

Crowning glory

What makes Delhi University a top draw for students? **Deepak Nayyar**, its former vice-chancellor, traces the university's journey to its current position of eminence.



The renovated Vice Regal lodge
Pic: YASIR IQBAL

I first came to the University of Delhi as an undergraduate student of St Stephen's College in 1962. I spent five years there, until 1967, doing my BA (honours) and MA in economics. I returned to the University of Delhi (DU) for a second innings, this time as the vice- chancellor, from 2000 to 2005. These were two very different incarnations but both were exciting and rewarding. And each was a learning experience.

I came from provincial India, having spent the preceding two years in Jaipur, in a Hindi medium school. In the beginning, I was a little intimidated. Open doors and equal opportunities, with supportive teachers and a splendid peer group, meant that I settled into my new world far more easily and quickly than I had imagined. The opportunity of education at the University of Delhi turned out to be my portal to the world.

After five wonderful years, I was selected for the Rhodes scholarship and went to Oxford. The academic gap between the universities of Delhi and Oxford was not enormous. Academic standards at Delhi School of Economics matched those at the University of Oxford. In fact, John Hicks, who was held in much awe at the time, asked why I had left Delhi to come to Oxford.

Yet, there were some things that were not quite right at DU. As a student, I found the emphasis on learning by rote and catering to the examination system somewhat unimaginative and certainly not conducive to learning in a creative mode. Asking questions was awkward. Being the argumentative Indian was exceedingly difficult. This is something that I learnt at Oxford.

When I returned to DU 33 years later, I was not a student but the vice-chancellor. During these three decades the world had changed, and so had DU, almost beyond recognition. It did not help matters that I had very little contact with the university during this interregnum.



Delhi University's faculty of arts building
Pic: YASIR IQBAL

THE UNIVERSITY

Just as Delhi is the capital of India, DU is a university for the nation as a whole. Its national character is the imprimatur of the institution since it began life more than a century ago. It has always attracted students from every part of India. This was so when I was a student. It was so when I was the vice-chancellor. And I hope that it will continue to be so in times to come.

DU is among the premier universities of India and the leader in undergraduate education. As in all excellent universities, anywhere in the world, it has some departments in which teaching and research are at the cutting edge of knowledge, even if some are not quite of the same level. There are flaws and warts. Yet, all said and done, it is among the best educational institutions in the Republic of India.

There are, of course, other institutions in India, such as the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management, which have built

formidable reputations as centers of academic excellence and learning. But they are small in terms of not only scale but also reach, when compared to DU. It has 85 departments for postgraduate students, 70 colleges for undergraduate students and professional schools in medicine, engineering, law and management. Its population of 2, 50, 000 students places it among the largest universities in the world. Indeed, it is a public university in the true sense of the term.

It attracts the brightest students. It has committed and reputed faculty members. Its former students have distinguished themselves in every walk of life — politics, academia, media, law, civil services, the corporate world, literature, art, theatre, films, sports, civil society — not only in India but also abroad.

DU has an established reputation for transparency and fairness in admissions, which are granted on the basis of the results of the school leaving examination or entrance examinations. There is reason to be proud of this. This is what gives potential students a sense of confidence.

AS THE VC

I owed the University of Delhi a debt of gratitude. So, do most of its former students. In my role as the vice-chancellor, however, I had the rare opportunity to repay that debt. With the passage of time, things had slipped at DU, as it had in every other public institution in India. It was time for reform and change. I wanted to make it the leading university in India and to close its widening gap with respect to the best universities in the world. It was a herculean task.

I went about this task in a systematic manner given a time horizon of five years. The fundamental objectives were a quest for academic excellence in teaching and research keeping the interests of students and of faculty members centre-stage. I must stress that this would simply not have been possible without the commitment and leadership provided by members of my team and the pro-active support of an ever widening circle made up of members of the university community. There were three dimensions to our endeavors.

The first task was to restructure curricula and courses most of which had changed little, if at all, over the past 50 years. The pathetic BA (pass) and BSc (pass) programmes were restructured in a radical manner to create state-of-the-art BA and BSc programmes that became role models for undergraduate programmes at universities elsewhere in India. The BA (honours) and BSc (honours) programmes were also restructured to integrate subsidiary and language courses and credit courses and allow students some freedom to study across related disciplines outside their major. The examination and evaluation system was changed to introduce internal assessment with a 25 per cent weight. This entire process spanned three years. It was done through consultation, participation and persuasion following not simply the letter but also the spirit of due process.

The second task was to streamline the process of academic appointments. The number of vacancies in university departments and undergraduate colleges, including colleges without principals for more than a decade, was mind-boggling. The selection process had atrophied in parts. We sought to restore its sanctity in terms of transparency and fairness to restore academic merit as the essential criteria for selection. Promotions were also subject to strict performance criteria. There was a conscious attempt to ensure that young persons, with talent and

promise, were also appointed. Some of them are already stars. And some will become stars in times to come.

The third task was to improve infrastructure, which was on the verge of collapse.

We built academic complexes for classrooms and offices. We built new hostels and renovated old hostels. We provided resources for libraries and laboratories. We built a state-of-the-art conference centre. We constructed an international guesthouse. We restored and built auditoriums. We created a students' centre with a wide range of facilities such as an amphitheatre, a food court and recreation facilities. We created pedestrian precincts with landscaping in the congested areas.

Restoration of heritage buildings was an integral part of this process. One of them was the old Vice Regal Lodge. It housed the offices of the vice-chancellor and the university administration. But it was in a dilapidated state. We went about in a systematic manner, garnered resources, shortlisted the right people and in a span of around two years, the transformation was magical. Today, it is one of the most beautiful buildings in Delhi.

C.D. Deshmukh was my role model. He was the vice-chancellor when I was a student and he was somebody who believed in creating institutions with creative and imaginative leadership. I believe that good leaders are those who nurture leaders for the future and make themselves dispensable.



Students from all over India study in DU

THE FUTURE

I hope the University of Delhi will continue to play an important role as an institution of academic excellence and retain its national character. It must evolve and grow with the object of becoming one of the premier universities in Asia and the world.

(As told to V. Kumara Swamy)

Deepak Nayyar is also the former chief economic adviser to the Government of India