

Alumni Associations express support to AIT

The joint meeting of the national chapters and mother chapter of Alumni Associations of the Asian Institute of Technology (AITAA) concluded on a very positive note with all alumni associations announcing their unstinted support to AIT and agreement that the "Exploration of a new Financing / Funding Model for AIT" study being conducted by the independent consultants should be allowed to continue and proceed smoothly.



Panelists discussing "Exploration of a new Financing/Funding Model for AIT"

The face-to-face meeting helped clarify a lot of the issues and there was concurrence among alumni in that their role in the process should be a consultative one with the final decision left to the administration and the Board. It was suggested that another face-to-face meeting be held to deliberate and discuss the report of the consultants once it is submitted in April 2010. The President also took the occasion to request the chapter presidents to encourage their respective constituencies to take active part in the alumni survey being conducted by the consultants as part of their study.

The meeting, which was attended among others by representatives of AITAA chapters from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Central Asia, China, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand apart from the AITAA mother chapter, called for greater communication between AIT and alumni so that the discussion on exploring a new financial model could be conducted in a constructive and comprehensive manner.

While the AITAA mother chapter maintained its neutrality on the issue, AITAA (Thailand) stated that they did not disagree with PPP model, but they had their concerns. AITAA chapters from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Central Asia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Philippines were positive about exploring the PPP model, while AITAA (China) chapter refrained from commenting on PPP issue till they received more information. Alumni chapters from Indonesia and Bhutan have also reacted positively.

The meeting began with AIT President Said Irandoust elaborating on how the landscape under which AIT is operating has changed from 1959, the year when AIT was founded. He elaborated on the status of the independent conceptual study while stating that the final report shall be presented to AIT by the end of April. Quoting from the initial report, the President remarked that there is a huge under capacity in the fields of higher education in China, India and many other countries in Asia and beyond. While AIT wishes to expand and open campuses all over, the financial structure of AIT has been changing over the years since the international community has gradually withdrawn its support to the institute.

AIT President clarified that Public Private Partnership (PPP) is not one model, but an umbrella model which is based on the triple helix approach. "The modalities of PPP remain to be discussed and deliberated. There has been no decision and the study will help us in exploring financial and funding models," the President added.

Mr. Syed Monzur Husain Bokhari, President AITAA (Bangladesh) remarked that since the major donors are no longer enthusiastic and the rate of student enrolment is going down, the PPP concept is not only a pragmatic way but also a practical approach to ensure that AIT remains sustainable. He also supported the under graduate program launched by AIT. Mr. Bokhari suggested that detailed discussions should take place before the parameters and boundary conditions of the PPP model are finalized.

Mr. Janaka Dharmabandu, President AITAA (Central Asia) appreciated the respect and sensitivity shown by AIT President towards the alumni. Narrating from his experience from the PPP scenario in UK, Mr. Dharmabandu stated that "It seems almost mandatory that AIT will have to subscribe to the PPP type of arrangement." The word PPP should not be anathema as it is a modern concept which brings both money and expertise from the private sector and distributes risks accordingly. He quoted from trends in higher education in Australia to suggest that PPP is a credible alternative. "Let us conclude the debate and place trust on the AIT administration," he suggested.

Representative from AITAA (China), Mr. Fang Xianming stated that AIT should not compete not only at the Asian level but at the global level. He stated that the China chapter wished to see more details and studies on PPP before committing themselves on the issue. He welcomed AIT in China and stated that the AITAA chapter in China would not only support but also help promote AIT in China.

Dr. Pornsak Supparatarn, Executive Secretary of AITAA Mother Chapter, remarked that the mother chapter maintains a neutral role on the issue. We neither support nor oppose the idea until an overall opinion of the alumni is formulated, he said. He stated that the mother chapter positions itself as the center of communication among all chapters of AITAA in order to share information, ideas and suggestions to form overall opinion of the alumni on the issue. "AITAA plans to collect all feedback, ideas and suggestions from all national chapters around the middle of March after which the overall opinion of AITAA will be formed and submitted to AIT," he said. The President asked Dr. Pornsak whether the mother chapter would respect the alumni survey being conducted by the independent consultants since feedback has also been requested separately by the mother chapter. Dr. Pornsak noted that the feedback requested by the mother chapter is from the alumni chapters, while the one from the consultants was sent to all the alumni, which they would also respect.

Mr. Moe Myint Kyaw, President AITAA (Myanmar) while appreciating the decision of AIT to involve the alumni remarked that "Alumni are not owners or decision makers of AIT." There can be several models including PPP which can be discussed as options. He suggested that AIT should focus on ASEAN and approach the organization to associate itself with AIT. This will help AIT since currently AIT has no owners, he remarked.

Mr. Ramesh Raj Bista, President AITAA (Nepal) assured AIT of all support at this crucial juncture. He suggested that various alumni chapters should discuss the details of the conceptual study once it is completed. "We must come with an open mind and without any preconceived notions," Mr. Bista remarked. Stating that PPP must not be equated with privatisation, he stressed that the entire process and selection of private partners must be credible. The intergovernmental and international character of AIT must be maintained.

Mr. Abdur Rahman, Secretary General, AITAA (Pakistan) said that he was not against the PPP model for AIT. He suggested that the strategy for undergraduate program could focus more on joint programs between AIT and other universities. He also sought the creation of a planning think tank at AIT which is able to forecast challenges, set targets and plan actions.

Mr. Piyal D Hennayake, President, AITAA (Sri Lanka) stated that further discussions should await the final report of the independent consultants since AIT has no prior experience on PPP. When AIT proceeds with agreements, it should be done with due caution or else the good name of AIT will be tarnished.

Mr. So Polen, President, AITAA Cambodia suggested that the consultant should focus on scenario analysis and the impact of various options. "We hope to find a good solution so that AIT can progress," he said while adding that his alumni chapter would like to see more research on PPP.

Mr. Allen Surla, President, AITAA Philippines while expressing his openness to new concepts remarked that that there had been misinformation and miscommunication on the PPP model, as well as apprehensions on takeover and a propensity to overrun partner institutes. He added that the issue should not be prolonged and AIT should fix a timeline for this project. "Undergraduate programs can be the bread and butter for an institute like AIT," he added.

Representative of AITAA Thailand, Dr. Somchet Thinapong sought more "faith, trust and confidence" while stating that their chapter has concerns on the PPP model. "We do not disagree with the idea, but are deeply concerned since all PPP projects in Thailand have failed," he said. He cautioned against PPP projects remarking that people turn to PPP only when they do not know what to do. "AITAA Thailand chapter wishes to see prosperity and sustainability of AIT and seeks more consistency in approach," he remarked.

He identified the New Charter, PPP and undergraduate classes as three key issues for AIT and its alumni. He called for more communication between AIT and its alumni. "Once we understand each other, we are in the same boat," he added.

AIT President Said Irandoust responded by stating that just because PPP has not succeeded in some cases does not imply that it should not be tried. Often PPP has failed because of corruption in public and private sector, he quipped. Stating that if humans had not tried; they would not have landed on the moon he added that one should not get disheartened or give up by failure but rather learn from the mistakes and experiences, and try and take on more innovative approaches the next time around. He added that PPP had been successful in many parts of the world and increasing number of studies had suggested that Thailand should engage positively with the PPP concept. The AIT President welcomed more interaction and communication between AIT and the AITAA Thailand chapter on a mutual basis. Regarding undergraduate, the President remarked that graduate courses are more resource intensive.

Prof. Worsak Kanok-Nukulchai, Vice President (Resource Development) welcomed all AIT alumni on AIT homecoming day. This would be the first such opportunity during the second half of AIT's century, he remarked. Prof. Worsak also stated that AIT plans to focus more on an endowment fund and requested all alumni chapters to get involved in the process.

Dr. Jonathan Shaw, Director, AIT Extension while moderating the discussing remarked that the need to change is urgent. "Communication is critical on this issue," he said while adding that Prof. Said Irandoust more than anyone else believes in communication.

The meeting ended with the President assuring all alumni chapters that AIT would continue to communicate with them on all important issues, particularly on the new funding model.

The proceedings were recorded and can be viewed at this link.



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