UGC proposal: Why India should not outsource higher education to foreign universities

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The vision of India becoming a Vishwaguru cannot be achieved by outsourcing Indian higher education to international universities.

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The 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) was a pathbreaking moment in the annals of Indian higher education. The policy envisions "a complete overhaul and re-energising of the higher education system…" and says "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". Regulatory bodies have been advancing new policy initiatives to realise this vision. The just announced University Grants Commission (Setting up and Operation of Campuses of Foreign Higher Educational Institutions in India) Regulations, 2023, have re-ignited debates on the internationalisation of Indian higher education.

Over the last three decades, three major factors have influenced the internationalisation of higher education. First, the prohibitive costs of higher education, especially in developed countries. Indian students must pay approximately Rs 70 lakh per annum to study at Harvard, Yale or Stanford and over Rs 55 lakh per annum to study at Oxford or Cambridge. Tuition fees alone would be about 15 times more expensive than Indian private universities and over a hundred times more costly than most Indian public universities. Prohibitive costs will preclude education in any foreign university campus for most aspirants. The new proposal vitiates the NEP's vision of equity and inclusion as it envisages higher education only for the super-rich.

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Second, the establishment costs of top university campuses make the project unviable. The vision of uniform academic standards in both the parent university and its international campus is a noble aspiration. However, the reality is international campuses have become a second-rate option, primarily accessible to those unable to get admission to the main campus. The quality and excellence in teaching and research on overseas campuses cannot match those in their primary location.

Third, the landscape of global higher education has dramatically changed post-Covid. The idea of brick-and-mortar international campuses has given way to building solid partnerships, student and faculty mobility, exchange and immersion programmes, joint teaching and research opportunities, collaborative conferences and publications and the development of online and blended degree programmes. The global thinking around international collaborations has changed.

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India has an extraordinary opportunity to be an aspiring nation for students worldwide. Instead of enabling the creation of international campuses of universities from developed countries, we need to focus on becoming a global higher education destination in our own right. We will not realise the Vishwaguru aspiration by inviting prestigious foreign universities to locate campuses. We must assume the leadership role we had over 2,000 years ago when Nalanda, Takshashila, Vallabhi and Vikramshila attracted faculty and students from around the world. We can be truly global leaders in providing high-quality education at an affordable cost. Likewise, we can produce high-quality research at a relatively lower cost. Indian scientists made a successful mission to Mars with a modest budget of $74 million, less than the production cost of $108 million for Gravity, a Hollywood film.

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We need to do five things to become a global leader in international education:

One, provide greater autonomy to Indian universities, including the Institutions of Eminence (IoE). Indian universities, both public and private, are generally highly regulated and poorly governed. The ingrained institutional habit of regulatory bodies instructing universities on what they should be doing must stop. One of the more liberal, progressive, and even radical public policy initiatives has been the creation of IoE. But this policy has not been adequately implemented to achieve its objectives. The government must pay greater attention to the IoEs and expand their scope and scale so that they become natural destinations for international students.

Two, establish global universities in India led by the public and the private sector to cater to the needs and aspirations of international students. India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is lopsided. The national GER is approximately 22 per cent but there are states, such as Tamil Nadu, with a GER of 52 per cent. We must build more public and private universities across the country, with greater autonomy, resources and better governance structures, minimising the role of the regulatory bodies. All states must create Special Education Zones (SEZs) and host universities that are global in their orientation and outlook.

Three, provide more resources to Indian universities and not focus only on select centrally established institutions. Indian universities face acute resource scarcity. The NEP has envisaged a six per cent annual investment in higher education and a National Research Foundation to allocate additional resources. Government must encourage CSR and philanthropic initiatives with more tax incentives to enable private sector contributions to public and private universities.

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Four, the NEP envisages breaking the long-standing barriers between public and private institutions. But many biases and prejudices persist, and regulatory obstacles have not allowed private higher education institutions to function autonomously and independently on equal terms with public institutions. An institutionalised hierarchy in the Indian higher education system replicates the caste system. First, the IITs and the IIMs are placed high in the pecking order, followed by the central universities. Next come the IISERs, NITs, and other such institutions, and much lower down are the state public universities. It is only after exhausting every other type of publicly-funded institution that private universities come into the reckoning. These deep-rooted biases and prejudice have fostered discrimination against private universities.

Five, establish a liberal and progressive regulatory ecosystem for Indian universities to attract international students. Much more than reforms in the education sector will be needed if India is to become a sought-after international destination for students from developing countries. Government must reform its visa processes and the FRRO registration procedures. There must be a significant improvement in the quality of infrastructure and hostels on university campuses. The safety, security and well-being of the students, especially women, must be ensured. Other forms of university towns and education cities can create a comprehensive ecosystem that will enable students and faculty to study, work and live in these communities.

The vision of India becoming a Vishwaguru cannot be achieved by outsourcing Indian higher education to international universities. In any case, I do not think any top-ranked universities would set up campuses in India, and for good reasons.

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