

Need for SEZs in higher edu

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By Professor

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"India's aspirations to establish world-class universities have never been greater. It has been time and again lamented that not a single Indian university has been among the top 200 in the world. However, the recently acquired distinction of two of India's reputed higher education institutions (Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore and IIT, Delhi) being ranked among the top 200 in the world in one of the international rankings has given new hope and expectations for the Indian higher education system.

The extraordinary contribution of the President of India acted as a catalyst, while serving as the visitor to the 114 higher education institutions exhorting the need for taking international ranking seriously with a view to promoting institutional excellence. India needs to establish Special Education Zones (SEZs) as the new and innovative policy reforms for promoting governance mechanisms that will enable the establishment of world-class universities.

The new generation of SEZs in education should nurture the creation of a knowledge development eco-system with everything that is needed to build world-class universities. We need to evolve a new institutional imagination for such universities. Jamil Salmi in a World Bank report entitled: The Challenge of Establishing World Class Universities had observed: ""In an attempt to propose a more meaningful definition of world-class universities, this report makes the case that the superior results of these institutions (highly sought graduates, leading-edge research, and technology transfer) can essentially be attributed to three complementary sets of factors at play in top universities: (a) a high concentration of talent (faculty and students), (b) abundant resources to offer rich learning environment and to conduct advanced research, and (c) favourable governance features that encourage strategic vision, innovation, and flexibility and that enable institutions to make decisions and to manage resources without being encumbered by bureaucracy.""

The following could be some of the unique characteristics of these SEZs in higher education that will enable the development of world-class universities in India: Establishment: The universities that will be invited to establish institutions in these SEZs for higher education will be based on transparent criteria with the main objective of building world-class universities in India. These universities could be both Indian as well as international universities, but will necessarily need to have educational standards that are comparable to the best in the world.

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There is a need for an enabling legislation at the national level that will help establish these universities in any part of the country through a Central government initiative. The legislation should have a clear mandate and autonomous institutional mechanisms that will foster the establishment of world-class universities. Regulation: The idea of SEZs in the context of special economic zones is to create an ecosystem where certain rules and regulations that are applicable

elsewhere may not be applicable within this framework. While this aspect of the Special Education Zones is indeed similar to the existing Special Economic Zones, the most important rationale for creating the SEZs in higher education is to significantly advance India's aspirations to establish world-class universities. For this purpose, the existing legal and regulatory framework needs to be re-imagined through the creation of SEZs in higher education.

The governance of universities in SEZs should be based upon the best global practices of the involvement of all stakeholders in the university system with little or no governmental involvement. Funding: The funding and resources for the establishment of world-class universities through the SEZs in higher education ought to come through the private sector and the international higher education sector. One of the important requirements for building world-class universities is the need for abundant resources. This may not come from the government as its priorities will inevitably be to expand opportunities in the higher education sector and create access to a large number of individuals.

At present, the not-for-profit private sector in higher education has little or no incentives to contribute to the creation of universities in India. The SEZs in higher education need to develop a vision that will significantly attract the wealthiest individuals and corporations to establish world-class universities through individual and corporate philanthropy. The existing tax structure and corporate social responsibility regulations need to be thoroughly re-examined to enable significant incentives for establishing universities in the SEZs.

The way forward A few years ago, a committee constituted by the then Planning Commission and headed by the founder of Infosys, N R Narayana Murthy, submitted a report on the role of the corporate sector in higher education. It acknowledged the importance of stronger private initiatives and recommended measures such as free land for 999 years, 300 per cent deduction in taxable income for contributions and 10-year multiple entry visas for foreign research scholars. It also recommended a scholarship fund for Rs 1,000 crore, with the corporate contributions tax exempted.

There is an urgent need to transform the higher education sector. The prime minister and the human resource development minister are well suited to convene a brainstorming session for promoting the idea of SEZs in higher education with all stakeholders including educationists, parliamentarians, policymakers, philanthropists, institutions and corporations.

This could be the basis for creating the Prime Minister's Task Force on Building World-Class Universities. This Task Force will be mandated to recommend all steps that involve the development of a vision, strategic plan, legal and regulatory processes, institutional mechanisms, and policies and guidelines that will enable the creation of SEZs in higher education. The time has come for us to recognise that we owe to the posterity for creating higher education opportunities that will enable the future generations of students to pursue world-class education in world-class universities in India.

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