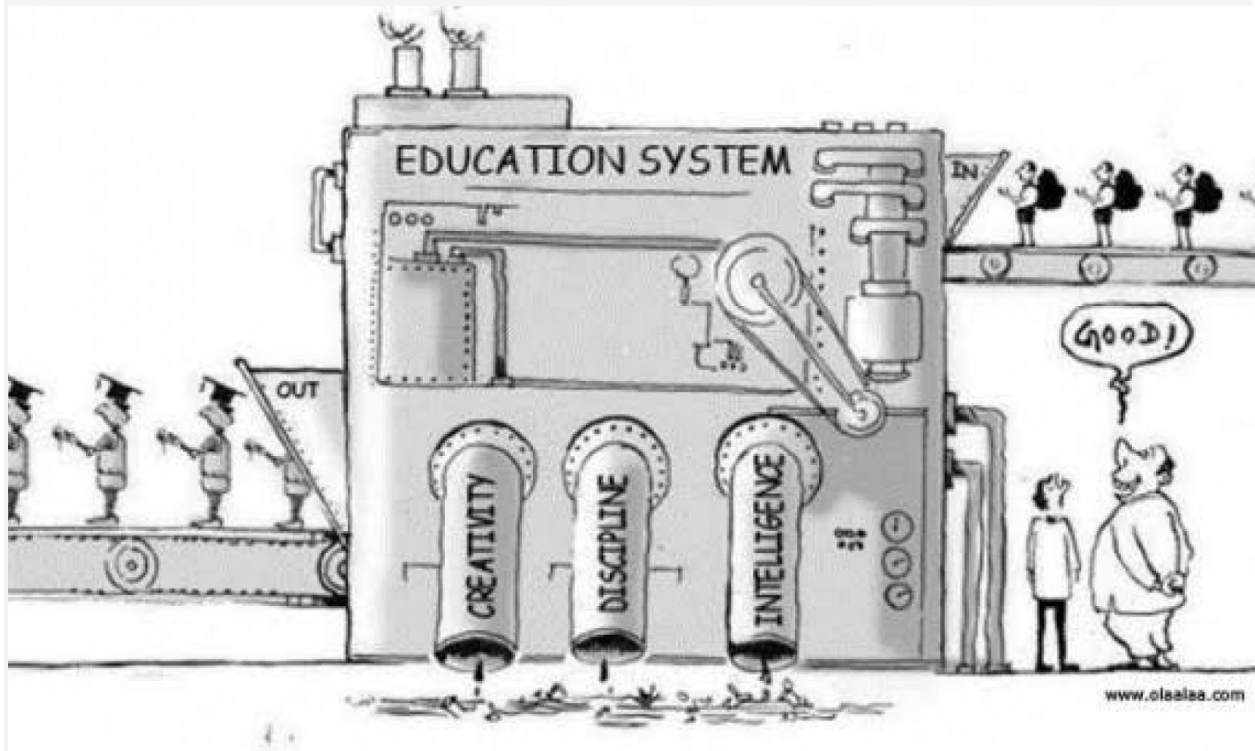


Universities and Colleges are for Dummies

Claude Alvares



I am surprised that every year hordes of people are still getting drawn into the university circus, filling in forms, chewing fingernails before entrance tests, celebrating entry into this college or that, into this course or that. This is despite the evidence that there is no confirmed connection between degrees and jobs.

The astonishing aspect of this crowd-like behaviour of the mostly upcoming generation, is that they are entering higher education institutions ("cages" would be a better word) without a clue about what lies at the end of that tunnel. Many are registering for degrees and certification because their parents want them to. Their parents have no clue either, but are fundamentally convinced that for a better life a degree in the hand is better than none. There is a general conviction that college is the inevitable or the most natural thing to be occupied with once you have completed your secondary schooling and have nothing better to do. (Some even get into depression because they could not go to college or get admission.) Immediate post college aim (or hope!) is jobs, placements, cash for employment. Your personal worth is assessed by your package.

That's what a "successful" life is seen as nowadays, even if that dangled job never comes or one has to eat crow, and take up something for which one has not even qualified or for which one is overqualified (Ph.Ds applying for job of postmen).

This trajectory of the obvious or conventional career graph that every young woman or man in our modern world is being required to undergo as a legit and desirable choice, has been severely challenged by hundreds of youngsters on several occasions over the last several decades. The young women and men who did so did not "drop out" of the university, they simply "walked out" of it. They considered the university and what it had to offer as unworthy of their time. So they conducted a bypass which took them directly to their life goal, despite the sneers of their peers. Steve Jobs, the

creator of Apple computers, is a classic example. But there are thousands of others in this country as well.

Most of the so-labelled “knowledge” or “learning” current day colleges and universities offer is so totally fucked up, normal human beings should not be seen anywhere near it, unless they want to self-inflict profound damage to their brains. That is why most ordinary people –who still retain their common sense – avoid attending college and becoming graduates: they find life outside is more attractive than the insulated unreal world of the modern campus.

The numbers and kinds of degrees and diplomas on sale these days (all demanding impressive fees and other expenses) are quite bewildering and difficult to keep count. All, if not most, of them are actually designed to generate a comfortable, sometimes lavish, wage for no-goods we call “professors” and “lecturers” and profits for their employers – mostly businessmen or politicians out to make money from as many suckers as they can in the shortest possible period of time. These “teachers” have rarely done anything interesting in their life except juggle with words, specialize in citations, or generate pulp in the form of textbooks which even termites find difficult to digest. They teach literature, for example, but are unable to write a novel. Most professors who teach management do not even know how to start or run a successful business. They themselves have no skills for business. If they had any, what are they doing in an institution like an IIM collecting a regular paycheck when they claim to be expert in showing youngsters how to become successful entrepreneurs and make lots

of money! What enterprise does a guy willing to be stuck in a comfy job for 30 years really display?

Let's not forget that for many young people getting into these institutions without borrowing money or massive loans is impossible. So the end of learning is also the beginning of bondage. This disease of indebtedness especially infects American students. But Indians are notorious for borrowing from banks to pay the outrageous fees of institutions abroad.

The other damn thing about this infernal business – for business it is (they now call it “commercialization” of education, finally) – is that it lays claim to, and takes away, the most extraordinary and exciting years of a young person's life – the period from 16 to 25, when life and love are sweet, hormones are calling, energy is unlimited, every woman looks beautiful, every boy as handsome as Brad Pitt and you're wondering how it is all passing you by as you remain glued to some crummy textbooks. These years will never return.

In whatever course or class you are sitting now, you must at least once or twice or many times over, wondered: “Isn't there anything better to do in the world than this?” If that has never crossed your mind, then you not only have a fatal mental illness, your soul is already migrated. Not only are you perhaps in the wrong place doing the wrong thing, like a fool you are financing the soul-kill by actually paying the college admin for this!

The very last thing you should be doing on this planet with this limited life left for all those in the 16-25 age group (remember climate change?) is to devote all of your parents' hard earned

money, savings or property to mothballed institutions like the university, howsoever fancy the name (Harvard, Amity, etc); or worse, pay for their upkeep and maintenance. Some institutions are better left to decay, rot and end up as ruins for archaeologists (who also need work). And you are doing something really dreadful and anti-life by keeping them going and giving them artificial respiration with your precious (and scarce) money.

Most people (maybe all) who come out of Indian universities today are destined to come out unemployable. The most useless to society are invariably hired by their own universities as lecturers to dupe more people in the interests of “learning” and “higher education”. A degree from university is a passport to the unemployment brigade – which keeps going up in absolute numbers every year as more dunks get their dunce caps and paper rolls.

As my colleague Manish Jain adds, college or professional education is training people not for livelihoods, but deadlihoods! You are taught how to exploit or destroy the environment and abuse local communities or how to fit into a system that will enable you to become a “success” doing these things in the most efficient way.

Several youngsters have come to my company for employment over the last 30 years. They came in response to ads. In all cases, they were unable to offer anything that was useful for any kind of work that we did – we ran a publishing house. It turned out that the young people who had responded to the ads had spent so much time on books and exams, they knew nothing else. All wanted to be employed – or even felt they had a right to be employed because they thought they had a hard-earned degree – but when asked what

they has to offer, frankly disclosed they were not taught anything useful. Accounts students obtaining a commerce degree did not know how to do accounts, law graduates lacked knowledge of legal procedures, and so on. These are professions. Forget about those even more ridiculous courses that spawned history or sociology grads.

It is also dawning on most intelligent people that with the present capacities available today to people to access useful information electronically, the university has moved closer to the dodo as a species. Because of the internet, in fact, the university as we know it (a purveyor of mostly second-hand and third-hand or obsolete information) may already be dead.

So suppose you want now to get out of this graveyard or kabristhan they call “college”? How do you do a bypass of college or university, and still get to what you want most earnestly from life? In a bypass, do you learn less or more? If you are eager to pay for learning, to whom should you rather pay your (or your parents’) hard earned fees, if your aim is to look for a good grounding for a useful role in this thing called “society,” and to help everyone feel happier and not just look after yourself?

Mind you, none of this advice is theoretical or from textbooks. We tried these out with our own three sons. We did not spend any money on fees or tuition nor did we go in for any loans from banks or loan sharks for equipping them for life. None of these three guys ever wanted to go to a foreign university and contribute to saving those paper tigers. Finally, they decided what they wanted to do themselves. We gave them free advice, which they sometimes

happily ignored. Now they can legitimately claim that what they have achieved is due to their own efforts, with of course, a little help from their friends (which included us, their parents).

So here are some guiding principles from these real life experiments with truth (if you reflect on them, you may feel you can add to them, find new ones, or replace them altogether):

The first principle is: eliminate the middleman! The college or university is the middleman parked like a dead log between you and your learning! In the real world, you pay an institution for its learning and for the degree certificate that certifies that learning. That certificate is stamped by government, which recognizes the university. After you receive that certificate, however, you are completely on your own. Worse, you now have to go and plead with someone for a job, submit to an interview, put on clothes you cannot afford to just look presentable, get work experience. The employer is quite surprised when he meets you first time. He finds that despite you having a degree, you are mostly unfit for any of his requirements. He is expected to do charity, train you and pay you a salary while you are being trained. But hey! All this was supposed to be done by the university! When you paid your fees there, you expected (and your parents too) that you would be competent enough to be entitled to a job after being stamped with the degree! In our present setup, the university gets the benefit of your fees, but it only makes you cram textbooks and gives you no practical training while the prospective employer gets the sub-standard product. After recruiting the guy, the prospective employer has to not only to train the dud, but pay the dud. What kind of world is this? So the common sense question to ask in such circumstances is: Why not

pay the employer what you are going to pay to the university, so that the person who is actually going to train you for the job which you would like to do – and maybe employ you as well – also gets compensated for it?

The basic error in our thinking is this expectation that after one gets that worthless piece of paper called a degree – or worse, a diploma – she is entitled to not just a job, but also payment as compensation for doing the job. Wait a minute. You yourself admit you are untrained for anything, good for nothing. So why should you be paid? Is the employer you have come to a welfare agency with deep pockets? All that I am saying is, if you want training for a job, why go to university or college? They will never guarantee you a job nor any training for one. You should go instead direct to the person or place which will give you hands-on training and pay them the fees instead. The employer will then be happy to take you on because he does not have to pay you a salary. Instead you will be paying him. You will be of help to him with his work. You are also respecting him for his knowledge and paying him for learning from his experience.

Let me give you a concrete example. So you want to study law and become a lawyer, how would you do this? Like in the old Indian system, you would apprentice yourself with a lawyer. You would pay your college fees to the lawyer instead of law school. These fees may vary from zero to whatever, but never beyond what you pay to the law college. Some lawyers would be so amused, they would in fact take you in free of cost. So you could also get your education without any payment. Now this is all premised on the fact that you

are attracted by law and by the legal profession because you've seen those movies like Jolly LLB and Jolly LLB 2.

If you are really interested, look for a lawyer you can access right away. If there is one in the family, or a relative, an uncle or aunt or any relative, so much the better, because you can get into her office without too many problems. So you can join at the good age of 16 or 17, and spend most of your time actively learning legal procedures. Most law is procedure. Often you lose a good case because you did not follow the procedure laid down or simply did not know the civil procedure code. You can take up any amount of drafting work: draft legal letters, petitions, affidavits. There will be enough specimens of this in your employer's office. This way, while all your friends are attending law school and wasting 5 years and lots of cash there, you will be working the courts, moving around with lawyers and even making some money for that cell phone by the time you are twenty. Your employer will love you because you are young, able to run errands fast, drive his latest posh car for him, and also sometimes share a good meal with him. Register for a law degree, if you wish, only after you are 25 or 30 years old. It will then be a piece of cake. To know basic constitution and law, begin with simple books like Jhabvala's – the standard guidebook and entry point for lawyers from duds to Supreme Court judges. Since you have already interned several years by the time you get your degree, you will be far ahead of the tyros coming out of 5 year law schools whose first work will involve carrying the briefs of their seniors to court and bringing them tea. By the way, there are hundreds of very good legal personnel who never got a law degree.

These people are sometimes far more effective than those with degrees.

Now you can use these same principles for learning, for example, how to repair the latest vehicles, mobiles, or TVs, for becoming an ace photographer, cricketer, artist, musician, dancer, steno, secretary, driver, stand-up comedian, chef, whatever. I am talking about the most attractive jobs this society has on offer. Because of general idiocy which has been nurtured in this society by India's education ministry and education departments (the whole system was in fact designed by an Englishman in 1837 to produce clerks for the then British administration), the general tendency is to discourage you from pursuing the best things in life, why, because they give you pleasure and happiness, but may not guarantee you a regular income (as if a degree from any average college or university today does that!). Everyone will keep telling you not to squander your life in frivolous pursuits, like sports, music, dance, acting, cinema. All of them want you to get as quickly as possible into their cage in exchange for life security through job security, like those endless air hostess jobs, for example. Shucks, did somebody make this all up?

Whatever you choose, never go in for being a scientist, engineer or IAS. In India, almost all scientists today work in institutions as bonded labour. Despite their glorified status, they need permission to speak to the public on matters of concern. Engineers we have too many already, more than adequate to last another three decades. Most of them are experts in nature-destruction, so you don't want to become one of those. As for IAS, avoid this profession like the plague. With few exceptions, it has now become a club of the most

corrupt individuals, slaving to support and endorse the backward decisions of elected no-goods called Ministers. In any case, a government job is a mind-numbing, soul-killing invention most people would naturally avoid. No need for you to go there.

So if you want to be a good movie maker or become an actor, or great sportswoman, dancer, chef, lawyer, then the worst thing you could do is go to college and get a degree, because those 4 years will squish anything creative –or any capacity to be creative – left in your soul, especially if you've been through ten years of Macaulay type of indoctrination and dumbing down and because of which you ended up as a mouse.

As an employer, at walk-in interviews, I can tell you we do not look at degrees but for that bright pair of eyes, that display of self-confidence, that ability to speak without hesitation, how you walk in, your passion, your energy. If you have that, you will be sought by anyone and everyone, especially by those who are willing to pay, even if you have no degree. Global employers like Penguins, Ernst and Young and others are now recruiting for placements without demanding formal degrees as a prerequisite for their job interviews. This is grudging admission that creative people don't have degrees!

So take that leap today. Thank Miss Corona virus for shutting down all formal institutions and for giving you the time to reflect on whether you should go back to university or college, or try out another way of engaging with society. This is a good chance to take that Gap Year everyone is talking about.

Before this, it might be useful to have a heart-to-heart with your parents. Explain to them that putting money in university helps the university, does not help you. They should use that money to enable you to do your own thing (or start-up), travel to places where you can learn or pay people who will assist your learning in practical skills which will always get you a worthwhile job which you will like being occupied with.

If you want to join a learning space that is the opposite of a university, join Swaraj University (www.swarajuniversity.org). If you want more options, go to the website of the Indian Multiversities Alliance (www.multiversities.net).

For those who want to pursue their learning independent of any institution like college or university, IIT or IIM, but don't know how to finance it, read my earlier blog:

<http://typewriterguerilla.com/2018/01/how-to-sponge-off-family/>