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## LEARNING CURVE

# EXCELLENCE AT UNIVERSITIES: OUR ELUSIVE QUEST

## EXPERT VIEW

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The spread of education in society provides the foundation of success in countries that are latecomers to development. Primary education creates the base. Equal opportunities in school education are critical. Higher education, then, imparts the cutting edge. In every sphere, India is now a laggard in Asia.

There is a quiet crisis in higher education in India that runs deep. The educational opportunities for school-leavers are simply not enough and what exists is not good enough. The pockets of excellence are outcomes of the enormous reservoir of talent and Darwinian selection processes. Institutions and individuals possibly excel despite the system, which is just not conducive to learning and does little for those with average abilities or without social opportunities.

The challenges confronting higher education in India are clear. It needs a massive expansion to educate much larger numbers, but without diluting academic standards. Indeed, it is just as important to raise the average quality. And inclusion, by providing access to people, is an imperative. It is also essential to create some institutions that are exemplars of excellence at par with the best in the world.

Such excellence is missing. Indeed, in terms of world university rankings for 2015-16 compiled by Times Higher Education, our performance is dismal. There are none in the top 200. There are only two—Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, and Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bombay—in the top 400. There are five more IITs in the 401-600 rankings. And there are just six universities in the ranks 601-800.

It must be said that these rankings have all the limitations of composite index numbers, since it is difficult to measure qualitative attributes while weights assigned to different components shape results. Even so, it is obvious that our universities have miles to go before reaching world standards. Islands of excellence in IITs are no consolation because it is universities providing educational opportunities for people at large that are the life-blood of higher education.

Alas, the comparative advantage that India had, at least in a few of its universities, has been slowly, yet surely, squandered over time. The situation is much worse than it was three decades ago. Uni-

versities have deteriorated in India but improved elsewhere, particularly in Asia. It would have shown if there were rankings for 1985.

There is intense competition among students for admissions to public universities with standards and reputations. The fortunate few, who do well enough in the Class XII examinations, take up these limited places, while most make do with institutions in the private sector, where fees are always high but quality is often poor. There are the privileged few whose parents are rich enough to send them abroad.

The number of students from India going abroad for higher education has increased from roughly 50,000 in 2000 to 200,000 in 2010 and 350,000 in 2015. It is estimated that, in 2015, around 40% went to the US, 20% to the UK, while 25% went to Canada, Australia and New Zealand. If their average expenditure on fees and maintenance is \$25,000 per student per annum, Indian students overseas are now spending approximately \$9 billion—the equivalent of ₹60,000 crores at current exchange rates—every year!

Our higher education is caught in a pincer movement. For one, there is a belief that markets can solve the problem through private players, which is leading to education as business, shutting the door on large numbers who cannot finance themselves, without regulation that would ensure quality. For another, governments that believe in the magic of markets are virtual control freaks with respect to public universities. This is motivated by the desire to exercise political influence in higher education for patronage, ideology, rents, or vested interests.

Micro-management by governments—both the centre and states—accentuates problems. Every government and every political party is culpable in the growing politicization of universities. This strangles autonomy and stifles creativity without creating any accountability. The quality of education is collateral damage.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) as a regulator compounds difficulties with its interventions at political behest. Its belief that one-size-must-fit-all drives its fetish for standardization, whether curricula, appointments, promotions, salaries, evaluation, administration or institutional architecture. The outcome is that every university must move at the speed of the slowest, if not drop to the quality of the lowest. Such levelling crowds-out or pre-empts excellence, because it stifles diversity, pluralism and

differentiation in higher education, all of which are necessary to develop academic excellence.

The problems with our higher education system are widely recognized. Several committees have submitted reports. There are blueprints galore, which gather dust on government shelves. The quest for excellence in higher education is long on words but short on substance. But there is a consciousness about the problem.

In his budget speech earlier this year, finance minister Arun Jaitley announced that an enabling regulatory structure will be provided to 10 public and 10 private universities to emerge as world-class teaching and research institutions.

The 10 public universities, to be selected on the basis of specified criteria, would receive ₹500 crore each over five years. Even if long overdue, it is never too late for such an initiative. But it is clearly too little. It needs much more financial resources. And it requires far deeper institutional change to eliminate the systemic flaws that have curbed excellence.

It is absolutely essential that the contemplated regulatory structure provides complete autonomy—administrative, financial and academic—to these universities. Liberation from the shackles of UGC is a necessary condition. The existing parliamentary or legislative Acts that created these universities also have many constraints and fetters. The solution might lie in an altogether new enabling legislation for what could be described as national universities.

This poses a dilemma that should be made explicit. It is obviously sensible to select 10 public universities from those that exist and support them in the pursuit of excellence since it takes at least one decade for a new university to establish itself. But universities that have been there for some time do carry deadwood, baggage and inertia. Their existing acts, statutes and ordinances could also be a drag. On balance, a new enabling legislation common to these universities, which provides institutional autonomy and eliminates structural rigidities, would be preferable. And it might be worth thinking about at least one new national university with a mandate for excellence. The much higher costs would be worthwhile to create a role model.

National universities must not be large. The optimum size would be in the range 5,000-10,000 students. They should span a wide range of disciplines across languages, humanities, social sciences, physical

sciences, life sciences and earth sciences, while recognizing that knowledge often develops at the intersection of disciplines. They should have state-of-the-art infrastructure, laboratories and libraries. Faculty members should teach both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The teaching should be in English because translations limit access to readings. There should be a special emphasis on attracting international students. These universities could also mentor other institutions.

Structures of governance must be innovative. It must be ensured that supporting governments, as well as promoting corporate entities or philanthropic individuals, are at arms-length in terms of decision-making, for these would be public universities. The best model would be a board of governors, to which governments or promoters could nominate at most one-third the total number. The other members, two-thirds or more, should be independent, of whom one-half should be distinguished academics while one-half should be drawn from industry, civil society or professions. The chairman should be an eminent academic with administrative experience. Members of the board should have a term of six years, with one-third retiring every two years. The vice-chancellor, to be appointed by the board with a six-year tenure, would be an ex-officio member. Except for nominees of governments or promoters, the board of governors should decide on replacements for its retiring members.

Financial autonomy is just as important. The government should consider doubling its special grant-in-aid for five years to ₹1,000 crore. These universities should have the freedom to set their own student-fee levels. Endowments are a means of assuring autonomy in finances over time. Thus, the government could consider providing a one-time-start-up endowment of ₹1,000 crore to each of these universities, with freedom to mobilize more resources for their endowments from industry, philanthropists, or alumni networks. They should also be allowed to invest funds in financial instruments of their choice by employing portfolio managers if required. Income tax laws could be amended to encourage contributions to, and accumulation of, such endowments.

Academic decisions about faculty, curriculum, admissions, examinations and evaluation, should be the prerogative of the university as an institution subject only to due process. These universities should have complete freedom in appointments of faculty members and their salaries. Differences in emoluments, both within and between universities, are necessary to attract and to retain talent. These universities and their departments should have complete freedom in deciding upon curriculum. Admissions of undergraduate and postgraduate students could be based on performance in a national entrance test combined with results in Class XII and the first degree course, respectively. But “needs-blind admissions” must be the norm so that once admitted, financial support is assured. These universities should have complete freedom in choosing their examination and assessment methods. Students should evaluate the courses taught to them and this feedback should be institutionalized. Both teaching and research should be subject to periodic peer reviews.

Academic freedom is primary because universities are places for raising doubts and asking questions about everything. Exploring ideas, debating issues and thinking independently are essential in the quest for excellence. Hence, the autonomy of this space is sacrosanct. It would enable such universities to be the conscience-keepers of economy, polity and society.

All this is easier said than done. Yet, we must remember that it has been done elsewhere. It needs political will, changed mindsets, and a belief that a better world is possible.

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