

Building India's Atmanirbhar Universities

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The National Education Policy 2020 has heralded a new imagination for the Indian higher education system. It has created an inspiring vision that has the potential to build and nurture world-class universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) in India. However, this vision depends on our ability and commitment to the pursuit of systemic, systematic, synchronous and sustainable reforms as envisaged in the policy. An equally important aspect of the higher education vision can and should be is what the Honourable Prime Minister of India has envisaged – the evolution of what he has called, “Atmanirbhar Bharat”.

The Honourable Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi has said “Aatmanirbhar Bharat is not about being self-contained or being closed to the world, it is about being self-sustaining and self-generating. We will pursue policies that promote efficiency, equity and resilience.” The Union Minister of Education, Mr Ramesh Pokhriyal “Nishank” has underlined the inextricable link of our aspirations to build a world-class higher education system with our commitment to developing an Atmanirbhar India. He has already begun extensive consultations with higher education leaders with a view to implementing the NEP in a time-bound and efficient manner.

It is important that the Indian higher education system pursue the following 10 public policy reform initiatives to fulfil the vision of an Atmanirbhar University.

Empowering universities with greater autonomy

The vision of a ‘self-sustaining’ and ‘self-generating’ higher education system needs Indian universities to be freed from the existing shackles of regulation. The Atmanirbhar university has to be autonomous and should be able to seek internal agency, innovation, experimentation and institutional leadership to promote new initiatives without regulatory constraints.

Ensuring regulatory freedom

The Atmanirbhar university needs regulatory freedom to evolve. The state, central and specialised subject-based regulations imposed on HEIs can limit their creativity and innovation. Freedom from regulatory barriers will be based upon the recognition of trust, responsibility and accountability. The recent effort to promote online education hadn't adequately fulfilled a vision of regulatory innovation. We need to move beyond the existing imaginations of online education and degrees to realise its true potential and keep up with the digital advancements in the world of higher education.

Enabling the university to raise significant financial resources

The aspiration to build an Atmanirbhar higher education system requires excellence, which comes at a price. The makings of a world-class university including infrastructure, faculty, internationalisation, career opportunities require huge financial investment. To build the desired institutional capacity, an Atmanirbhar university needs significant capital infusion, whether it is publicly or privately funded.

Energising the university for innovation, entrepreneurship and collaboration

Most universities in India are isolated from the wider society, industry, government and even the community. Universities should become avenues for innovation and entrepreneurship. While there have been a lot of exhortations to the HEIs and universities from the regulatory bodies to collaborate with all stakeholders, it will take significant public policy reforms to enable this.

Globalising the Indian university

The Indian civilisation heritage had imaginations of global and multidisciplinary education in the form of Nalanda, Takshashila, Vallabhi and Vikramshila. India's aspirations to build an Atmanirbhar globalised higher education system requires reimagination of the Indian university to recreate our own future. India offers a diverse and vibrant democracy, an intellectually engaging society, an affordable education. It is time that the world sees India as the global destination for higher education that it is.

Developing strong international collaborations

The NEP has focussed on internationalisation with the vision for international university campuses in India. While this could promote internationalisation, we should focus on making our universities Athmanirbhar and create internationalisation within our own ecosystem. However, we need regulatory reforms, which could provide Indian universities the space to develop different forms of collaborations with universities around the world in form of exchange programmes, dual-degrees, joint conferences and research collaborations.

Focussing on excellence in research and publications

The lack of a culture of research, scholarship and publications in Indian HEIs has limited our performance in global rankings. The vision of an Atmanirbhar university should focus on research that can impact the development of the society at large. It should be able to address the problems of society through innovations in STEM, social sciences, humanities and medicine.

Building strong state and local level institutional capacities

The larger narrative of Indian higher education, unfortunately, remains urban in its orientation. Atmanirbhar India needs to expand its scope beyond urban locations and a few cities to build a strong state and local level institutional capacity for higher education in rural India. This will require innovation in rural transformation, including building of civil, transport, telecommunication and digital infrastructure to match world-class standards. Enabling Atmanirbhar rural-based HEIs will play a leading role in creating a knowledge society.

International rankings and global benchmarking

We need to recognise the importance of international rankings and move beyond the myopic vision of celebrating our success and dismiss the rankings when we don't do well. We must not be threatened about our institutional capacity to achieve excellence and develop strong and substantive institutional policies that will align the individual university rankings' aspirations with the larger national approach towards international rankings and global benchmarking.

Breaking the public-private university divide

There is an urgent need for breaking all barriers relating to public and private divide in HEIs. The NEP has suggested a need for reimagination in this regard. With nearly 70% of HEIs in the private sector and over 70% of students studying in private HEIs, we must recognise the significance and impact of the private HEIs.

The Way Forward

The Indian imagination of an Atmanirbhar university will be successful, if the vision of NEP is implemented in letter and spirit. We need to implement the following 5 initiatives to implement the NEP that will also help us implement the 10 public policy reforms that I have proposed:

- Establishing the Prime Minister's Task Force on Higher Education Reforms

- Establishing the National NEP Implementation Committee with select Vice Chancellors, Chaired by the Union Minister of Education
- Empowering the “Institutions of Eminence” to become India’s Global Universities
- Constitution of the National Education Ministers’ Council with Education Ministers of all states and UTs to seek reforms in the state education sector to align with the NEP
- Constitution of the National Higher Education Philanthropy Council to promote private sector participation in the development of HEIs

The vision of an Atmanirbhar University and an Atmanirbhar Higher Education System in India is truly inspiring. It combines the vision of John Henry Newman’s ‘Idea of a University’ with the Humboldtian imagination of the modern research university to create the new Global University, which is multidisciplinary, democratic, inclusive, aspirational and international.

India needs to accept that we can fulfil this vision, only if we are prepared to take the full responsibility of what it takes to become an Atmanirabhar Bharat!

DISCLAIMER : Views expressed above are the author's own.