

Sailing from Byzantium

To fulfil its potential, India's academy must be freed from the constraints of red tape as part of a root-and-branch transformation, argues C. Raj Kumar



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“Indian universities need to be made autonomous in the true sense of the word”

The annual release of the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings sends shock waves through the Indian higher education establishment. In recent years the rankings have come to preoccupy the minds of India's intelligentsia, academics, policy-makers, regulators, government agencies, even the country's president and prime minister. The fact that not a single Indian university is ranked among the world top 200 has become a matter of deep concern for many in India and beyond.

Transforming India's universities and making fundamental changes to its higher education arena are critical for India's future – and not just in the rankings. Reform needs to be based on a fresh conception of the nation's institutions, informed by the following points.

First, Indian universities need to be made autonomous in the true sense of the word. While academic freedom for intellectual pursuits is deeply embedded in the sector, the

existing regulatory framework has undermined institutions' ability to innovate. The labyrinth of red tape that traps India's academy – laws, rules and guidelines produced by a plethora of bodies, enforced by government at the state and central levels – stifle even the possibility of innovation.

The universities need to be freed from this Byzantine bureaucracy so that they can develop new identities. When institutions are first established, they need a guiding hand; once they are up and running, they should be free to craft their own destiny.

Second, the necessary transformation must be led by outstanding academics – inspiring teachers and prolific researchers. One of the critical challenges facing India's universities is that research and citations (research influence) have been neglected for decades. This has led to institutionalised mediocrity, where high-quality research and staff publications are a rarity at best.

Universities must be knowledge-creating institutions: the future reputation of the Indian academy ought to be built on the quality of academics' teaching, research and publications, not simply the talent and quality of its students.

Indian universities have to be reimagined as liberal and progressive intellectual spaces capable of promoting critical thinking across all disciplines. The existing barriers to this outcome, borne of historical prejudice and institutional bias, must give way to more balanced and nuanced approaches to institution-building.

While a nation-building agenda can offer the foundation stone for a fit-for-purpose academy, substantial effort must also be made to evaluate the quality and excellence that already exists in India's universities. There is a need to aid the creation of private, not-for-profit and philanthropically funded institutions such as our own: the future of Indian higher education will depend to a large extent on our ability to creatively involve the private sector and corporate philanthropy in supporting it.

Another vital issue is ensuring access to higher education for India's young people. With more than 800 million Indians under 35, this is an overwhelming concern. No transformation of India's universities is possible without paying serious attention to the aspirations of the country's youth, many of whom cannot afford higher education. Issues relating to equity and inclusion on the one hand and employability and empowerment on the other are critical to reformulating Indian higher education policy.

The future of Indian universities is inextricably linked to our ability to seek fundamental transformation of the entire system. The country's failure in the world rankings is simply a symptom of a deeper malaise. ●

