

Vice Chancellor's Report
XXIX Annual Convocation - 31st October 2021

Hon'ble Chief Guest Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi,

Hon'ble Chief Justice of India and Chancellor of the University, Shri NV Ramana,

Hon'ble Judges of the Supreme Court of India,

Hon'ble Chief Justices and the Judges of the High Courts,

Hon'ble Minister of Higher Education, Shri C N Ashwath Narayan

Hon'ble Minister for Law, Parliamentary Affairs and Legislation, Shri J C Madhuswamy

Hon'ble Chairman of the Bar Council of India, Shri Manan Kumar Mishra

Hon'ble Members of the General Council, Executive Council, Academic Council and the Finance Committee of the University

Dear Graduating Students, Parents, Faculty and Staff

Good morning, and welcome to the 29th Annual Convocation of the National Law School of India University. Last year, I emphasized the unique 'virtual' mode of the 2020 Convocation hoping that this was a one off! Yet, here we are in 2021 physically distanced once again, and convening digitally in the long shadow of the Coronavirus pandemic.

The difficult circumstances this year have kept us from pursuing our educational goals with the fullest rigour and sticking to our academic schedules in every respect. Moreover, the Covid pandemic has reminded us that there are times where our primary academic concerns must give way to more pressing and urgent matters of preserving the health and safety of the NLSIU

community. Nevertheless, we've been resolute and determined to solemnly convene here today at this Annual Convocation to proudly graduate students in various academic programmes.

In 2021, we graduate students with the following degrees: 4 PhD, 4 M Phil, 45 Masters in Public Policy, 46 Masters in Law, 83 Bachelor of Arts and Laws (Honours), 683 students with Masters of Business Law and other postgraduate diploma off-campus programmes.

On 28 previous occasions, we have sent out graduates into the world to excel and distinguish themselves in various professional fields and public life. The graduates of the 29th Annual Convocation now stand at the threshold of embarking on careers of distinction and purpose. Their families and friends have supported them at every step of their journey through NLS. The University owes these families and friends a fulsome thanks and a hearty congratulations.

The 29th Annual Convocation coincides with the 75th year celebrations of India's freedom from colonial rule. This Convocation celebrates this historic milestone by inviting as our Chief Guest Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi whose personal history and experience, career and public service and intellectual exertions have all been intricately intertwined with, and have shaped the history of our nation. As you, our students, step beyond the protective walls of the University into the careers that await them, Shri Gandhi will address you on the larger significance of this moment in your lives and our collective futures.

On my part, I will in this brief Report, reflect on Academic Year 2020-21 and throw a forward glance at the exciting and challenging new plans adopted by the University for the next few years.

Foundations

In my last two Convocation addresses, I've emphasized the critical importance of the University rediscovering its founding motivations and values, embedding key principles in our everyday practices, and holding ourselves to these high aspirations on an ongoing basis. In the last two years, we're proud to say that this University has fundamentally restored this founding vision.

The core purpose of this University is to be a national and international pioneer in legal education. To achieve this purpose, we need to select the best students and then have the best possible faculty group guide them through a rigorous and demanding curriculum. Though we are keen to improve and modify our student selection process, highly motivated and capable students enter the University each year and energize our collective lives. In the last two years, the University has recruited nearly 20 exceptional faculty with graduate and doctoral degrees from the best Universities around the world. Further, we've engaged over a 100 visiting faculty from the legal profession and academics from across the world to diversify the intellectual and educational experience at the University. These efforts have already brought fresh perspectives, rigour, and diligence to the academic programmes at the University. We will continue to recruit and grow our core and visiting faculty pool in the years ahead and are committed to ensuring that NLSIU remains the first institution of choice for the most talented and committed faculty in India and beyond.

To sustain these academic achievements, we need to ground the University in robust financial foundations. In the last two years we've reversed our legacy of budget deficits through a careful mix of augmenting our revenues and tight expenditure control; we've recruited highly qualified staff to ensure that our current financial policies will preserve the University's financial autonomy while creating the headroom and resources to adopt aggressive and sustainable growth plans. In this Financial Year, we've refunded a portion of student fees to ameliorate the adverse Covid pandemic conditions, and still generated surpluses that we've committed to rebuilding core infrastructure at the University. After several years, our annual audited account statements have no qualifications by our Statutory Auditors due to exceptional effort put in by our Accounts and Finance team to ensure that we decisively turn our back on past practices, and are ready to move ahead with confidence.

The University infrastructure comprising classrooms and academic and learning spaces have remained frozen in time. Returning graduates often celebrate the unchanging character of the main quadrangle in the academic block and point out that the chairs they sat on 20 years ago remain in the classrooms! While NLSIU had put in place infrastructure that was very advanced

for the early 1990s, our inability to augment and improve these facilities has left us way behind where we should be to remain leaders in legal education. The University has already begun a core infrastructure upgrade which includes classrooms, residential spaces, common spaces and the library. Simultaneously, we've begun redesigning and redeveloping our IT infrastructure to cater and respond to the digital transformation currently underway in all areas of our collective lives: teaching and learning; administration and accounts, and residential life.

The Inclusion and Expansion Plan

Despite the massive disruptions arising from the Covid pandemic, this University has successfully restored its foundations with deliberate speed and purpose. While many visitors and faculty remark on the rapid pace and significant transition already underway, the more extensive transformation is yet to come. Over the last two years, the University has co-developed a strategic plan with the faculty and governing bodies that integrates academic, financial, and infrastructural growth in a phased manner over the next 4 years. This Plan, titled the 'NLSIU Inclusion and Expansion Plan 2021-25', was reviewed and adopted by the Governing Bodies of the University in April-May 2021.

The Plan is designed to ensure that NLSIU consolidates and builds on its status as India's No 1 Law University while responding to contemporary social needs and the current policy environment. Two overarching concerns motivate the Plan:

First, the University has failed to respond to several calls to increase student diversity by admitting students from various marginalized, disadvantaged and underrepresented sections of Indian society.

Secondly, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 encourages larger multi-disciplinary higher education institutions that enroll significantly higher numbers of students. This Strategic plan anticipates and responds to these concerns through three initiatives:

1. Student Inclusion & Expansion:

The University currently has over 660 students enrolled in the on-campus programmes. By 2028-29, we plan to reach a projected size of over 2,200 students. We will increase student intake in current academic programmes, and we will launch a new three-year LL.B. programme using NLSIU's unique curricular and pedagogical approach to legal education, on which I will say more at the end of this Report. Further, the University is rapidly developing technology platforms for online and hybrid educational content to introduce courses for pre-law, law students and professionals.

Simultaneously, the University will implement a new inclusion policy that provides for reservations for several categories in a phased manner over the next four academic years. These categories include OBC, EWS, Karnataka Students and Women students. Further, the University will develop a stronger Financial Aid policy and Academic Support programmes to ensure all students benefit from a transformative education at NLSIU.

2. Faculty and Research:

To ensure that NLSIU maintains the highest academic standards of teaching and research, we will strive to maintain a 1:15 faculty-student ratio across all programmes. So we will grow the faculty from the current strength of about 40 to about 115 faculty in the next few years. We also aim to develop a research faculty cadre to recruit scholars dedicated to path breaking research, and re-organise research publications to achieve and sustain internationally peer-recognized scholarly output.

3. Finance and Infrastructure:

To remain a residential campus, the University will need to expand academic and residential facilities. We aim to secure an additional parcel of 12 acres of land with the support of the Government of Karnataka and capital grants to construct 90,000 square feet of classroom and learning spaces, and 2,50,000 square feet of residential facilities. At all times, we will strive to ensure that annual fee revenues from on-campus and

off-campus academic programmes, and research grants, will provide for annual revenue expenditure thereby ensuring that the University remains financially autonomous.

Implementing the Plan

These dizzying growth numbers convey the exciting scale and ambition of the Plan as well as significant capacity challenges that we must overcome in the years to come. Our successful implementation of these plans is neither predestined nor a foregone conclusion. Let me conclude with two short vignettes that inspire belief that we're on the path to build on our past successes.

Today, I'm glad to announce that the University is in the final stages of securing its largest capital grant ever: the Infosys Foundation has approved a INR 5 Crore grant to redevelop the Shri Narayan Rao Melgiri National Law Library to augment capacity, redevelop and rezone the library and its surroundings, and adopt a digital learning and inclusion initiative. We aim to create a green and sustainable library that will become the heart of social and intellectual life of the University. Some alumni and several University staff have worked tirelessly to ensure that we make the NLS library a beacon for legal education and research in India in the 21st century. We expect to make a formal announcement and share more details in November 2021.

In 1988, the University was launched on the back of an audacious curricular experiment: the 5-year integrated BA LLB programme. This experiment succeeded beyond expectations and secured NLS's legacy as the institution that incubated and radically disrupted legal education in India. Three decades after that initial success, today, we announce the launch of a new interdisciplinary 3-year LLB embedded in an experiential learning pedagogy. The University has secured the necessary regulatory approvals from the regulatory authorities as well as the governing bodies to launch this programme. The inaugural batch will begin their education in July 2022, and will help re-energize and transform postgraduate legal education across India in the years ahead. We have assembled the best faculty team to redevelop India's oldest academic law degree, and we invite the brightest and the best graduates from any discipline to join us as we set out to radically transform legal education yet again!

These examples of extraordinary effort and significant achievement give me the confidence that this University will once again radically transform the benchmarks and standards of Indian legal education in the 21st century, like it did earlier in the late 20th century. We invite all those who are committed to building world class higher educational institutions in India delivering a socially engaged and transformative education, to the most inclusive and representative student community, to join us on this journey.

Prof (Dr.) Sudhir Krishnaswamy

Vice-Chancellor

Conclusion