flipping through all the feedback sheets at the KJA office. He first went into the campus of the college that was the first to implement the project. The Coordinator for the program was the Placement Officer, who briefed that the college’s regular classes were being conducted at that time, thus, the training program had to be allocated a special room. The training classes were for a total duration of 120 hours, at six hours per day. The students were dedicated and learnt with great interest was the opinion of the placement officer. When Pranav met a few principles, they spoke about how they had to twin up with other private colleges or private computer centers to run this program because of non-availability of necessary equipment in the rural government colleges. The Principals felt that there were some assessment problems, due to the tight schedule during which the students had to finish the training program before the semester exams began. In some cases, there was a spill over of the training after the exams also.

Some of the Coordinators cited few challenges, one of them said, “I had built in and set up all the systems for a smooth run of the program and now I am transferred to a different college where I need to start from scratch.” “This is de-motivating.” The Coordinator blames the authorities that they do not understand the pain and effort of building a rapport with the students, colleagues and principal and executing initiatives such as these at the grass root level.”

The principle from a rural Government College shared his feelings about the commitment of the faculty coordinators. He said, “Our coordinators are also qualified and selected through a rigorous process. The project progressed successfully because the coordinators were responsive, and had the intent and passion to work towards the cause of employability of their students. The principals said, “Do you know Mr. Pranav? In many instances, the coordinators had to work on Saturdays and Sundays, Some coordinators and faculty member have also paid the deposit of Rs. 100 on behalf of their students who were economically challenged, but were keen that their students benefit from the training.” There were also cases where in the Principals of some rural colleges requested State Road Transport Corporation to extend the validity of bus passes to the summer vacation period.
Pranav was overwhelmed on hearing the experiences shared by the coordinators and other faculty members. When he came into the principal’s room of one of the Government colleges, he was surprised to hear from a parent “Does your college run this training program? We are interested to put our ward into the course only if you offer such a program”. Seeing the surprised expression of Pranav, the Principal said “This has, in fact, become the most frequently asked question at my office – I only wish the program continues.”

While discussing his experiences with his friends, he noticed that Preethi had lost in her own thoughts, when coaxed, she said, “Yes, the two ends for making them employable seems to be woven quite well. The students and training program you have examined, but don’t you feel that the trainers who are the facilitators form the basic ground for the program.” She also offered to join Pranav in collecting first hand impressions of the trainers. The trainers said “We have taken an approach many a time to train through our own examples.” “We consciously made an effort to handle the classes by starting with the local language and later gradually shift to English.” Their approach of building a rapport through the local language with self narrative examples, they said, had worked positively in many cases.

The trainers said that they were stunned to see the confidence level of students of several districts, who spoke with great ease about their goals and vision. The trainers do admit that many a time, faculty members are the guides and philosophers; and students show a lot of commitment when taught by a faculty member, But, at the same time, to bring in the edge of bridging the gap between academia and industry, it was also appreciated by students and faculty members that a great deal can be done by external trainers. Another trainer felt, “This was a very well conceived program that was initiated by the Government. The students received it well and put in their efforts to excel in their careers.” He said, “Tell me Pranav, how can you say a ‘no’ to a student who is persistent and who has the zeal in him to learn?”

Some of the training institutes felt that there was a shortage in the time given for implementation of the program and awareness of the program among the faculty members, students and parents. The common problem that was faced by many rural colleges was logistics support and the students getting accustomed with the trainers and the concept of the training itself. The training had to align with the courses that the students had opted for. The students in the degree classes are used to the teaching/lecture mode and a workshop mode of training and interactive presentation sessions was new to the. The training was heavily dependent on voluntary involvement and participation by the students.

Mr. Pranav, while going through the feedback obtained through survey from students, felt that it was quite encouraging. The students had opined on all the parameters as good or excellent. The students felt that the program was good with respect to the training content. They got to learn many things which included job skills, life skills, soft skills and many more. A few students were happy to be placed in prestigious and much sought after companies like Infosys, Wipro, TCS and HP. Most of the students responded positively about the training program. A few however expressed some negative feelings. Many colleges did not enroll students belonging to the Science
group, which created disappointment among this group of students. On the other hand, a few BA students felt that they were being sidelined, and that the trainers were concentrating more on students of B.Com and BBA. Several students expressed that the training institutes made a difference to their skills and personalities. However, a few were of the opinion that their own college faculty could have done an equally good job. Some students said that the training schedule clashed with their academic commitments, and hence they could not make best use of it. Among those who did not enroll for the program, some students doubted the course because it was a government initiative. Yet some others were not aware of the program that was launched in the colleges. Some felt that they were not sure what they would be trained about and felt it to be useless and ignored it. A few of the students said that they should have had some sessions on group discussions, body language and computers. Some from rural colleges felt that the training was “too much at one shot to grasp.” B.Com, students opined that the training was value addition but, computer training could be more rigorous. Across most of the students, it was voiced that “practical sessions could be increased.” All were however appreciative that the skill training provided them what they needed to survive in the competitive world.

A Knot that needs to be knitted:

With a mixed pack of good and not so good experiences of feedback in his bag, Mr. Pranav could see that the program showed the way how three Government organizations could associate for the benefit of the students. The greatest concern that was voiced by all involved was the issue of sustainability. Will this project that brought three Government bodies relating to education sustain in the future? The project which started with a lot of brain storming saw the light of the day as the heads of all the three Government bodies involved, worked with a common vision. The project created good relationship among the personnel involved. His doubt is will the initiative sustain and flourish in the years to come. He wondered if he could see some more of such innovations happen in other areas of public services or, will it be the end!
Annexure - 1

Department of Collegiate Education (DCE) was established in 1960 with the sole purpose of making degree-level education more accessible to the masses. Today, the department has emerged as a bridge between the need for higher education and empowerment for one and all, especially women and the underprivileged. The department has six regional offices in Bangalore, Mysore, Managalore, Shimoga, Dharwad and Gulbarga, and administers 356 Government degree colleges and 297 private-aided colleges, in eleven universities in the State. Its multifaceted role includes H & R development within, through various programmes; infrastructure development in Government colleges; planning, monitoring and co-ordination of degree education; and, co-ordination with state universities, the Union Grants Commission and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council.

Annexure – 2

KVTSDC, a Government of Karnataka undertaking, was established to provide training and employment to unemployed youth in the state in September 2008. It provides vocational training and employment to school dropouts, unemployed youth, ITI graduates and existing workers. The initiative’s aim is to empower all individuals through improved skills and knowledge, which would enable them to secure a bright future. It also addresses the skill gaps in the Industries & Service sector by providing them with trained youth. Its objectives are to ensure steady flow of skilled manpower to industries and to equip the youth with practical skills which enable them to seek employment or self-employment. It also aims to rise the quality and quantity of industrial production by systematic training of workers.
Annexure - 3

KJA (Karnataka Knowledge Commission) is a high powered Commission set up in the State of Karnataka along the lines of the National Knowledge Commission set up by the Government of Karnataka. It was constituted on 5th September 2008 under the aegis of the office of the Chief Minister of Karnataka. It is headed by Dr. K. Kasturirangan, Member of the Planning Commission, Government of India and a former member of the Rajya Sabha. The members are drawn from diverse fields like education, science and technology, agriculture and industry.

The overarching aim is to “Transform Karnataka into a vibrant knowledge society”. The work of the Commission includes various terms of reference like building excellence in the educational system, promoting creation of knowledge in all knowledge institutions, improving leadership and management of knowledge institutions, promoting knowledge applications, making government an effective service provider by using knowledge capabilities and for promoting inter-sectoral interaction. The basic approach of the Commission is interaction with departments, stakeholders and experts; undertaking various projects which pilot the implementation of the various recommendations and different research studies. The Commission has made 60 recommendations till date. Further details could be got by visiting www.jnanaayoga.in.

Exhibit - 1

Sahayog – is a project under which vocational and life skills are imparted to students of B.A, B.Sc, B.Com, BBM etc courses in Government First Grade Colleges of Karnataka. The training organizations impart 40 hours of Life skills and 80 hours of Vocational skills during any one of the semesters out of 3 years along with the regular classes. This is a joint initiative of Department of Collegiate Education (DCE), Karnataka Vocational Training & Skill Development Corporation (KVTSDC) and Karnataka Jnana Aayoga (Karnataka Knowledge Commission) three separate entities of Government for the first time in the country. The students will be awarded a certificate and will also be provided with a Life skill manual with a DVD. There is exclusive software to keep track of the placements of students.

During 2009-10, 7000 students in 22 districts from 112 colleges were benefited whereas 13,363 students drawn from 223 colleges underwent this training during 2010-11.