

IIM CALCUTTA

# RIGOUR AND REL

**The benefits of social good over the balance sheet**



# EVANCE

◀ Campus of the  
Indian Institute  
of Management  
Calcutta



By **MANISH THAKUR**

**A**CADEMIC INSTITUTIONS DO HAVE their own cycles of rise and decline. No institution can rest on its past laurels for a considerable period of time. In order to retain its excellence, an institution has to continually reinvent itself in relation to changing societal demands and evolving expectations of its multiple stakeholders. Indian Institution of Management Calcutta (IIMC) is no exception to this general trend. If over the past six decades or so, IIMC has been steadfastly able to hold on to its preeminent position in the field of management education, then there must be an inherently robust institutional ethos and accompanying commitment to rigour and relevance on the part of its faculty, students, alumni, and the staff. This brief essay explores some of those elements that make IIMC tick all the right boxes and retain best-in-class education standards over time.

**T**HE FIRST AND foremost element is the quality of the IIMC faculty. IIMC has been singularly blessed with such faculty whose disciplinary depth and research excellence have been on par with comparable global standards. Since IIMC has been fashioned after MIT's Sloan School of Management, the grounding in fundamental academic disciplines has been of seminal importance to the IIMC faculty. In fact, this largely explains the highest standards of teacher-taught interaction in an IIMC classroom. Even as the IIMC faculty has worked in interdisciplinary areas, its feet have been firmly placed in the fundamental disciplines in which it has been trained. This enviable combination of solid anchorage in a fundamental discipline and an earnest openness to cutting-edge research has historically imparted IIMC an academic rigour that is not easily found in a large number of business schools. Little wonder the IIMC faculty has not only worked in the applied areas of immediate interest to Indian business and state policy but has also contributed to some of the major theoretical debates across disciplines. To give just one example, the Economics faculty at IIMC has been a major contributor to what subsequently came to be known as the 'mode of production' debate in Indian agriculture. Ranjit Sau, Paresh Chattopadhyay, NK Chandra, and the like, are familiar names to students of social sciences in India. At the same time, Sudip Chaudhuri's work on the Indian pharmaceutical industry has informed one of the influential Supreme Court

judgments, having immense policy ramifications.

Allied with this perpetual quest for disciplinary rigour, there has been an ingrained respect for academic autonomy in IIMC. There have been no attempts whatsoever to fit everyone in a given research/teaching mould. Nor have there been any diktats from the top to do a particular type of research (say, applied research alone) or to use a specific kind of pedagogy (say, case teaching). This has ensured enabling freedom to faculty where she is free to choose a given pedagogical method or a particular research trajectory to suit her interest and temperament, thereby optimising outcomes. If the past is any guide, this uncompromising academic autonomy has never degenerated into a free-for-all convenient eclecticism or stultifying complacency. On the contrary, it has paid huge dividends and has been able to make IIMC the most preferred destination for young and research-oriented faculty.

More importantly, IIMC has had a distinctive self-image since day one. It never looked at itself as a run-of-the-mill business school. Rather, it thought of itself and accordingly delineated its mandate, as a premier public institution devoted to the furtherance of quality management education and research in the country and beyond. In effect, it meant a certain breadth of vision of what management education was, and ought to be. IIMC delivered a kind of management education that drew upon an array of fundamental disciplines, including social sciences and history. In fact, some of the IIMC History faculty went on to become renowned historians in their own right. The names of the late Barun De, Savyasachi Bhattacharya, and Sumit Guha come to one's mind immediately. Likewise, Sujit Basu, the late Manish Bhattacharjee, and Rahul Mukerjee have been well-known as researchers of international repute in the field of statistics.

**B**ESIDES SOLID DISCIPLINARY grounding, the IIMC faculty has always been adaptive to changes in educational technology. Long before the Covid-19 pandemic brought home the value of virtual classrooms, IIMC had gone to town with a diverse portfolio of its long-duration programmes leveraging technologies available in the market. To be sure, it was an unusual feat in terms of farsightedness and revealed an inclusive vision of management education. Today, IIMC's online long-duration programmes are a reference model for others in the market. They fulfil an urgent national need to offer management education in an accessible manner to thousands of working professionals across the length and breadth of the country.

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IIMC's digital infrastructure is world-class, and this feeds into the classroom enhancing the quality of the teaching-learning experience. Noticeably, given this openness to technology, IIMC did not face any serious disruption during the pandemic and seamlessly migrated all its academic programmes to online platforms with minimal loss to the learning curve of its students.

But then, like any good academic institution, IIMC is much more than the sum total of its parts. True, it has outstanding faculty, first-rate students, exceptionally dedicated staff, and the most supportive alumni. But what is it that binds them together and makes them part of a well-knit joint family, so to say? The answer is obvious: their shared commitment to excellence. Yet, there is a subtle difference here as compared to other institutions with similar commitments. At IIMC, there are three distinct elements informing this shared commitment to excellence. First, the quest for excellence is not at the cost of undermining its public character. IIMC has been acutely aware of its mandate as a national institution of importance and has gone out of its

way to align its institutional priorities with the national ones. It has never championed the softer path of being made free from the "burden" of national expectations in order to forge ahead in this era of global competition. It has proactively reacted to the demands of nation-building. And it has taken pride in its alignment with the national goals.

Second, IIMC has made attempts to define excellence in its own terms. While going for global rankings and accreditation, the IIMC faculty has always problematised the global division of academic labour. It has consistently questioned the theoretical hegemony of the global north in relation to knowledge production. Over the years, such

questioning has led to our faculty's worthy contributions to the emergent field of Critical Management Studies (CMS). It has also accelerated our endeavour to indigenise and critique theoretical frameworks by delving deep into the sociocultural specificities of Indian business practices, and diverse forms of contemporary capitalism that have historically unfolded in India. Last, and most crucially, this shared commitment to excellence has been the outcome of a multipronged dialogue among faculty and the members of the board of governors. In fact, it can be seen as an embodiment of substantive democratic consultation. Arguably, a long-drawn consultative process ensures the self-propelled participation of everyone concerned as no one thinks that something has been imposed on her by a superior authority. This facilitates a deeper alignment of individual career aspirations and research interests with the overall institutional goals and

objectives. Appreciably, IIMC has been able to clinch this alignment to a large extent. This probably explains the continued preeminent positioning of IIMC in the field of management teaching, research, training and consultancy.

**A** NEGLECTED FACET OF institution-building in Indian higher education has been the appreciation of the role of non-academic staff. Howsoever grand a vision, unless it percolates to the cadres across the board, it will never become part of the institutional common sense. After all, it is the support staff that translates a lofty vision into everyday institutional practices. It needs to be emphasised that IIMC has had its fair share of such dedicated staff who often went beyond the call of their duties to streamline administrative bottlenecks and created a congenial setting for the pursuit of academic excellence. Walk into the MBA office at 10PM and you will find some of the staff working diligently to accommodate the best visiting faculty in the teaching schedule with minimum inconvenience to both the teacher and the taught. Come to the campus during the weekend, and you will see a couple of doctoral classes going on with full support from the office and staff. This internalisation on the part of the staff that they are part of a larger enterprise of shaping bright young minds is something that makes them have an affectionate and warm connection with the students. They end up developing long-lasting relationships with the student alumni.

IIMC firmly believes that change is the only constant, and it is more so in the increasingly competitive and rapidly changing landscape of professional higher education. This calls for a state of readiness so that IIMC has the institutional capaciousness to accommodate the globally circulating discourses on ethics, responsibility, and sustainability. While IIMC has remained strongly committed to its founding vision and core values, it has managed to remain supple and dynamic in adapting to changing requirements in an asymmetrically integrated global academia. Furthermore, IIMC strives to address newly emerging challenges such as climate change and rising inequality under current conditions of economic growth through constant innovations in its curriculum, research, and training agendas. IIMC attempts to create an ethically informed and responsive student community sensitive to the needs of environmental sustainability and the sensible stewardship of a fragile planetary ecology. As the first National Institute of Management, IIMC has always emphasised the need to train managers in a way that they

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NEP 2020 ENVISIONS  
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acquire sensitivity to the ethical and societal consequences of their corporate actions.

**T**HE TURN TO internationalisation of IIMC in recent years has furthermore necessitated the reiteration of its task of development of “ethical future leaders capable of managing change and transformation in a globally competitive environment”—as a critical institutional mission for guiding research, teaching, and training activities. Evidently, it is difficult to insulate management education from larger global challenges of sustainable economic growth and inclusive development. The New Education Policy

2020 envisions the transformation of standalone management institutions like IIMC into multidisciplinary universities by 2030. In this context, IIMC's historical legacy, disciplinary focus, and enabling and egalitarian work environment are bound to give it an edge in this envisaged transition. Since contribution to the greater national good has been its avowed institutional motto, IIMC is poised to remain a leader in providing a type of management education that lays emphasis on accommodating sociocultural differences, facilitating cross-cultural exposures, and articulating the social role of business.

We live in times when responsible corporate citizenship has emerged as the animating mantra for management education. Business has to proactively champion values like plurality and diversity in a rapidly globalising world. The social impact of business can no longer be a trivial concern that pales into insignificance when compared to an ever-growing balance sheet. Future management education has to organically integrate the kernel of “social good” in its curricular and pedagogic practices. The societal relevance of management education is going to be an all-encompassing challenge staring in the face of management educators. Viewed thus, the future management education is going to be socially relevant, ethically responsible, and less straitjacketed than it is now. Sure enough, it is going to be technology-driven in order to address larger policy concerns of access, inclusion, and equity. It is going to be more nurturing of liberal democratic values in an interconnected world where healthy competition among the providers of management education is bound to ensure ceaseless innovation and responsiveness on the part of institutions like IIMC. IIMC is more than earnest in facing up to such a future. ■

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