

IIM Calcutta: The Democracy of Decisions

Debate is key to critical thinking and self-expression at the oldest Indian Institute of Management



Manish Thakur



Students at the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta (Photo: Getty Images)

The Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta (IIMC)—the oldest Indian Institute of Management—continues to be a beacon of quality management education and research in the country and beyond. In its diamond jubilee year, it is entitled to exude a sense of pride and glory in its manifold accomplishments in the field of professional higher education. Over the past six decades, it has contributed to the formation of cutting-edge managerial leadership through its alumni who have scaled enviable heights in the domains of business, entrepreneurship, public policy, academia, and the non-governmental sector. Its doctoral programme, since the mid-1970s, has produced hundreds of fine researchers and educators who are the backbone of higher institutions of management education in India and abroad. These Fellows (now doctorates) from IIMC have rendered yeoman service to the nation by providing much-needed thought leadership in the field. They have been the carriers of the best traditions of knowledge creation and dissemination in the management sciences.

Besides, IIMC has been quick to seize new opportunities in frontier areas of knowledge. Its Post-Graduate Diploma in Business Analytics (PGDBA) has not only been a trendsetter in leveraging the global interest in data sciences but has also been a model for institutional collaboration. It calls for initiative and imagination to rope in two other prestigious institutions—Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur and Indian Statistical Institute, Calcutta—to launch a topical and innovative academic programme. Likewise, its Post-Graduate Programme for Executives for Visionary Leadership in Manufacturing (PGPEX-VLM) is another entrepreneurial instance of cross-institutional alliances to leverage multi-sited expertise. In this case, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur and Indian Institute of Technology, Madras joined hands with IIMC to deliver a customised programme to strengthen the Indian manufacturing sector. Initiated under the Indo-Japan Cooperation Agreement, PGPEX-VLM is unique in terms of its conceptualisation and support structures ranging from Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), National Manufacturing Competitiveness Council Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, Government of India, and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). Then, it has a full-time one-year programme for working executives—MBAEx—which is going from strength to strength as it has entered its second decade of existence.

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Also, IIMC offers management development programmes (MDPs) of varying durations (both open-ended and customised) to help upgrade the skillsets of people working in business and industry. These programmes help us disseminate applied and relevant management research to those who need it the most. At the same time, they bring to us real-life challenges of business and entrepreneurship, providing the faculty with raw empirical material and live concerns that feed into their research, thereby reducing the gulf between the worlds of business and academia. Moreover, it needs emphasising that IIMC is the pioneering institute in the space of technology-driven executive education in the online mode, both through state-of-the-art studio classrooms across the length and breadth of the country as well as abroad, as well as in the direct-to-device (D2D) format. Over the past two decades, the portfolio of our long-duration programmes (LDPs) has grown enormously to cater to the diverse needs of working professionals. At any point of time, IIMC has some 35 LDPs on offer catering to different sectors and segments. So far, an estimated 25,000 working professionals have benefitted from them. At IIMC, we attempt at calibrating our LDPs in relation to the changing dynamics of national and global economies. We continuously keep adding new programmes in the fields of general management as well as cutting-edge functional and niche areas. At the same time, we do not hesitate to drop a programme if it has outlived its relevance. Our programmes draw upon the high-quality academic resources of our faculty and the select reputed practitioners from the world of business. Our pedagogic methods take on board the work experience of the participants, and our teaching modules are designed to enhance participant-centred learning. All our LDPs have an in-built component of campus visits of short durations. These visits are meant to offer the participants opportunities to interact with our faculty members, including the ones who may not have directly participated in a given programme. All the same, the visits turn out to be memorable events for our participants as they experience the serene campus life with its bountiful flora and fauna. On campus, the classroom discussions very often spill over to prolonged informal conversations on the lakeside and under the canopy of an old banyan tree. Over the years, these programmes have enabled us to cast our net wide by way of inclusion of thousands of participants and in helping them

achieve their professional goals and fulfil their personal aspirations. They are now the proud alumni of the IIMC executive education.

An institution of the calibre of IIMC has a heightened sense of self-awareness as far as its obligations to the lofty goals of democracy and development are concerned. Where else will you find a course entitled ‘Corporate Social Irresponsibility’? This self-awareness has ensured that IIMC faculty and students express themselves freely and critically on issues of national importance

However, IIMC, like any other public institution of eminence, is more than the sum total of all the programmes it offers. It has an institutional ethos honed over the decades with the active participation of its students, faculty, staff, alumni and myriad other well-wishers. Its singular achievement has been faculty-led governance that respects disciplinary diversity, safeguards academic autonomy, and fosters collegiality. It is least hierarchical in its everyday administrative structures and practices. Its historical focus on consensus-based decision-making has encouraged democratic debate through its numerous committees and fora. Apparently slow, this style of decision-making has served the institute well in the past as it facilitated dialogic negotiation across divergent points of view on a given issue, or set of issues. After all, an institution of the calibre of IIMC has a heightened sense of self-awareness so far as its obligations to the lofty goals of democracy and development are concerned. Where else will you find a course entitled “Corporate Social Irresponsibility”? It is this self-awareness which has ensured that the IIMC faculty and students express themselves freely and critically on issues of national importance. The IIMC faculty have frequently written for the popular media and the enlightened lay public. They have been more than mere consultants to industry houses and disseminators of pre-fabricated knowledge systems. They have been critical interlocutors both within the institute and outside of it. Without this much-valued criticality, it would not have been possible for the IIMC faculty to contribute so significantly to “the mode of production debate” in Indian agriculture which illuminated the pathways of capitalism in India. Very few people know that the IIMC faculty had done pathbreaking research in the area of demography and population stabilisation way back in the 1970s.

AND THIS BRINGS one to a term which has somehow lost its lustre in the recent past—“nation-building”. Ever since its inception, nation-building has been the central theme framing IIMC’s range of activities. Critics might say that IIMC has merely helped perpetuate reproduction of techno-managerial elites in the country. Yet, it is not the placement records of its graduates that has defined IIMC. It is IIMC’s continued quest for nationally relevant knowledge production and dissemination that has animated the research and training portfolios of its faculty. The IIMC faculty have engaged with issues like agriculture, irrigation, population stabilisation, decentralised governance and MGNREGA (usually beyond the ken of business schools narrowly defined) precisely because the faculty found them aligned to their understanding of the demands of nation-building. No wonder, even now IIMC unhesitatingly undertakes the training of the heads of higher secondary institutions of the state of West Bengal with a sense of satisfaction. In the past, IIMC wore it as a badge of pride and honour when it got itself involved in the training of a

large number of political functionaries of panchayats and the grassroots health officials of a number of eastern states of the country. These are just a few illustrations of IIMC's humble contribution to socially responsible public impact. More importantly, IIMC does not look at these activities as mere add-ons to its otherwise central goal of working for the private-corporate sector. Rather, its commitment to nation-building has been the unflinching impetus in its journey as a premier institution of management education. Appreciably, IIMC's successive boards of governors have been quite supportive in this endeavour and have often lent their encouragement and sage counsel to the institute. The current board is equally steeped in the high ideals of nation-building, and its chairperson, Shrikrishna Kulkarni, is fond of calling IIMC a public institution devoted to *rashtra seva* (country's service).



A classroom session at IIM Calcutta (Photo: Getty Images)

Howsoever grand its past laurels, no institute can afford to rest if it has to remain relevant in a fast-changing global and national scenario. It has to move in line with the changing times while preserving and reinforcing its core values. IIMC is no exception to this. It has had its fair share of introspection and forward-looking strategic planning to address primarily two of the pressing external variables—the growing interconnectedness (internationalisation) of management education and higher education in general, and the New Education Policy, 2020 (NEP 2020), in particular. The first brings in global competitiveness and the attendant demands for accreditation and rankings. IIMC has been prescient on this count. Without losing any valuable time, it became the first IIM to achieve the popular “triple-crown”, that is, accreditation from three prestigious global bodies—Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) and Association of MBAs (AMBA). Moreover, IIMC is the only institution of management in the country which is a member of the exclusive club of the Community of European Management Schools (CEMS), comprising 34 business schools across the globe (Global Alliance of Management Education). This association adds the globally reputed Master's of International Management (MIM) to the existing repertoire of IIMC programmes.

In a similar vein, IIMC regularly participates in multiple ranking exercises, besides participating in the Government's National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) initiative. The second factor is a national imperative. As a public institution, it is duty-bound to implement the NEP 2020. The NEP 2020 expects all standalone institutions (like IIMs) to move in the direction of multi-disciplinary universities in the near future. Logically, this means anchoring management education in a much broader framework of the sciences, social sciences and humanities in imaginatively new ways.

THERE HAS EQUALLY been a persistent demand to go for responsible management education suffused with ethical values and global citizenship. There are frequent calls to go beyond the mere focus on enhancing the shareholders'

value as the ultimate goal of management education. Concerns for planetary health and community well-being are being interwoven in management curricula everywhere. In fact, the United Nations has been working on the “Principles of Responsible Management Education” and has made it a part of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In any case, management education of tomorrow has to align with larger goals of ending extreme poverty, fighting inequality and injustice, and protecting our planet. There is no escaping the fact that future management education has to be capacious enough to address the most important economic, social, environmental and governance challenges of our time. That very clearly means widening the scope of management education beyond a firm’s balance sheet. A certain inclusiveness involving business, state, civil society and communities is the order of the day and management education has to imbibe this and anchor its disciplinary practices around that sought-after inclusiveness.

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True, the NEP 2020 and the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), an initiative by the United Nations Global Compact, pose new challenges to IIMC as they do to other similarly placed institutions of management education. These are uncharted territories. All the same, they offer new possibilities. Much depends on our preparedness to convert these possibilities into realisable goals and feasible pathways. Luckily for IIMC, its association with the Alfred P Sloan School of Management of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has predisposed it to draw upon fundamental academic disciplines as it discharged the responsibility of delivering quality management education to generations of bright young men and women. In any case, the future of management education in India, as elsewhere, depends to a large extent on an institution’s ability to navigate the competing demands of the national and the global, as also those of the fundamental disciplinary research and the applied, relevant, practitioner-friendly usable toolkits. To be sure, IIMC has the institutional and intellectual wherewithal to face these challenges and emerge a winner given its glorious legacy and robust structures of collegial governance and collaborative knowledge creation and dissemination.

From the Alumni

**Island Of Tranquillity: Time slows down at IIM Calcutta as it embraces
modernity**



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My admission interview for the IIM Calcutta (IIMC) Fellow Programme (now called the doctoral programme) took place on a sunny morning in April at the Joka campus a lifetime ago. On my way back to the city after the interview, I decided to take the tram from Joka to Ballygunge.

I had spent a few years at Ballygunge as a child; perhaps, I expected to have a flash of memory when I revisited the locality. The tram ride took much longer than I expected. It proceeded like a moving island of tranquillity through the chaotic city streets. I even dozed off for a bit in the middle! However, while awake, I found myself thoroughly enjoying what I saw and heard. By the time I reached my destination, I realised that it wasn't what I expected it to be; I had no idea what to expect in the first place; and, it was a whole lot of fun getting there. That was the point of the exercise.

For someone who builds predictive models for a living, it is ironic how I completely failed to recognise that the tram ride was a pretty accurate predictor for what the next several years of my life would be like.

On a recent campus visit, I noticed that the tram had been replaced by a metro, which I suppose is a logical progression of that analogy in more ways than one. However, stepping through the gates felt like entering a time warp: the only thing my cab had missing was a flux capacitor in the back. Sure, there were new buildings and Wi-Fi everywhere and what not, but that essential quality of time slowing down was exactly the same as it always was. It was like my guru (thesis advisor feels too prosaic to describe what he meant to me) once said: in order to go fast, you have to go slow.

IIMC offered you an eclectic variety of things to occupy your time. You could hang out in the music room with your JBS-12C bandmates, head out to the city to attend one of its open quizzes or for a movie at Nandan, stop by Mohanda's for coffee and conversation, or simply sit at the jetty and stare out at the lake. Or if you found yourself free, maybe even wander into a classroom and wonder how the institute managed to pack so much wisdom within its walls.

The place resembled nothing so much as the "Room of Requirement" at Hogwarts. Some of us went to Joka to grow up, and some of us to escape growing up. In either case, we got what we needed, exactly when we needed it, in an

environment where the lines between order and chaos were blurred to the point that one never knew where the lawns ended, and the wilderness began.

As for me, I learnt how to be a student. School and college were all about finding answers. For answers imply knowledge, and the one with the right answers is the more knowledgeable. At IIM Calcutta, I learnt that I knew nothing and understood even less, and that my job was to ask all sorts of questions. And that there was no shame in feeling lost or being confused, or in thinking that the most important maths problem in the universe was that of estimating the probability of getting bird droppings on your brand new sweatshirt.

Funny thing, this student business. Once you truly become one, you never stop being one. Which means, I suppose, that a part of me will always live on that little island of tranquillity at the edge of a bustling, chaotic city. I cannot think of a better place for it to stay.

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