

The Higher Education Cell, Centre for the Study of Culture and Society

The Pathways to Higher Education Programme (Supported by the Ford Foundation)

**Report on a Desk Review conducted by Ashwin Kumar AP (HEC) and Nishant Shah
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Review of Overall Project Design – Ashwin Kumar A.P

- 1. Outputs:** even when all the planned activities in the present design will be completed successfully, the outputs of the project might remain somewhat low. It is therefore important to focus on producing structures, platforms, models and products (however defined) which will outlast the duration of the project itself.
- 2. Management Structure:** currently, there are two senior positions at CSCS and two at CIS, along with 2 junior-level staff at CSCS and a research assistant. This does not refer only to salary outflows but the amount of human resources being put to use by this project. In the best case scenario, it might help to reduce this in such a way that, there will only be one senior person (in charge of the programme and fully answerable for the deliverables of the project along with monitoring the implementation of it) and one middle-level person (at the programme associate level, managing the coordination and community building activities of the project, which is its core set of tasks and also providing administrative support and liaising between Ford Foundation and the colleges) running the project. Instead of the one middle level person, two programme associates sharing the responsibilities could also be considered, but only as a second option.
- 3. Design of the Programme:** The programme presently looks like a set of activities which are unified only insofar as they happen to be located in the same college or target the same set of students. This has been so largely because of the project design which focuses on the student workshops (somewhat misnamed as ‘technology workshops’) as the key activity and output of Pathways. As a result, the future of this programme, as also the Social Justice Initiative, of which this programme is the mainstay, is not thought through. One possible exploratory model would be the following: bring the Pathways Programme and the Digital Natives programme into greater synergy. We could even explore the possibility where Pathways Programme is seen as a joint project of the Social Justice Initiative of the Cell and the Digital Natives project of CIS, in India. The specific content that HEC would want to see in the Pathways Programme can be strategically injected into the model provided by the Digital Natives project. Seen this way, the future of the Pathways Programme can be envisaged in the longer term as providing new avenues for social and intellectual

production and exchange among students and youth communities. This would not only go beyond social empowerment of youth, but also create new exemplars for exploring the agency and social innovation potential of young people. Collaborations with other sectors like Civil Society and Governance could be placed in better perspective, once this shift is made.

4. **Teachers and Curricula:** Personally, I am of the opinion that the Pathway Programme must not intervene in curricula or teacher training in any direct sense. This is not only a distraction in the design of the programme, it is also counterproductive to engage with curricular structures without working with the given structural conditions of higher education: disciplines, levels, streams, teacher workloads, affiliations, autonomy and so on. The Pathways Programme, as the design is emerging, would do well to explore other sites and modes of intervention, which look at truly innovative attempts at harnessing latent energies and social knowledge that students and young people can bring to bear on the thinking about their world. Curricular interventions might follow, but making that the goal might constrict the imagination of the Pathways Programme. If one of the interventions that one of the communities incubated or developed through the Pathways Programme would indeed want be about curricular and other educational issues, it must be fully encouraged, instead of *implementing* a curricular reform model, which would only help in dissipating the focus of the programme. Teacher-training, currently in the consciousness-raising model towards issues of social justice. Rather than bring together the teachers separately, it may be useful to think of integrating the teachers in the student workshop situation. It may also help if teachers form a community similar to that of students and then think through relevant questions or even selectively join one or the other student group, subject to the condition that it does not curb the free expression of the students. Here a natural fear may be one of keeping the activities too open ended. But, that is where the expertise of the coordinators comes into the picture. It is important for coordinators to steer sessions towards precipitating free-floating ideas into concrete initiatives. In the situation where particular groups fail to do that, there can always be other methods of creating guided initiatives.
5. **Partnership between CSCS and CIS:** the current partnership between CSCS and CIS for this project is in a service-provider model. This is not only creating a lack of coordination at the implementation level, but is also undercutting the possibilities of serious engagement between the two institutions. More importantly, the coming together of a vision based on critical questioning of the received wisdom on equity and justice on the one hand and innovative approaches to both studying, catalysing and enhancing community building and identity formation on the other, (which, for simplicity's sake, can be said to be represented by CSCS and CIS respectively) is being left unexplored due to this state of affairs. Therefore, my suggestion is that, rather than work with the present model where the output is first defined (that is there

are technology workshops and other related activities) and both these institutions take up one or the other component of these activity sets, it is better to work with a collaborative model. That is, CIS could provide training and hand-holding for the personnel who will be involved in the running of this project as also provide initial support for the community-building activities.

- 6. Beyond Pathways:** Currently the managerial hurdles of the Pathways programme may be restricting the people involved in thinking beyond the Pathways Programme. In the next six to eight months, CSCS and CIS should work towards setting up a joint team of 3 to 4 people who will have the capacity to fully run the Pathways Programme. Simultaneously, the senior-level personnel of both these institutions must distance themselves from the day-to-day running of the programme and also the conducting of the scheduled activities of the programme. Instead they must focus on taking the Pathways model beyond its initial scope: this might include, among other things, project incubation involving other institutions and players, development of newer intellectual platforms, registers and idioms for thinking about issues of community, identity, socialisation and justice and democracy. Creating new pilot projects where different higher education institutions can come together to create new forms of intellectual engagement, creating a critical mass of young people who have access to intellectual and technological resources to examine and intervene in their own communities and larger social platforms. Equally important is to encourage the existing partners (or subsets thereof) to come up with small initiatives in a relay model. If as part of this initiative, one college can set up a journal, another, a community radio and a third one create an internship programme with a local NGO, then it would be a mark of success. But apart from such organic outgrowths, it is also important to actively bring together different organisations to create new pilot initiatives which can inaugurate an entirely new order of intervention in civil society initiatives.
- 7. Reviews and Monitoring:** As has been discussed time and again within the HEC, the project has to move away from measuring student competence as the outcome of such an intervention towards evaluating the quality of participation and quality of social innovation effected by the students participating in this programme. Pathways Programme has to see higher education as a place where the cardinal virtues of our modern condition, i.e., autonomy and independence are developed in students and not only as a place where canonical knowledge is stored and disseminated. Other interventions may be justified in working in higher education with the model of canonical form of knowledge production and dissemination, but there is no need for Pathways to restrict itself to that outlook. Strengthening the capacity of students to exercise their autonomy and independence in social spaces by creating experimental fields, which are otherwise not available for them owing to the predeterminations of

their social conditions, is what this programme must focus on. In its deepest sense, we can say that, that is the crucial missing component of Justice (that is, justice seen as freedom to realise one's capabilities) relevant to higher education today, which is provided by the Pathways Programme.

Review of the Technological Component of the Programme (Effective Communication and Technology Workshops, Building Communities and Networks in the Programme)

– Nishant Shah

The Social Justice Initiative's Pathways project is designed around three ambitions:

- 1. The empowerment of socially underprivileged students within higher education in India.*
- 2. Understanding the landscape of social justice vis-à-vis youth in the country.*
- 3. Building communities and knowledge networks of sustained change.*

The current methodology looks at digital technologies as the site upon which these ambitions will be realised. The attempts at introduction of digital technologies to students who have never had access to it and hoping that the tools and gadgets will become the central tropes of community building have been partially successful in skill-building among students. However, the efforts have not yielded any results that can help us understand the relationship between technologisation and empowerment. Moreover, the students remain individually interested but do not necessarily engage in processes of community building.

The following elements have been identified as contributing to the set-backs of the project:

1. Technology as skill v/s Technology as paradigm

There is an over-emphasis on skill-building and introduction to new technologies that concentrates on the students' learning of new technologies. While this does lead to some empowerment, within their everyday context, these skills are often redundant (due to lack of access) and do not lead to the crafting of an empowered user who can explore and exploit the potentials of these technologies. The effort at peer learning has been useful in building weak ties between the students, but does not address the substantial issues that animate the students and that they share in common.

Recommendation: It is necessary to re-think the design of the workshops so that we concentrate on introducing the students, not merely to the tools and usage, but also the 'digital turn' that new technologies bring with them. This would mean an articulation of the status quo, the desired change in it, and the ways in which technologies could help in bringing about that change. The workshops need to begin with stating the problems, understanding how the participants perceive them and create structures of

conversation and participation that helps them understand the ways in which they can participate in processes of social change.

2. The changing landscape of Social Change

A workshop that introduces digital technologies as a ‘corrective’ measure for social inequity, presumes to understand the processes of social change as monolithic and unchanging. It often inherits analogue problems and seeks to correct them, without considering the lived experience and the everyday practices of the people involved. The participants are cast in an existing framework and they are imparted skills which might not always be relevant to them.

Recommendation: The ambition and execution of the workshop need to be re-designed. Instead of ‘knowledge imparting’ spaces, they can become the spaces for the articulation of the political as the young participants perceive it. Use of open spaces like BarCamp, Birds of a Feather, Unconferences, etc. can help in emerging conversations that can be documented to understand the material practices within which the students live. Within these open spaces, the students can find a safe space to connect with each other because of shared commonalities. The workshops can have facilitators, who are not just tech experts but also can make the connections between social technologies and change. The lessons learned about the ways in which the participants understand political and social change could be the basis to build and generate skills and resources for them.

3. Stakeholder over Participant

One of the problems of the traditional workshop model is that the participants are only understood as consumers of knowledge. No attention is paid to their capacities to produce and analyse knowledge. The mediating structures become the stakeholders and the participants only remain subjects or catalysts of change rather than the owners of change. The reasons why the participant comes to the workshop is often overlooked due to the concentration on the workshop’s own logic.

Recommendation: The participants have to be given enough purchase points for them to become the nodes of a knowledge network. However, these purchase points cannot be defined by the workshop. Encouraging the participants to identify spaces, roles and processes that they want to initiate and helping them build those structures through their peers, helps them take more ownership over the project. The technologies need to be understood, simultaneously, as enablers of these structures and also secondary to these structures. Instead of thinking of the student as a participant who shall be taught technologies, it is better to imagine the student as a stakeholder who can strategically use technologies available to him/her for desired processes.

4. Imagining new networks and communities

The workshops, while they bring participants in physical contact with each other, do not automatically result in community and network building. The skills learned and knowledge shared at workshops can become an impetus for community building but

requires a sustained effort on our part to keep the conversations alive. The workshops cannot be seen as the be-all and end-all of the project and different strategies need to be developed so that scattered and disparate groups can still be involved and engaged in different processes.

Recommendations: It is good to spend some time of the workshop in strategising over actions and interventions for the future. Giving the participants a common goal (which they can decide upon) and helping them with resources to achieve it is extremely important. The participants need some external peers and mentors who can help them in evaluating and measuring the impact of their actions. These goals need to out-live the workshops; however, it also means that the ways in which participants are selected needs to be changed, where you are calling not just people who are interested in technology but people who are interested in using technologies towards a desired change. This action-oriented community and network building results in sustained interaction between the participants and also using their technological skills to achieve their goals.

5. The role of the facilitator

The facilitator at a workshop is generally an expert, detached and different from the participants, and responsible for imparting certain skills. Especially at tech-oriented workshops this results in a superficial engagement with the participants' tech needs.

Recommendation: It is advisable to bring the facilitators from the students' own regions and contexts. They don't necessarily have to be tech experts, but need to be able to tell stories of technology for change and development, in order to expose the participants to the transformative value that technology can have in their lives. Facilitators need to be able to connect to the participants and serve as mentors rather than skill-builders in the workshop.

Based on these 5 elements and the recommendations, I would suggest that we make the following changes with the project:

- a. Incorporate staff who are not 'experts' in either tech or social development but are able to bring the 2 together in their understanding of the ambitions of the project. People with expertise in ICT4D and Social technologies would be preferred.
- b. Redesign the workshops to concentrate on the problems of the political rather than technology skill building.
- c. Articulate the socio-political contexts within which the workshops seek to make an intervention and choose the students who resonate with these ideas.
- d. Re-think the realm of the cultural as political by looking at technology processes not only as empowering but embedded in different negotiations and recalibrations of power.

- e. Find workshop coordinators who will be able to build communities of action and processes and train the staff at the colleges to provide such spaces and resources to the participants long after the workshop is over.
- f. Understand the technology ecology within which the participants exist in order to identify knowledge and resource gap and mobilising resources to bridge these gaps.
- g. Include the participants as stakeholders by making them contribute to the workshop designs and by making them realise that they are prosumers of knowledge.
- h. Encourage dissemination and documentation of the knowledge produced in the workshop via the digital medium, and in the process build digital skills for communication and outreach.
- i. Involve personnel who can serve as mentors for the students and help them in strategising for social change at a micro-level.
- j. Evolve new indices for impact measurement that focus on story-telling, and the transformation at level of the subjective. Build processes by which the patterns within individual accounts can be identified to articulate the technology-social change relationship.