

Azim Premji University

A Note on the Character of the University and Its Governance

1.0 The University – its roots

1.1 The beginnings of Azim Premji University are in the learning and experience of a decade of work in elementary education by the Azim Premji Foundation. The University was founded as one of the key responses to the constraints and challenges that the Foundation encountered both within and in the environment, and as part of a larger strategy to contribute to the Education and Development sectors in the country.

1.2 Two key principles guide the process of the University's evolution. Firstly, the University has an explicit social (or moral) purpose. As an institution, it exists to make significant contributions to education in a manner consistent with social justice, equity, humane values and sustainability within the framework of a secular and democratic Indian polity. This is an explicit commitment to the idea that knowledge and learning have human and social consequences and that their pursuit cannot be separated from these consequences. At the same time, this commitment to a specific value orientation is not to be interpreted as a narrowly utilitarian view of the University. We believe that the commitment to these values is not in any way inconsistent with academic and institutional autonomy and excellence.

1.3 Secondly, the University is part of the Foundation and integral to its vision. The synergy from the close working of the students and faculty with the Foundation's field units will inform and enrich the programmes at the University and the field alike. The members of the Foundation as a whole have the challenging task of defining an organizational culture and processes of interaction that realise the full potential of this linkage. It is well possible that the University would grow to have a presence in all the field units, leading to the closest possible integration of their programmes.

1.4 It should be clear from the above that Azim Premji University is unusual in the way it is conceived and organized. We profess liberal and 'humanistic' values but at the same time define our intent unambiguously in the context of India's social and political development. We consider independence and excellence in research to be critical, but do not see the possibility of sharply separating knowledge from its purposes and consequences. We are not narrowly utilitarian in our orientation, but at the same time are deeply mindful of the consequences of our work.

1.5 The above points have definite implications for and impact on the organization and governance of the University.

2.0 Governance and organizational culture

2.1 The University is the direct result of private philanthropic initiative and by definition not for profit in its orientation. At the same time, while being a public and charitable institution, its vision and strategy are closely aligned to that of the Foundation and are specific. It is crucial that the University develop structures and processes that nurture autonomy and excellence while demonstrating fidelity and accountability to its founding intentions.

2.2 The above consideration requires that the early and formative years of the institution be guided with clarity and firmness that in no way compromise openness in functioning. Academic communities work best when they work democratically and in a participative manner. The vision of the University therefore emphasizes the processes of questioning, cooperative functioning, dialogue and an orientation to action. Therefore the University will respect the perspectives and voices of all the stakeholders while in no way shirking the responsibility to act decisively. It is important that we avoid the pattern of governance deficits that plague our public universities and public administration in general. To this end, we have blurred the sharp divide between the roles of faculty and administrators in University governance. This is a significant departure from convention in Indian higher education.

2.3 The close linkage to the world of practice through the work of the Foundation has prompted the creation of a faculty structure that is not divided in traditional disciplinary lines. It is hoped that interesting networks and collaborative work practices will develop in response to a more integrated view of the University's domains of interest and their fields of application. This consideration has also prompted us to invite practitioners of calibre as faculty in the University. This unconventional approach, we feel, will enrich both academic work and the realisation of its implications for the field.

2.4 All faculty members are expected to contribute to and participate in some measure to teaching, research and practice/service. The annual planning exercise includes mechanisms and processes that help faculty plan their work over the year to achieve this. The annual review which includes modules for assessment of one's own work and an evaluation by an advisor or supervisor is also integral to this system.

2.5 While we expect faculty members at various stages of their academic careers and with differing records of accomplishments to join the University, the academic community is expected to be egalitarian and collegial in its functioning. We feel that a rigid culture of status and authority based on seniority is detrimental to the overall climate of the organization. While there will inevitably be different roles, "levels" of responsibility and financial compensation, these will not constitute an explicit and rigid hierarchy.

2.6 Faculty participation is critical at all levels of functioning and is a necessary condition for the University's success. However, in view of the anticipated scale of the University and the size of the faculty community, it is inevitable that decision making and roles be specialised. It is unrealistic to expect all members to be aware of or be party to all decisions in real-time. Open communication and feedback are therefore crucial.

2.7 Faculty participation may happen in myriad ways. This requires, among other things, a proactive managerial vision that synergises academic and administrative processes. Identifying and empowering persons with capabilities for particular tasks and roles is central to this. Depending on the context, individual faculty members may be nominated, appointed or invited to take particular roles and responsibilities. In many situations, members of the faculty may, of their own initiative, volunteer to fulfil certain tasks and roles. Faculty members are invited to take the initiative in identifying areas where they can contribute meaningfully to effective governance. These modes of participation are not expected to be rigid over time. Groups that are constituted by appointment or nomination may be constituted in other ways as the institution matures.

2.8 It is important that decision making happens at “levels” and groups that have the relevant information and the perspectives on the issue. Identifying such issues and levels is an on-going task and an important element of our learning. Faculty forums for discussion and review of these and other issues are already active and will continue to contribute to the functioning of the University.

2.9 The creation of a participative and vibrant faculty community should not be a matter of chance and crucially depends on the willingness and ability of its members to contribute their time and energy to build it. While such investment may not demonstrate tangible outcomes in the short term, it is critical to nurturing an effective organizational culture and for the University’s future.

2.10 Faculty autonomy and participative functioning have another crucial ingredient whose importance cannot be overemphasized. It is the success of the members in forming a community that is “more than the sum of its parts” that makes or breaks the institution. It is inevitable that individuals will have temperaments, preferences, professional-intellectual views and interests that make faculty groups a hotbed of contending perspectives. In the face of such diversity, the capacity of groups to maintain coherence of functioning and to transcend divisive forces is neither easy nor automatic. Such capabilities are often the result of personal commitment by individual faculty to rise above narrow concerns and the commitment of the institution as a whole to prioritise and nurture such norms and terms of engagement. Therefore this is one of the University’s paramount interests and a definer of our culture as an organization.

2.11 The above points require constant and effective processes of faculty support, development, mentoring, peer-supported evaluation and feedback. The annual review process mentioned earlier is built on this premise and will contribute to the development of personal effectiveness and to organizational success. These will continue to be refined and modified in response to our experiences in implementing them and to feedback.

3.0 The organization of the University’s work

3.1 The current structure is expected to respond to the needs of a more complex and growing organisation while retaining flexibility and the focus on our goals. Needless to say, the new structure will be responsive to feedback from the University’s community and our experience in working within it and thus subject to review and change.

The University has six operating units – four Schools and two centres with specific mandates. They are:

- School of Education
- School of Development
- School of Policy & Governance
- School of Liberal Studies
- Research Centre (RC)
- University Resource Centre (URC).

3.2 Each School is headed by a Director who will provide the academic and overall leadership for the effective functioning of the respective School. The Vice Chancellor, Registrar and the Directors of Academic & Strategic Development will work closely with the Directors.

3.3 Each Faculty member will have a primary affiliation to a School. However, we see all faculty as “University faculty” and affiliations as flexible grouping responsive to changing needs. Teaching and research across schools of affiliation will therefore be facilitated in appropriate ways. By the same token faculty recruitment and placement will assume competence to teach in multiple programmes and will not create a hierarchy based on programmes taught. Hence, all faculty will be recruited for the whole University as they will have University wide work; it is for the functional reason that they will have a primary affiliation to a School.

3.4 The Registrar’s office (Programmes’ Office, Academic Administration, Admissions, Student Support & Placements) provide academic administration and other operational support to all the Schools in the University. The University already has statutory bodies and other committees such as the Board of Governors, the Academic Council, the Research Council and the Curriculum and Pedagogy Committee; their roles and responsibilities remain unchanged and are not described in this document.

3.5 In addition to the above, there are two pan-University roles, the Director of Academic Development and the Director of Strategic Development, who will contribute to the integration of work across the organisation. The Director of Academic Development will strengthen systems and processes that support and ensure the quality of the University’s programmes and the opportunities for faculty learning. The Director of Strategic Development will be involved with and contribute to the overall strategic and operational planning of the University, which includes the programme and people strategy, development of organizational policies and other related issues.

3.6 The University currently has various strategic research programmes called Initiatives like Law, Governance & Development, Work & Education, and Philosophy of Education. These initiatives will be linked to a specific School for operational and administrative purposes. However, the ‘Initiatives’ are likely to draw members from across the University and the rest of the Foundation, and are going to be important mechanisms to foster cross-university work.

In sum

Azim Premji University has adopted a vision, developed structures and defined roles that are not conventional in Indian higher education. We are confident that this will pay rich dividends in the long run and help us discover excellence.

The University considers effective processes of governance and administration to be supportive of the vision of learning that we cherish and central to the success of its mission. Development of such structures and practices of governance is inevitably a long and often arduous process of organizational learning under often ambiguous conditions. At the same time we will not shirk the need to act decisively when the situation demands, taking full responsibility for our actions. The academic community can help the process tremendously through constructive critique, feedback and direct participation.