

Board of Studies Meeting

November 6th, 2014

Minutes

Agenda Item 1: Introduction

Prof. Vivek Bhandari extended a warm welcome to members of the Board, stressing the important role that this body will play in designing the MBA in Rural Management. He also clarified that since the Board of Studies is a new institutional presence at IIHMR University, it has an opportunity to set high standards of rigor and depth, so that the MBA program succeeds in emerging as a long-term, durable presence in the firmament of management education in the India.

Agenda Item 2: Background Presentations on IIHMR University, the School of Rural Management, and the MBA (Rural Management)

Prof. Bhandari outlined, in some detail, the historical journey of IIHMR, flagging the three broad phases of its evolution that have culminated in the emergence of IIHMR “University” by an Act of the Rajasthan State legislature earlier this year. In particular, he stressed the fact that now that IIHMR is a “research university” rather than a domain-specific “institute,” its canvas of disciplines and academic activities is much larger than earlier; and this means that the depth and breadth of the University’s activities have to increase. Expressing excitement at all the possibilities this opened-up, he emphasized the importance of IIHMR’s creating a new and robust organizational architecture that is consistent with these objectives.

Based on this background, Prof. Bhandari went on to describe the emergence of the School of Rural Management, and more specifically, the objectives of the MBA in Rural Management (RM). In his introduction to the MBA program (as per its description outlined in the agenda papers), he emphasized that it was hoped that this program should become an integral part of the emerging architecture of the School of Rural Management’s core activities (i.e., research, training, and consulting) in an integrative manner, and indeed, go on to shape the larger activity matrix of IIHMR University in symbiotic ways.

Prof. SD Gupta, President of IIHMR University, who participated in the meeting briefly, echoed the above sentiments. He also strongly endorsed the re-launch of the rural management postgraduate program, and extended the University’s complete support to the Board of Studies.

Agenda Item 3: Detailed Discussion on the MBA (RM)

Prof. Bhandari introduced this discussion by stressing that the primary objective of the MBA (RM) is to facilitate integrative learning in the deepest sense of the term, so that graduates are able to walk into professional roles with ease, and play a vital role both at both the operational and strategic level in their jobs.

Mr. Ved Arya responded to these ideas favorably, acknowledging how many stakeholders in the development sector welcomed the arrival of well-designed academic programs because of the high demand for development management professionals. He stressed, however, that it was critical that graduates of these programs were willing to work in the field, with rigor and commitment, and not abandon development praxis, something that happens all too often.

Taking the discussion forward, Mr. Arya emphasized that it was critical for the MBA program's design to meet the expectations of all of the key stakeholders, i.e., the owners/apex leadership of IIHMR; the students who will go on the enroll for the program; and the prospective employers.

- With regard to the students who would be entering the program, Mr. Arya emphasized that the current crop of aspirants populating business schools everywhere has many distinctive attributes, aspirations, and an outlook that must be appreciated. He said that this was, after all, the Google generation!
- He also stressed that as far as the demand-side, i.e., the prospective employers, are concerned, it is clear that all sectors (such as livelihoods, technology, finance, etc.) are changing fast, and the specializations that IIHRM offers must be cognizant of these dynamics as it plans for the future.

With regard to the views of the owners/apex leadership of IIHMR's views on the MBA (RM), Prof. Bhandari stressed that these stakeholders are supporting the new initiative, and indeed the SRM's plans, to the fullest. This, fundamentally, is why the decision to launch this program was taken.

Mr. Arya concluded his remarks by complimenting the overall mission, vision, and operational matrix of the SRM. The fact that the SRM's vision document outlines an institutional commitment to the poor and the marginal was, in his view, an attractive feature of the SRM's outlook, indeed its moral vision. Overall, he also appreciated the work that has gone into the design of the MBA (RM), in particular the fact that the program lays strong emphasis on research skills and field-based learning.

Mr. Kothari echoed these comments, and complimented the design of the program, its commitment to diverse areas of specialization, and overall stress on rigor and practical engagement in the field. He went to add that the

distinguished history of IIHMR makes it an excellent setting for the incubation of the SRM, and more specifically the MBA (RM). He added that the Bhoruka Charitable Trust (BCT), which has done pioneering work in rural development, already plays a vital role in shaping IIHMR's activities, and the SRM must leverage its formidable resources and network in nurturing the MBA (RM), especially in matters related to fieldwork.

Mr. Kothari went on say that IIHMR's historical strengths in research must be leveraged to strengthen the SRM and the MBA (RM). Pedagogically, he felt that it was vital for the SRM to develop high-quality cases, which could be used to energize and ground students as they prepare for careers in a volatile workplace. New government schemes such as the Jan Dhan/Bhama Shah Schemes, Swaccha Bharat Campaign, the Adarsh Gram Yojana, among others, are providing the SRM with good opportunities to take the lead in creating invaluable research, as well as case material for use in the classroom.

He added that it is clear that some of sectors where the MBA program can make a major contribution include agri-business, a domain that is growing fast. The whole agricultural sector is poised for a major overhaul in the coming years, and it is clear that a new program in rural management must increase its engagement with this sector through a multi-pronged strategy.

He went on to describe the work being done at PRATHAM, and how its initiatives in skill development could provide useful opportunities for ground-level learning engagements. In particular, he commented on how new educational programs should allow students to develop strong managerial skills, but also the capacity to diversify in new and exciting areas of development. The MBA (RM) should therefore offer a variety of pertinent elective courses that bring the students into contact with a diversity of developmental fields.

Mr. Kothari emphasized that CSR activities are gaining in momentum around the country, and the SRM should take the lead in shaping this conversation. He also said that the private sector's interest in rural India should also be considered a key area for the SRM to engage with. Describing NIIT University's (Neemrana) tie-up with ICICI Bank, he said that such experiments demonstrate the strong potential for public sector engagement with academic programs in rural management. In view of the overall expansion of the finance sector in India, one of the key specializations that the MBA (RM) may wish to offer is Rural Finance and Banking (with elective components devoted to "Financial Inclusion").

Mr. Kothari further added that students should develop strong communication skills, analytical skills, and the ability to work in field settings without any hesitation. Last but not the least, he said that students should be encouraged to think entrepreneurially, so that they could innovate and develop new social enterprises.

Prof. Dandekar built on these comments to stress how quickly the definition of “rural” is changing. He also questioned the nomenclature of the MBA (RM), suggesting that even if this issue is settled for now, that the limitations of this label be appreciated. Echoing Mr. Kothari’s comments on the changing character of the agricultural sector, he described, in some detail the looming crisis in this sector.

He said that total investment in agriculture as a percentage of GDP has declined from 1.6% to 1.3%, and successive Indian governments have slashed their expenditure on rural development (including expenditure on agriculture, rural development, special areas program, irrigation and flood control, village industry, energy and transport). Indeed, the Center’s spending on agriculture had fallen so steeply during the liberalization era that in 2004-05 it was, in real terms (that is, after discounting for inflation), about *20 per cent lower than in 1990-91*.

Prof. Dandekar went on to add that as public sector investment in agriculture has been slashed, a whole range of input costs are being hiked, bank credit is being slashed, domestic crops face competition from cheap imports, and price support operations are being reduced or wound up. Essentially, *more and more rural producers are losing their land*. Marginal farms, which are unviable and hence unable to provide much employment, grew from 19 per cent to 22 per cent of rural households in the decade before 2000; thus landless and marginal farmers together accounted for 63 per cent of rural households, up from 55 per cent in 1987-88. As a result more than *two hundred and fifty thousand farmers all over the country have committed suicide in the country in the last decade and half*.

Based on this analysis, Prof. Dandekar said that since the relationship between rural and urban has been completely reconfigured in the past few decades, it is vital that the MBA (RM) evolves a curriculum that is able to respond directly to the challenges being posed by the decimation of agriculture, and more generally, dramatic shifts in the political economy of rural India.

In a provocative intervention, he suggested that instead of offering specializations, the MBA (RM) should – in its second year – offer three tracks: one for a general MBA (with normative specializations like finance, HR, etc); a second track in development studies (for students who are committed to research); and the third, in rural management (with sectoral specializations like natural resource management, rural finance, etc.).

Prof. Tukdeo starting by complimenting the overall design of the proposed course. She then went on to build on the discussions by stressing how the MBA (RM) should attempt a meaningful merging of the fields of rural management and development studies; and how the nomenclature of the program should somehow reflect this as far as possible. Pedagogically, it was critical that there be

strong stress on the *processes* that are redrawing the rural landscape in the country, not least because the specificity of the rural is under question.

Taking this idea further, she argued that the program's curriculum must make students aware of the deeper processes and structures that are shaping the lives of rural communities; so as to connect with the multiple domains (agriculture, finance, etc.) and the agencies (government, private sector, civil society, etc.) that are at work. *In other words, a conceptual triad, between processes, agencies, and sectors, could provide a meaningful framework within which to design the overall curriculum.* Prof. Tukdeo appreciated that some of this was already visible in the present draft of the curriculum, but that this could be strengthened.

Finally, she commented on the need to locate the cultural transitions and processes at work in contemporary India at the heart of the curriculum, not least because these dynamics are playing a fundamental role in transforming the rural landscape, and need to be viewed through a management lens. None of the mainstream business schools do this, but in the domain of rural management, culture is a key determinant of organizational life, and indeed, most developmental interventions in general.

Sounding a word of caution, Prof. Saxena reflected on the difficulties of realizing the SRM's foundational vision after the PGDRM was launched in 2011. She lamented the challenges associated with operationalizing the program at that stage and in subsequent years, eventually leading to its closure in 2014. In particular, she felt that within the larger culture and organizational architecture of IIHMR, the domain of rural management had found it hard to gain much traction.

Prof. Saxena went on to talk about the difficulties of attracting good students capable of absorbing the challenging curriculum being envisaged for the MBA (RM). According to her, some of the biggest challenges faced in the execution of the PGDRM had to do with the absence of basic skills (in writing, communication, math, etc.) among the students.

Members of the Board reacted to this by pointing out that although her concerns are well taken, the challenge of weak basic skills among management students was one that academic programs around the country (including some of the strongest programs in India such as those at the IIMs, TISS, or IRMA) were confronting. Like these institutions, it is vital that the MBA (RM) is able to provide a robust coursework, workshops, and provide support mechanisms in these basic skills so as to ensure that the students were able to grow as professionals and change-agents in a holistic manner. As in the finest MBA programs around the world, the inculcation of basic skills has to be woven into all stages and levels of the two-year program, and should not be treated merely as "remedials" or "add-ons." Prof. Dandekar, among others, stressed that this kind of integration on basic skill education with the core curriculum had been

achieved successfully at many new programs in development management programs in India (such as the Central University of Gujarat, TISS, etc.). All members of the Board felt that it was critical that IIHMR University ensures that the issue basic skills among entering students is dealt with aggressively.

Commenting on the relevance of learning from other institutions, Prof. Sadhu stressed the need for the SRM to create a formidable network of both academic and professional development organizations, as well as NGOs. He highlighted some of the successes of the PGDRM in this regard, and felt that the newly designed MBA (RM) should work toward the strengthening of such a network expeditiously. This, he said, would be vital for the success of the fieldwork segments of the MBA (RM)'s curriculum, as well as SRM's different activities, many of which are already under way, especially in the areas of water and sanitation, natural resource management, etc. The SRM has already demonstrated its strengths in these areas. Since IIHMR already has good networks in these domains, these networks could be leveraged for the future.

As the discussion was winding down, Mr. Kothari reminded the Board of four core attributes that must be nurtured in a quality management education of the future; and that these must be encoded in the curriculum of the MBA (RM).

These are:

- Strong communication skills
- A capacity for leadership
- An entrepreneurial spirit
- An appreciation of the power of technology

Fundamentally, the primary objective of a management education, Mr. Kothari stressed, was enhancing the ability of the students *to act decisively based on their rigorous understanding of their professional environment.*

Mr. Ved Arya, agreeing with these views, added that the experiences of SRIJAN confirm this, and have led him to conclude that any new program (including the SRM's offering) must ensure that basic skills and professional training receive equal emphasis. Students must be exposed to initiatives that successfully link farmers with markets, as well as give them a sense of the challenges associated with building durable value chains. SRIJAN's own work is very instructive in this regard.

Decision: At the end of the discussion, it was agreed that Prof. Vivek Bhandari constitute a sub-committee of the SRM's Board of Studies comprising of three or four members. This sub-committee will draft a detailed curriculum for the MBA (RM), which will be taken up at the next meeting of the Board of Studies (to be held no later than February 2015).

Agenda 4: New Linkages

It was agreed that in the coming weeks, members of the Board would share the names of resource persons as well as potential collaborating organizations that share the SRM's vision.

Concluding Comments, and Key Takeaways

The Board wholeheartedly endorsed the launch of the MBA (RM), and felt that since a good beginning has been made, the program be streamlined in a nuanced, and rigorous manner. Some of the key challenges that will need to be addressed in the coming days are as follows, many of which plague almost all management program around India:

- (i) **Acquiring clarity on the thrust areas/specializations for the program:** Which specializations should the MBA(RM) offer? Should the program focus on agriculture and allied sectors of the rural economy, in other words, the areas livelihoods of the rural poor; or should it operate on a larger canvas? Should the program also seek to impact the areas of education and skills, health, issues related to governance and accountability – indeed to engage with the various fault lines in our society and polity at a macro level? These questions need to be answered systematically so as to evolve a meaningful course design, and relatedly, a brand identity.
- (ii) **Positioning and branding:** Related to the above issue, members of the Board felt that the label “rural management,” while sound, has some limitations. Its use should ideally calibrated to address a diversity of sectors, agencies, and processes unfolding in India today. The course design must connect with the “demand side” in a focused manner for maximum impact.
- (iii) **Networking and outreach:** So as to strengthen its capacity to deliver a vibrant MBA program, the SRM must reach out to other academic institutions, government agencies, philanthropic trusts, civil society organizations, and the private sector to share its vision, and make them aware of the large canvas of its activities. Doing this will also allow it to explore new partnerships, many which should yield dividends in the form of collaborations in research, consulting, and training.
- (iv) **The faculty's commitment to research into contemporary problems:** In order for the MBA(RM) to meet the needs of its different stakeholders, the SRM's core faculty members will need to conduct grounded, cutting-edge research. This will mean that they spend substantial amounts of time in the field to become conversant with the problems themselves, which would result in their being able to inspire the students to devote themselves to problem-solving, poverty alleviation, and the overall improvement in the condition of people

who are in the lower social strata. If the SRM's faculty members collaborate with NGOs and Foundations of repute and spend time in their field projects, it will sensitize them to the current problems of farm productivity, climate change, value chain creation, bank financing and so on. Just as importantly, such research will allow the faculty to develop new cases and teaching materials for use at IIHMR University, and beyond.

- (v) **Basic skills and competencies:** The issue of baseline skills and competencies of the students the SRM admits is critically important. Skill development must be inculcated at different levels of the curriculum.
- (vi) **A spirit of creativity:** For the program to really succeed, a spirit of open inquiry, engagement with the issues that excite young people (the Google generation!), and a commitment to experimentation should be integral to the pedagogic approach. This will be necessary to foster innovation, social entrepreneurship, and creativity in the program. At the heart of this is the faculty's deep appreciation of the power of technology in addressing the problems facing rural society.
- (vii) **Quality of the faculty:** As the meeting ended, members of the Board stressed that for the MBA (RM) to succeed, it was vital that the quality of teaching, field-engagement, and mentoring by the faculty must remain consistently high. This will require the SRM to recruit skilled educators equipped with strong credentials in rural management, a love for teaching, and a commitment to field-based learning. Any compromise on this front could be fatal for the program. A great beginning has been made; and it is vital that the momentum be maintained.

The meeting ended on a high note. Prof. Bhandari thanked all members on behalf of the SRM, IIHMR University.