

Entry of foreign universities in India can be a game changer

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The draft resolution concerning the entry of foreign universities in India released recently by the UGC is the first step towards inviting them to set up campuses here. Aptly titled “Setting up and Operation of Campuses of Foreign Higher Educational Institutions in India 2023”, it is to be discussed by all the stakeholders before the final resolution takes shape.

One recalls how during the Congress rule in Haryana, Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda got some 2000 acres of premium land along the National Highway earmarked and laid the foundation stone in 2012 of Rajiv Gandhi Education City, hoping to entice around fifty universities from abroad to set up campuses here, independently or in collaboration with Indian institutions. Unfortunately, no foreign university turned up. Initially, it was three Indian universities that set up campus here. Later, some more Indian institutions came so that the final tally presently stands at 12 with vast expanse of land lying unused. Ostensibly, the terms offered were not so attractive.

This time, however, we are assured that the terms are different and so there is hope. The foreign universities and institutions desirous of entering India have to be among the 500 top-ranking universities in the world or have a reputed place on their home turf. It is still not known as to grading of which rating agency will be acceptable. These institutions can appoint their own staff and fix compensation packages, devise their own curriculum and courses, and take back home all the profits – which is what was the sticking point in the past. Also, we recall that there was reticence on the part of the foreign faculty to come to India. Now that economically and technologically India is better placed, there should be no reservation on this count. Already, we see many foreigners working in Indian companies and educational institutions. Also, there are a large number of Indian universities which have collaborations with foreign universities.

The decision to allow the entry of foreign universities by our nationalist government seems puzzling, what with references to glorious ancient universities of Nalanda, Taxla, Vikramshila, and so on, and declared intentions to be the Vishwaguru. Probably, the present decision has been taken to avoid outflow of capital for studying abroad. According to an estimate around 4,50,000 students went abroad for education in 2022 alone. This is despite the piquant situation in which Indian students were placed in the war-torn

Ukraine or Corona-ravaged China. Also there is real need to increase the number of universities in India to teach and train the burgeoning number of youth, for which huge funds are needed. The entry of foreign universities will take some load off the budget.

One hopes that the courses and programs taught at these universities will be cutting edge ones and the infrastructure set up by them will be state-of-the-art type. This will give a boost to research and innovation. The only restrictions stipulated are that these foreign institutions cannot offer online courses and run courses that bring down the standards of education or might endanger India's national interest. This, of course, is a grey area subject to interpretation according to the interests of either party and can lead to tussle and may eventually add to court cases. The scenario brings to mind the confrontation that our government has had with multinational social media platforms.

There is palpable worry about the impact of this move on our own educational institutions. They face renewed challenge from foreign campuses. Not all Indian universities can challenge the foreign ones. On the other hand, despite the glamour of foreign universities, the cost factor will pose a challenge to them. It is also doubtful that the campuses set up by them in India will match the original campus back home in their home country. What one fears is the competition normally seen in businesses where big business buys over the small business and then makes all the profit that it wants as sole producer or marketer of particular goods. Under the circumstances, it would be advisable for the government to at least allow better autonomy to high quality Indian educational institutions. Surprising enough is the fact that even institutions declared 'autonomous' or 'institution of excellence' also do not enjoy full immunity from the shackles of UGC. The public education system here will not feel much pinch simply because it is highly subsidized and is accessible to ordinary people.

NEP 2020 stipulates that "India will be promoted as a global study destination providing premium education at affordable costs, thereby helping to restore its role as a Vishwa Guru". For such lofty aspirations, there is need to bolster the indigenous private university system. There is no dearth of rich people in India. It saddens one to see many millionaires donating big money to foreign institutions because those were their alma mater, because such enthusiasm does not match help rendered by them to native institutions. Finally, we must be guided by our national interest. Education in India needs a large dose of employment-oriented courses. If the entry of foreign universities addresses this most important need, then these must be welcomed.

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