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Reforming our education system

OUR EDUCATION system suffers from serious problems. We may be producing professionals such as software engineers and doctors in large numbers. But they are an oasis in an otherwise barren desert. Indeed, if a small percentage of our scholars are a match for the best in the world, it is in spite of the education system, not because of it. This is really sad, because many of the reforms urgently needed in our education system will cost little money. What is needed is creative thinking and a new mindset that is willing to embrace exchange.

Before we understand how to reform our education system, we must first be clear about what we want to achieve. Education must make our people wise and equipped to understand and solve the problems of the world. That calls for conceptual clarity and depth of knowledge.

I recall the highly insightful remarks made by the principal of the school where I got my son admitted, three years back. She felt that she would be extremely happy if students responded correctly when someone asked them a question. The principal felt a student must confidently answer the question or frankly admit he does not know the answer or seek a clarification if he does not understand the question.

Being a teacher myself at a leading B School, I see a disturbing trend in the current crop of students. They do not fall in any of the three categories I just mentioned. They answer questions without seeking to understand them. They confidently reply even when they do not know the answer. They rarely ask for a clarification or admit they do not know the answer. The thinking here seems to be that when a teacher asks a question, giving some answer is better than admitting ignorance! Indeed, some of the answers are so vague and general that they can be given with minor modifications for a range of questions!

An amusing experience

Recently, I had a very amusing experience with a fresh MBA who had applied for a job with us. She had done a project on corporate governance. To test her knowledge I started off with a basic question: What is corporate governance? She did not take much time to get off the starting block: "It is about managing a company well so that shareholders' wealth is maximised." Then I asked her to define corporate finance. After a bit of meandering, she repeated the first answer. I then asked her to explain the difference between corporate finance and corporate governance. She gave up.

I cannot really blame this student for what happened. Our education system lays a premium on rote learning. We attach greater importance to remembering isolated facts instead of trying to understand why they happened. Our examiners are happy if a student writes a long answer even if most of the answer is irrelevant to the question at hand. A student daring to write a short, smart, clear answer is taking a big risk. Indeed, our whole emphasis seems to be on helping students fall into a set pattern, not on improving the learning process.

In the above incident, the student had heard the term shareholders' wealth maximisation being repeated by different teachers in different classes. She must also have seen the term being mentioned repeatedly in newspapers, magazines and books. So she must have thought, it is a safe answer to give for most questions in the area of finance. Consider the following questions. What is the main function of the CEO? What is the main duty of managers? What is the role of the board? What is financial management? What is corporate governance? What is the function of corporate strategy? For all these questions, a student can say "It deals with maximisation of shareholders' wealth." Yet, there is a different answer to each question. The CEO, the board and managers have different roles to play. Financial management, corporate governance and corporate strategy have different meanings, even if there are some overlapping areas.

To correct the state of affairs, what we need is not huge investment but a new approach. For example, we need to use more imagination while setting examination papers. We must include questions which provoke students

and force them to think. We must move from what and when to why and how. Suppose, we were to ask a question, Why do we need a separate subject called corporate governance? That would really test the students' understanding. Or we could ask another simple question. Why do firms exist? Or we could ask: When is vertical integration advisable? That would again force the students to think and reflect.

In short, the need of the hour is to shift from remembering to understanding, accepting to questioning and reading to reflecting. We must make the students understand the basic concepts. We must encourage students to think, reflect and get into an inquiry mode. Unless we do something quickly about this, I am afraid, even the quality of the top 5 per cent of our students might deteriorate.

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