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Building better universities

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RANKINGS OF ASIAN UNIVERSITIES									
	QS World University Rankings (Top 200)			Times Higher Education World University Rankings (Top 200)			The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)/ Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Top 200)		
	2013	2012	2011	2013-14	2012-13	2011-12	2013	2013	2011
China	7	7	7	2	2	3	5	4	1
Hong Kong	5	5	5	3	4	4	1	4	1
India	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Japan	9	9	11	5	5	5	9	9	9
Malaysia	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Singapore	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1
South Korea	6	6	5	4	4	3	1	1	1
Taiwan	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Source: Original database

The regulatory mechanism for higher education should aim to ensure quality and accountability, rather than leave institutions constrained by rules

As the University Grants Commission (UGC), the apex body regulating higher education in India, marks its 60th anniversary — it was inaugurated on December 28, 1953 — some introspection is in order. The democratisation of the higher education system and improved and expanded access and opportunities are some of the milestones of the last half-a-century. However, there are concerns expressed by all stakeholders that the current models of governance of universities do not inspire confidence about an appropriate framework to regulate them. Several issues need to be examined in the context of the existing framework for regulating universities.

The existing model is based on deep and pervasive distrust among regulators over the possibility of universities doing things on their own, and doing it well. The current framework that require universities to be constantly regulated by laws, rules, regulations, guidelines and policies set by the government and the regulatory bodies have not produced the best results.

There are at least five factors that increasingly govern such regulation. The first relates to Central laws and rules concerning universities and higher education. A second concerns laws and rules of State governments. A third relates to rules, regulations and guidelines formulated by the UGC. A fourth one concerns rules, regulations and guidelines formulated by regulatory bodies such as the Medical Council of India and the Bar Council of India. A fifth concerns orders and directions passed by courts.

If there is one lesson we can learn from the last 60 years of regulating universities, it is the need to reduce the burden. But regulation in general and the governance of universities in particular have certain important social objectives.

There are issues relating to quality and accountability that need to be ensured, and regulatory bodies should assume that role and responsibility. That role needs to significantly change from the existing model to a more progressive approach where universities are allowed to take greater responsibility on their own. There is a need to develop a framework of Earned Autonomy for universities where new forms of regulatory models are created. This model can have a system in which universities could be identified on the basis of indicators and assessment criteria so that a number of them, public and private, could be allowed to function more autonomously than others. This framework should allow upward mobility: universities should be able to fulfil a specific set of goals to develop and reach different stages of autonomy.

There is a case for changing the existing regulatory framework that has a disparaging attitude towards private universities. The model of distinguishing public and private universities in terms of the original source of funding — whether it was created by the state or through private initiatives — is archaic and has to be reexamined. They have to be assessed on the basis of their contribution, looking at what they are doing as opposed to who created them.

The regulatory model of governance needs to focus on empowering public and private universities with a view to achieving excellence. A large number of universities will have to cater to the growing demands and aspirations of Indian youth to be educated and, in that process, employed. However, the regulatory bodies have a critical responsibility to identify a select group of public and private universities to empower them to achieve global research

These objectives should go hand in hand; there is no need to trump one over the other. There is a need to promote non-profit private university education; philanthropy of private individuals and corporate philanthropy have to be encouraged. The question of accountability is relevant both for public and private Indian universities.

Not one Indian university figures today as one of the top 200 in any of the major rankings of universities in the world. In fact, the debate relating to global rankings of universities in India has matured into a constructive dialogue initiated by the UGC, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the Government of India and the Planning Commission. Serious, transparent and candid discussions are being held about rankings and how to improve the quality of universities. There cannot be a better occasion than the 60th year of the UGC for it to work towards a specific set of targeted goals in a time-bound manner that will bring some Indian universities to the top 200 list.

It is worth examining the achievements in establishing and developing universities of global excellence in Asian countries, particularly in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. This will reveal that an extraordinary impetus to seek the transformation of universities has been undertaken in the last two decades for universities in Asia to be among the top 200. India will do well to draw inspiration from some of these experiences from Asian neighbours.

The heart of university education is research and knowledge-creation. But teaching informs research and research contributes to better teaching. India needs a lot more colleges, particularly undergraduate institutions that will fulfil the dreams and aspirations of young India.

India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is a matter of concern and the demographic dividend we hope to achieve will be possible only if we provide opportunities for quality education to young people. The regulatory framework ought to make an important distinction between the role of colleges in promoting access to higher education on the one hand and the larger focus of universities in India, which should be to create knowledge and promote research and scholarship leading to publications.

One of the reasons for Indian universities not figuring among the top 200 is that since Independence our focus on expanding the higher education sector to provide access has led to a situation where research and scholarship have been neglected. We need to strike a balance.

Over 60 per cent of the criteria used to assess the quality of universities are based on research, publications and citations. We can make amends for this by recognising that different universities are situated to achieve different sets of important educational goals and objectives. Not all universities need to be research-oriented. Nowhere in the world is that the case. A systematic, coherent, and transparent approach is needed to determine the suitability of universities to pursue objectives of excellence.

THE WAY FORWARD

If we accept the proposed theory of regulation, there should be a greater focus on the establishment of universities and the need to maintain higher standards and sharper scrutiny at the time of establishment.

Gradually, the scrutiny of universities before starting programmes or schools should come down, as they are expected to assume greater responsibility in having self-regulating mechanisms and internal quality assurance systems. The role of regulators should change, as the purpose after the establishment of the universities would be to empower and enable them to perform better. But for this to be effective, tools of assessment that are credible and internationally benchmarked should be developed.

The vision, nature, and scope of regulation of universities will determine the ability of higher education institutions to fulfil their goals of academic excellence and research achievements with a view to helping India establish a knowledge society.

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