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Research Paper



Qualitative impact of spirituality in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Higher education system is currently challenged to focus more purposely on students' holistic development, including nurturing the spiritual identities of students. Today students experience a disconnect between their academic studies and personal exploration of meaning in life. In order to understand the qualitative impact of spirituality in higher education, the present study aimed to make a comparative study of 60 undergraduate students each from Dev Sanskriti Vishwa Vidyalaya (DSVV), Hardwar, a University that claims to seamlessly integrate secular inputs with spiritual values of ancient Gurukul system and the conventional Delhi University colleges. A semi structured questionnaire, focusing on academic and non-academic experiences of students, perceived changes and self- growth was used for data collection. Qualitative analysis of data was done. Results indicated that the two groups differed on the different dimensions of semi structured questionnaire. A potential consequence of this research is that it will strengthen institutional initiatives and will encourage educators to consider the importance of students' spiritual development when they develop academic and co-curricular programme.

Keywords: Holistic Development, Spirituality, Higher Education

Thile the philosophy that colleges and universities should educate the student in a holistic manner—mind, body, and spirit - is not new, however, over time, this focus has diminished (Reuben,1996; Cohen, 2006). Our current higher education system is too frequently biased towards training merely to get a job, rather than educating to become a good person and an effective citizen. Ideally, the fundamental aim of higher education is to give the students a foundation to develop their philosophy of life and a broad, considered sense of what it means to be human. As rightly pointed out by Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam "the purpose of real education is to initiate a learning process that transforms students into good human beings with knowledge and value system." 'Education' comes from the Latin word 'educare', meaning 'to draw out.' It acts on the premise that students have within them a great deal of innate knowledge and potential, and that it is the purpose of educators to draw this out by providing them with the right kind of enriching environment.

As demonstrated by the recent surge in literature on spirituality in higher education (Astin, 2004; Astin and Keen, 2006; Byrant, 2006; Byrant, 2007; Bryant and Astin, 2008; Lindholm, 2007), today researchers seem more interested in understanding the inner lives of

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the students than they were in prior decades. Academia is moving increasingly towards perspectives in which values, assumptions and belief have an important role to play in education. Duff (2003), Lee (1999) and Lewis (2000) all agree that spirituality is an integral part of learning throughout the lifespan and assert that it should play a significant role in any teaching-learning process especially in higher education.

Tacey (2000) who has written widely on spirituality in education more generally support the inclusion of this dimension into the holistic education of the learner. Holistic education would be one where intellectual input are supported by emotional intelligence, further reinforced by social and spiritual consciousness. He argues that higher education is the ideal place for this to take place because of the age and the maturity level of most college students and the learning environment that is ideally suited to encourage students to form their own belief.

However, the impact of educational and organizational features on holistic development, especially in the domain of spirituality is not fully understood. Gonyea and Kuh (2006) reported that "while there is mounting evidence that students' interest in spirituality is stronger than in recent decades, an unresolved dynamic is the influence of institutional characteristics in this process of change". Very few studies have been conducted in this vital area of higher education especially in the Indian context.

Fully convinced about the relevance of spiritual foundation in living a meaningful life, the researcher was keen to study the impact of educational setup, that adhered to and promoted spiritually rich context, on various aspects of students orientation towards life and to compare it with students who are exposed to educational setups that basically focused on imparting secular knowledge and academic skills to its student community. The study was prompted to be undertaken as a result of the researcher's own set of personal experiences based on her observation of the system of integral education that is practiced at Sri Satya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (Deemed University) in Puttaparthy, Andhra Pradesh.

METHOD

Objective of the study

The study largely aimed to understand the qualitative impact of spirituality on college students. This was done by understanding how the context in which different higher education institutions operate ,the vision that they envisage with respect to focus on spirituality and value integration into institutional culture, curriculum and co-curriculum and the milieu that they provide, affects the students' understanding of the concept of spirituality and its relevance in contemporary times, their orientation towards life, the spiritual behavior that they exhibit as well as understand students' varied experiences within their college that helped in their spiritual development.

Participants

The present study was conducted on 60 students each from Dev Sanskriti Vishwa Vidyalaya (DSVV) and Delhi University (DU) colleges. All students were presently studying in third year across various science, humanities and commerce stream. The selection of the thirdyear students was governed by the thought of having those students to participate in the study who have had spent good enough time in the existing milieu of their respective educational set ups to imbibe the essence of the interactions therein and be impacted by the overall vision of the university. Within Delhi University, data was collected from five

colleges. Participants consisted of both boys and girls and were based on the availability of the students.

Research location

The two universities studied in the present context differed in terms of the level of focus on value integration built into their conventional educational setups, with Dev Sanskriti Vishwa Vidyalaya (DSVV) distinctly including a stronger undercurrent of imparting spiritual values along with the academic inputs as compared to the traditional secular inputs in the conventional Delhi University (DU) colleges with its primary focus on promoting intellectual pursuits.

Some unique features of DSVV

- Integrating values with secular knowledge through curriculum and classroom teaching.
- Curriculum steeped in rich Indian culture.
- Ambience that pervades the disciplined environmental synthesis of science and spirituality
- Compulsory course on life management and scientific spirituality Every student
 has to take up these courses aimed at establishing harmony between the two schools
 of thought namely science and spirituality and promoting holistic understanding.
 Secrets of life style management focused on imparting skills in the art of living
 including time, stress and relationship management, self-confidence, creative
 excellence, communication skills etc.
- Regular sessions on yoga and meditation are conducted that help in maintaining the physical as well as the psychological well-being of the students.
- Social internship programme Every student undergoes a social internship programme for two months after completion of their course where students put to use the knowledge they gain in the university for the benefit of society. This mandatory programme instills a sense of social responsibility and the ability to bear accountability.
- 'Earn while Learn' scheme is run through 'Shrijna' where students can both develop their creative talent and earn too through programmes such as handmade paper projects, best out of waste, using solar energy.

Measures

Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interview was conducted with the objective of obtaining in-depth explanatory data that would help to explore the students' views and experiences with respect to their college life that in turn would help in drawing out patterns of insight into the research problem. The questions asked were broad and general so that the participants could construct their own meaning.

To understand what the two institutions under comparative study currently engaged in and the opportunities provided within the institution to foster students' search for meaning and purpose, questions concerning college activities, classroom teaching methods, self-perceived changes and self- growth in college, interactions with faculty, discussions on spirituality, and other academic and non-academic experiences, charitable involvement including community service, volunteer work, environment activities were incorporated.

The semi- structured interview was therefore very broadly divided into three sections depending on its focus. The first section 'A', basically focused on understanding the students' notion of spirituality and the role it plays in their life. The second section, 'B' focused on their orientation towards life, their goals, their understanding of what constitutes happiness and satisfaction in their life, what defines meaning of success for them and description of self in terms of spirituality. The third section, 'C' focused on the varied academic and non-academic experiences of the students in their respective institutions, including college activities, classroom teaching methods, interactions with faculty, charitable involvement including community service, environment activities, self- perceived changes and self- growth in college etc.

Field notes from observation of activities by the researcher as well as focused group discussion also contributed towards obtaining rich experiential data. Students were also asked to submit their reflections based on personal processing of their experiences.

RESULTS

The data was analysed using thematic analysis. For the first round of analysis, thematic coding was applied to the full data source. This coding was done in a "line-by-line" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) manner. Combining notes from semi structured interviews, focused group discussions, observations, open codes were created, not based on pre-established categories of analysis. This helped to ensure that the coding was based upon what was actually said by the participants and not by the researcher's inherent biases. After the initial coding process was completed, levels of broader or interrelated codes were created and those were categorized around important themes. A number of themes identified in the research undertaken are discussed and understood.

Understanding Spirituality

There are assorted understandings of spirituality. Data was analysed to explore how spirituality was understood by students of higher education. This was to understand how students of the two different institutional setups, namely DSVV and DU, with differential emphasis and focus on spirituality and spiritual practices in their campus life, conceive of spirituality and its relevance.

Table 1 Meaning of Spirituality

Sl.No.	Students	Total %	DSVV %	DU %	C.R.
		N = 120	n = 60	N = 60	
	Response Categories				
1	Art of living life the right way	23.74	26.96	16.66	3.14**
2	A process of self-	23.19	25.60	17.86	2.38**
	growth/evaluation				
3	Humanitarian approach to life:	25.78	25.34	26.78	.42
	From I to we				
4	Soul consciousness: Connect to	7.79	21.57	12.5	3.01**
	Higher Power				
5	Abstract Concept for people	3.89	.53	11.31	7.23**
	bored to Life Luxuries				
6	Being religious	4.63	0	14.89	-

DSVV: Students of Dev Sanskrti Vishvidalaya referred to as DSVV

DU: Students of Delhi University referred to as DU

As is clearly evident in table 1, DSVV students more strongly construed spirituality as an 'art of living life the right way' (DSVV -26.96%, DU- 16.66%, C.R.-3.14**) and 'process of self-growth' (DSVV- 25.60%, DU- 17.86%, C.R. -2.38*). Also, understanding spirituality in terms of 'soul consciousness and connect to higher power' was more conspicuously identified by DSVV students as compared to DU students (DSVV-21.57%, DU -12.5%, C.R.-3.01**). An interesting category identified under this theme, namely, spirituality being understood as 'abstract concept for people bored with life luxuries' was clearly marked by students of DU (DU- 11.31%, DSVV- .53%, C.R.- 7.23**). Also, only DU students equated the meaning of spirituality with 'being religious' (14.89%). None of the DSVV students gave any response to this effect.

Orientation towards life

The data was also analyzed to understand the orientation of the students towards life. What factors do they perceive as contributing to their happiness and satisfaction in life, their goals in life and meaning of success for them.

Source of happiness and satisfaction

According to humanistic school, happiness accompanies growth towards self - actualization. Factors that contribute as one's source of happiness speak volumes about one's orientation towards life. Data was analysed to understand what contributed towards happiness and satisfaction among students of higher education and whether there was qualitative difference between the DSVV and DU students on this dimension. Interestingly, all the categories of responses showed significant differences.

Table II Happiness and Satisfaction

Sl.No.	Students	Total %	DU %	DSVV %	C.R.
	Response Categories	n=120	n=60	n=60	
1.	Altruistic pursuits	20	5.12	26.83	8.94**
2.	Entertainment/ Family/ Friends	11	21.80	6.19	7.92**
3.	Academic achievement/ Recognition	12	27.70	3.87	11.85*
4.	Monetary material success	6	13.33	2.32	7.41**
5.	Self enhancement	23	28.20	20.13	3.11**
6.	Spiritual growth	28	3.84	40.65	13.20*

All the categories of responses showed significant differences between the two groups of students. Larger number of DSVV students reported 'spiritual growth' (DSVV-40.65%, DU-3.84%, C.R.-13.20**) and 'altruistic pursuits' (DSVV-26.83%, DU-5.12%, C.R.-8.99**) as contributing to their happiness and satisfaction as compared to DU students. Spiritual growth was explained in terms of being able to uphold values in difficult situations, being peaceful from inside and being able to stay positive and balanced, feeling connected to higher self, engaging in spiritual practices such as meditation, appreciating nature etc. Altruistic pursuits included selfless service, helping others in distress, social work, doing good to others etc.

However, DU students focused more on 'entertainment, friends, family' (DU- 21.80%, DSVV-6.19%, C.R.-7.12**), 'academic achievement and recognition' (DU-27.70%, DSVV-3.87%, C.R. - 11.85**), 'monetary and material success' (DU-13.33%, DSVV-2.32%, C.R.-7.41**) as factors leading to happiness and satisfaction in life.

Meaning of success

The way success is understood shapes our orientation to life. Happiness and meaning in life is also related to how success is defined and understood. Once it is figured out what is important for an individual in terms of success, then the understanding of one's vision, goals and general approach to life becomes clear.

Table III Meaning of Success

S.No	Students Response Categories	Total %	DU %	DSVV %	C.R.
		n=120	n=60	n=60	
1.	Job Security/Well Settled Career	18	24.67	12.14	2.86*
2.	Money / Fame /Recognition	16	25.1	7.3	5.31**
3.	Being of Service to Others	16	9.7	22.26	3.91**
4.	Achieving Personal Goal	16	20.3	12.14	2.42*
5.	Spreading Happiness	18	12.3	22.67	2.26*
6.	Connecting to Higher Power	16	7.92	23.48	3.66**

Qualitative analysis of the data reveals that while DU students defined the meaning of success more in terms of 'money/fame /recognition' (DU- 25.1%, DSVV-7.3%, C.R.-5.31**), 'job security and well settled career' (DU-24.67%, DSVV-12.14%, C.R.-2.86*), 'achieving personal goals' (DU-20.3%, DSVV-12.14%, C.R.-2.42*), the meaning of success for DSVV students had more to do with 'spreading happiness' (DSVV-22.67%, DU-12.3%, C.R.-2.26*), 'being of service to others' (DSVV-22.26%, DU-9.7%, C.R.-3.91**), 'connecting to Higher Power' (DSVV-23.48%, DU-7.29%, C.R.-3.66**). The results indicated a qualitative difference in the understanding of the two groups with respect to the meaning of success.

Their goals in life

Based on one's understanding of the meaning of success, goals that one intends pursuing are determined. Therefore, a logical point to consider after understanding how meaning of success was defined by the two groups of students, was to analyse the goals set by them in their life. Setting goals is a powerful process for thinking about one's purpose in life, and for motivating self to turn this vision into reality. Goals are essential components of a person's experience that contribute to the process by which people construe their lives as meaningful, valuable and worthwhile. By knowing precisely what you want to achieve, you know where you have to concentrate your efforts.

Table IV Goals in Life

S No.	Students	Total %	DU %	DSVV%	C.R.
	Response Categories	n=120	n=60	n=60	
1.	To earn money, fame, and recognition	15	25.24	8.85	4.57**
2.	To be a good human being	17	12.14	26.1	4.26**
3.	Bring happiness in family	21	23.78	23	0.26
4.	Serve the society	16	13.6	22.12	4.39**
5.	To successfully complete education	19	25.24	19.91	1.83

Interestingly, the goals in life as identified by the students seem to be related closely to what success meant to them. 'Money, fame and recognition' had earlier emerged as the most dominant response category (25.1%) as defining success for DU students. It is interesting to note that on the same lines, 'to earn money, fame, recognition' was conspicuously identified by them as their goal in life (DU-25.24% DSVV-8.85%, C.R.-4.57**). However, analysis of the data reveals a difference in the nature of goals that were identified by larger number of DSVV students, namely 'to serve the society' (DSVV-22.12%, DU-13.6%, C.R.-4.39**), 'to be a good human being' (DSVV-26.1%, DU-12.14%, C.R.-4.26**).

College contribution

College contribution was assessed with respect to students' college experiences and students' perceived growth and changes through the college years.

College experiences

The college environment is comprised of many facets including the physical environment, role of teachers. activities, social /academic opportunities, students' interactions to connect with others. Students' experiences in college have the potential to impact how students perceive the landscape of their college and this in turn has a powerful influence on their personal growth and life understanding.

Table V College Experience

S.No.	Students	Total %	DU %	DSVV %	C.R.
	Response Categories	n=120	n=60	n=60	
1.	Teacher as perfect role models	19.37	9	24.16	4.02
2.	Spiritual practices in college campus- Yoga, Meditation, Community Service	19.37	9.90	23.75	3.69**
3.	Mandatory courses promoting self-growth	13.39	6.30	16.66	3.20**
4.	Subject Knowledge and skill imparted	25.07	52.25	12.50	9.67**
5.	Ambience of college campus	22.79	22.50	22.91	.10

As is evident from table V, apart from the ambience of the college campuses that was reported to have appealed to both the groups in terms of the locale, infrastructure, basic amenities provided, upkeep etc, all other response categories showed a significant difference between the students of DSVV and DU, namely, 'teachers as perfect role models' (DSVV-24.16%, DU-9%, C.R.-4.02**), 'spiritual practices in college campus' (DSVV-23.75%, DU-9.90%, C.R.-3.69**) and 'mandatory courses promoting self-growth' (DS VV-16.66%, DU-6.30%, C.R.- 3.20**).

Growth and change through the college years

In addition to experiences that students had during their college years, college contribution was also assessed on the basis of the changes that the students perceived in themselves through the college years. Various types of stimulations in the college context namely, physical, intellectual, social, emotional and last but not the least spiritual, can produce profound changes in its young students.

Table VI Perceived Changes in Self

SNo.	Students	Total %	DU %	DSVV %	C.R.
	Response Categories	n=120	n=60	n=60	
1.	Improved interpersonal and other social skills/ academic competence	20.91	32.09	13.04	5.97**
2.	Personality development and enhanced self-confidence self- reliant, social skills empowerment	22.91	32.09	15.21	5.17**
3.	Emotional regulation	19.38	15.43	22.17	2.17**
4.	Spiritual awareness	18.36	9.25	24.78	5.10**
5.	Sense of responsibility, altruistic perception, ethics of caring	19.13	11.11	24.78	4.42**

As table VI reveals, 'academic competence' as a response category for the perceived change in self was reported by larger number of DU students as compared to DSVV students (DU-32.09%, DSVV- 13.04%, C.R.-5.97**). Also, higher percentage of DU students reported feeling empowered as a result of perceived change in self with respect to 'personality development- increased self- confidence and self- reliance and enhanced social skills' (DU-32.09%, DSVV-15.21%, C.R.-5.17**).

However, responses focusing more on developing spirituality, wholeness, integrity and managing emotions, were given by a larger percentage of DSVV students as compared to DU students. 'Spiritual awareness' as a perceived change in self was highlighted more by DSVV students (DSVV-24.78%, DU-9.25%, C.R.-5.10**). Similarly, regulation' (DSVV-22.17%, DU-15.43%, C.R.-2.17**) and 'altruistic perception and sense

of responsibility' (DSVV- 24.78%, DU-9.25%, C.R. - 4.42**) were reported more by DSVV students.

DISCUSSION

A good measure of the effectiveness of how an educational institution delivers entails an understanding of the changes observed and experienced by the students as an outgrowth of that context. A broad array of factors in terms of institutional features and the causal mechanism seem to have influenced the kind of experiences that the students reported to have had in their respective college campuses. Larger percentage of DSVV students (90%) attributed their gains in spirituality to their college experiences as compared to a much smaller number (40%) of DU students.

DSVV students' verbatim highlights the relevance of the spiritual practices and disciplined college milieu in contributing to their self growth -

"The spiritual ethos of our university, while cultivating our intelligence, also purifies our impulses and emotions and equip us with the physical and mental discipline needed for drawing upon the fountain of calmness and joy that lie within our hearts. It is not just good for philosophical discussions but is the very core of leading a happy and satisfying life."

"The system of integral education at the university has had a remarkable impact on me as a person. In the current times, when everyone is running after money, power and fame, it makes me stand aside and look into what is important in life and helps me in making choices in personal life for higher goals of life."

Experiences of self- transformation in campus

Role of spirituality in the educational context was visible through the perceived changes that the students reported in themselves. Largely, both the groups reported that they felt they have changed for the better. However, an elaboration of the kind of changes reported by the students of the two groups makes possible a deeper understanding of the quality of changes/progress reported by the students in the two different institutional setups. DU colleges, with its focus on providing rich academic exposure to its students were reported to be successful in building confidence, greater independence, enhanced intellect, a sense of responsibility towards self and life, exposure to newer academic perspectives, development of talent through extra-curricular activities, skill enhancement in the students (DU-32.09%, DSVV-15.21%, CR-5.17**).

Substantial number of DU students reported that they have become more extrovert after joining college due to greater chances of wider interactions made possible in the campus. Their critical thinking, decision making capacity has definitely improved, they feel more confident in social situation and feel equipped for entrepreneurial endeavours. Most of the changes reported by DU students seem to be majorly in the direction of academic competence, enhanced knowledge base and skill development and the resulting impact in way of increased confidence, enhanced self- efficacy and heightened self- esteem (DU-32.02%, DSVV-13.04%, CR-5.97**).

DSVV students were also vocal about the perceptible changes that they very distinctly observed in themselves after their years of stay in their college milieu. Majority of the students wholeheartedly credited their institution for facilitating their integral development and enabling them to become better human beings with finer, culturally richer characters (DSVV-24.78%, DU-11.11%, CR-4.42**).

It is interesting to note that 'sources of happiness and satisfaction' for the students of the two groups corroborated with the 'meaning of success' for them. A 'well settled career' (24%), 'money fame and recognition' (25%) and 'achieving personal goals' (20%) is how the students of DU described their meaning of success as. Many of them did share that college life was meant to be enjoyed with friends and that spiritual pursuits were meant to be followed at later phases of one's life. Happiness for them emerged from deeper connect with friends and the success that comes with recognition, power and material gains. However, DSVV students understood success in terms of 'being of service to others' (22%), 'spreading happiness' (22%), and 'connecting to Higher Power '(23%). A small number (7%) equated success with 'money, fame, recognition'.

From a researcher's perspective, it was truly an enriching experience to discuss life orientation issues with the students of DSVV. The depth of their understanding of the more subtle spiritual matters was outstanding and a stronger sense of rootedness, humility, social responsibility, spiritual connect was spontaneously revealed by the majority of them in such discussions.

On being asked what factors contributed to this kind of life orientation for them, the students of DSVV very vocally and enthusiastically credited their life teachings and skills to the life management courses, yoga and meditation classes offered by their institution. Also, the month long social internship programme that requires them to reach out to the community and while living with them make a difference to their lives, helped to bring them closer to understanding the real philosophy of life and instill these soft skills of compassion, humility, social responsibility and commitment in them.

A glimpse into the life at DSVV brings out the emphasis that is built into the university schedule with students participation in early yoga classes, a walk in the acupressure park, availability of healthy and fresh juices to the students after the morning exercise, adherence to simple Indian dress code right from the students to the teachers as well as non-academic staff, students reverence for their teachers and administrative staff, their connect with nature through their active participation in tree plantation, maintaining greenery, doing 'seva' activities.

Researcher's observation

Being part of the faculty in one of the DU colleges, the researcher had a reasonable understanding of how a typical college life is in any of the Delhi campuses. However, her deliberate attempt to stay in the DSVV campus for long stretches of time to collect data, gave her ample opportunity to closely observe the manifest institutional features as well as develop a good understanding of the impact of the programmes and policies of that university on the growth of the students.

The researcher makes her stand clear with regard to the academic exposure that is available to the students of Delhi university and the impact of this exposure on the academic performance of its students. Undoubtedly, the richness of the knowledge imparted and the skills, curricular as well as extra -curricular, taught to the students in Delhi University is unparalleled. The large number of students that Delhi University caters to is equally impressive which might make the task of reaching out to students and touching their lives on all dimensions an insurmountable one. Delhi University colleges, focusing on academic excellence and knowledge base as well as work related skills of its students, did justice to what it stands for.

Having acknowledged that, the researcher is also fully convinced that for holistic education to take place, knowledge for the head and skill base for the hands also need to be integrated with the balance of the heart. This is where the role of spirituality comes in.

With the emphasis that DSVV placed on integral and holistic education in its university campus, concerted efforts were made at all levels, including academic and administrative, to incorporate distinct features both in the curriculum as well as the campus life to expose its student community to finer life skills, the sole purpose of this being to enhance the spiritual well-being of its students. A deep sense of gratitude to have been provided an opportunity to be part of the university that is making such a beautiful difference to their life, a belief and a resolve in themselves to bring about a meaningful change in the world for the better, were characteristic feature observed more conspicuously by the researcher among the DSVV students.

Experiential learning was found to be the pedagogy used for teaching awareness programme and practicing spirituality at DSVV. The impact of the focus on values and spiritual underpinning of the university was also obvious in the manner in which the academic and non- academic staff conducted themselves. Their simplicity, humility, the love for their students and their keenness to take up their roles as an offering to the higher power reflected their strong dedication and commitment towards the cause. The commitment to academic excellence was interwoven with their commitment to foster the spiritual development of their students.

The holistic, value based integral system of education that the researcher observed at DSVV takes care of both the worldly and spiritual education. The researcher after experiencing first-hand, the enriching environment of DSVV and observing its impact in terms of apparent and larger inner growth of the students is convinced that such an environment needs to be emulated as an inspiration through the collective efforts of all concerned in the higher educational system. Such focus on holistic and integrated personality development of the students is the need of the hour with readjustment in the curriculum in order to make higher education a forceful tool for the cultivation of social and moral values in addition to imparting the necessary knowledge base and required subject skills – thereby contributing to students' complete development of mind, body and soul. This will bring about the true value and significance of the concept of education that is not for mere living but for life, a fuller life, a more meaningful and a more worthwhile life. The presence of this concept of integral, holistic learning in higher education proves the feasibility of such a viable model for reorientation of university level education.

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Conflict of Interest

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