



Union Budget: Reforming higher education

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The new Modi government has committed itself to reforming the higher education sector. Smriti Irani, the Union HRD minister, has begun her work in all earnestness and is conscious of the aspirations and expectations that the government has generated. But there are big challenges facing the Indian higher education sector.

Quality, excellence and faculty: First, we must raise the quality of our universities by promoting research and publications. Not even a single Indian university got featured in the top 200 universities of the world in all major rankings and this is a serious concern. Second is the issue of attracting quality faculty. There is a crisis relating to faculty recruitment and retention in our universities. Even the central universities are facing difficulty with 35-40% of their faculty positions remaining vacant. Third, there is an urgent need to increase the capacities of the higher education sector. This will involve significant investment in higher education; we need to build more colleges and universities, but that should not lead to any reduction in quality. This balancing act of maintaining the quality of education while increasing the quantity of institutions is a critical challenge.

Public, private and the regulator: The existing dichotomy between public sector efforts and private sector initiatives in the higher education space needs to be dismantled. The yardstick to measure the quality and effectiveness of higher education institutions in India should not be based on whether it is public or private, but through benchmarks that are universally applicable. There is a need for radical regulatory reform in the higher education sector, and an examination of the powers and functions of all regulatory bodies. The regulations should focus on creating an enabling environment for the higher education sector to grow in which public,

private and international institutions can thrive—all with a view to advancing the goals of excellence in higher education. The need for internationalisation and global opportunities in education and research for our students and faculty has to be promoted by the government. Further, we need to address the issue of increasing the gross enrolment ratio from 18% to more than 30%, and this calls for substantial investment in higher education.



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Knowledge, skills and perspectives: We have to develop significant capacities for promoting vocational education and develop skill-sets. Whether we examine a developed country like the UaS or a developing country like China, there is a strong emphasis on maintaining rigorous standards and research excellence among universities, while providing strong impetus to promoting vocational education and skills development. Public policy needs to recognise that knowledge creation and excellence in research can and should go hand-in-hand.

There is no single answer as to how we can transfer knowledge from university to industry. We must understand the importance of collaboration between academia and the industry. Unfortunately, these two worlds have been operating independently with a fair amount of indifference and scepticism of the other. This has not helped in any form of knowledge transfer. We need to facilitate conversations between academia and industry. It is also necessary for industry to recognise that universities are about creating ideas and promoting innovation, but not all of them can be driven by industry demands and market expectations. This balancing act is critical.

Universities and economic growth: The experience of many countries has shown us that innovation and research in universities contributes to the creation of new opportunities and the growth and development of many industries. Many countries in South East Asia are shining examples of this. There is no doubt about the fact that universities have to redefine their role in India, but this is not only in relation to their contribution to economic development, but also in relation to their social, cultural and intellectual development of the nation. There is a strong case for making Indian universities more accountable and this accountability is not to the government or to the regulator, but to the society at large.

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