

Fresh ideas, not more institutions

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The Hindu PURSUING EXCELLENCE: The vision for transforming Indian universities needs to focus on a set of specific goals to nurture research. Picture shows students of Delhi University during their convocation. Photo: Meeta Ahlawat

The misguided approach of building more institutions is not only bad public policy, but also creates social expectations that get belied very quickly

The Union Minister for Human Resource Development, Smriti Irani, has set out an ambitious agenda to seek reforms in higher education. There is no greater challenge to the future of India than the urgent need to revamp our institutions of higher education. The reform that has to take place will have to address the fundamental problem of institutionalised mediocrity, deeply embedded in these institutions. It is not enough to talk about pursuing excellence; to establish and build world-class universities of excellence, the ecosystem of higher education has to change dramatically. These are some of the changes required.

Nurturing talent

Transforming Indian universities involves a vision that will help India have a stronger commitment toward pursuing excellence. While global rankings of universities around the world have embarrassed us time and again, with no Indian university in the top 200 universities, this should not surprise us. What should, however, make us ponder is how the last two decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number of universities in Asia, which have begun to figure among the top universities of the world. What is it that Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taipei, Japan and China have done that we have not? While as individual scholars and researchers Indians have been doing remarkably well around the world, it is the inability of our own universities to nurture this talent that needs understanding. Unfortunately, most Indian universities are not spaces that are inspiring enough for knowledge creation, nor have they been designed to ensure the pursuit of serious research and scholarship. Effecting transformation involves five things: substantial resources, a progressive regulatory environment in which higher education regulators begin to trust universities, a new governance model for creating opportunities and space for research and scholarship, an enabling environment within universities that will significantly incentivise research and publications, and an attitudinal change among all stakeholders in the higher education sector.

The core emphasis has been to expand the diverse higher education sector with a view to increasing the gross enrolment ratio (GER). Mindless expansion has led to a situation where there is mediocrity. Central universities may be well funded, but suffer from a crisis of governance in which over 40 per cent of faculty positions lie vacant. The problem is even more serious when it comes to the state universities — they suffer from a lack of resources among other things. The new

government must ensure that all faculty appointments are filled up within a time-bound framework. This will involve tactful engagement with the institutions and a creative approach to faculty recruitment. Archaic policies that have outlived their time should be dispensed with while recruiting faculty. Until the crisis of a lack of adequate infrastructure and faculty is addressed, there should be a short moratorium on establishing more central universities, IITs and IIMs. The misguided approach of building more institutions is not only bad public policy, but also creates social expectations that get belied very quickly when it comes to the quality of education that is offered.

Building world-class, research-oriented universities involves a serious commitment to knowledge creation in the sciences, arts, social sciences and humanities. It is not enough to focus only on building laboratories and knowledge parks, promoting an industry-academia interface and pursuing research grants and creating incubators; we need to go beyond these reforms in order to create a culture of research. The vision for transforming Indian universities needs to focus on a set of specific goals to nurture research. It is essential to identify a selected set of institutions to represent the best of public and private universities and significantly enhance their capacities with a view to advancing their research agendas. This will not only help in understanding the key challenges that universities face in relation to nurturing research, but will also help us learn from recurring mistakes. Institutional reform inevitably requires risk-taking and innovation.

Indian universities are generally timid in seeking collaborations which are necessary for the development of new ideas and perspectives. There are a significant number of biases and prejudices that have led to scepticism in promoting any form of collaboration, even among our own universities. There is also lack of interdisciplinary teaching among different faculties and schools. The bureaucratic approach of university managements and regulators has led to the creation of too many hurdles in the pursuit of any meaningful collaboration.

Existing policies relating to research collaborations both within and outside India need to be re-examined and made more progressive and inclusive. They should be made progressive *vis-à-vis* ensuring greater autonomy and freedom to universities to determine who they want to collaborate with and what the terms of collaboration should be. I don't

see any reason why the knowledge, wisdom, integrity and experience of the faculty members of the collaborating universities are less important than that of the regulators. There is a need to remove the distinctions that exist in relation to public and private universities; instead, universities ought to be differentiated on the basis of their performance and contribution. There is also a need for an inclusive approach, which involves all aspects of the higher education sector in knowledge creation. This will help in developing a higher education system that will assess the quality of education through objective standards and international benchmarks rather than making private sector education subservient to public universities.

Amending rules

The biggest challenge is to create an enabling environment to promote innovation. Archaic rules and regulations that are constantly flouted have given rise to opportunities to dubious institutions to be engaged in corruption. There is a need to seek a change in the attitude of government departments that are involved in policymaking, and regulatory bodies that are monitoring and ensuring standards in higher education. The deep distrust that is prevalent among the institutions on the one hand and the government and regulatory bodies on the other has made the higher education sector static. There is little effort in seeking innovation. This has to change, and quickly. No reform of higher education institutions is possible without a careful and calibrated effort to examine the current framework of the powers of the government and of regulatory bodies.

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