

What afflicts India's higher education regulatory bodies

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Inefficiency and corruption in India's higher education regulatory authorities can harm academic and intellectual capital.



The quality of higher education in India, rather than improving to best global standards, may be adversely affected by ongoing issues : Photo by Omar Flores on Unsplash/Unsplash licence

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Two Indian higher education regulatory authorities – one that maintains standards of teaching, research and university examinations and the other that assesses and accredits universities – are in a mess.

While the University Grants Commission (UGC) recently passed a resolution empowering universities to appoint individuals who do not hold doctorate degrees as vice-chancellors of universities, seven National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) officials, including a professor from the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University, were arrested this month for allegedly taking huge bribes to grant accreditation to dubious educational institutions.

The political opposition lost no time in attacking the UGC and the government, claiming that the apex body's draft resolution on appointment of vice-chancellors and college teachers was an attempt to recruit people with doubtful educational provenance and those who adhere to the right-wing ideology to ultimately push "one history, one tradition, one language".

On February 5, ministers for higher education from seven states – Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, Himachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu – bandwagoned to oppose, among other things, the UGC's rules and a new grading system for universities based on the 2020 New Education Policy.

The state ministers passed a 15-point resolution that essentially were point-by-point objections to the UGC regulations that aim to replace the 2018 rules which set strict adherence to norms for appointment as professors, associate professors and assistant professors.

The controversies surrounding the UGC and the NAAC reflect a crisis in India's higher education sector that is marked by bureaucratic inefficiencies, ineffective frameworks and allegations of corruption. This has sparked debates about their effectiveness, jeopardising the quality and global standing of India's higher education.

Flawed regulations?

The UGC draft regulations on minimum qualifications for appointment and promotion of teachers and academic staff in universities and colleges claim to broaden the eligibility criteria for vice-chancellors and teachers. These are supposedly inclusive as they recognise "professional achievements, diverse careers backgrounds and non-traditional academic pathways".

But what caused an uproar is the draft UGC regulations' non-inclusion of the state government's role in the appointment of vice-chancellors of public universities founded under State Acts, which infringes on states' rights in a federal system.

The UGC has been rightly criticised for disregarding essential PhD requirements in faculty recruitment, which could result in a decline in the quality of higher education. By diluting the PhD requirement, the UGC risks lowering the academic rigour and research quality in universities. This, in turn, affects faculty appointments and the overall learning environment, potentially leading to a decline in teaching standards.

More critical is the provision relating to the post of vice-chancellor, which could be from outside academics. According to the rules, S/he could be from a “senior level in industry, public administration, public policy and/or public sector undertakings”. This implies that even a person who does not hold a PhD may be considered for appointment as vice-chancellor. A section of academia is alarmed over the “dilution of qualifications” for the vice-chancellor’s post.

Besides, the chancellor – the governor of a state in the case of State universities – “shall appoint” the vice-chancellor from a panel of names recommended by the search-cum-selection committee. This gives disproportionate authority in the form of veto power to the governor and goes against the principle and spirit of “institutional autonomy”.

While proposing amendments to faculty recruitment, the draft regulations now allow applicants holding postgraduate degrees in Master of Engineering or Master of Technology (MTech), with at least 55 percent aggregate marks, to apply for assistant professor roles without qualifying for the UGC National Eligibility Test (NET).

Even more intriguing is that something as vague as “teaching-learning and research in Indian Knowledge System” has been recognised by the UGC as a “notable contribution” that the section committee for recruitment and promotion of university and college teachers needs to consider. The risk here lies in recruiting applicants from questionable streams such as astrology and other streams that are not strictly in the realm of established scholarship.

Threat to teaching fraternity

These issues pose a significant threat to the teaching fraternity and the future of higher education in India.

The NAAC scandal further exacerbates the crisis, undermining trust in the accreditation process, which serves as a benchmark for educational excellence. NAAC was set up in 1994 under the UGC whose chairperson heads the former’s governing council. This enables “students and other stakeholders to make informed choices.”

However, NAAC’s accreditation process has faced criticism for subjectivity and inconsistency, with institutions falsifying data to secure higher ratings. Many Indian universities also remain unaccredited, reflecting systemic bottlenecks and bureaucratic hurdles.

This poor oversight and compromised accreditation process dilutes academic standards, adversely affecting academic institutions to the extent that their graduates may be ill-suited to face global competition. If the credibility of accreditation is compromised,

universities may struggle to secure research funding, collaborations and international recognition, which could hinder international mobility for faculty and students.

Besides, inadequate funding and ineffective regulations may adversely impact research output and stymie India's transition to a knowledge-driven economy.

Beyond governance concerns, these developments significantly threaten India's teaching community and the overall higher education ecosystem. Disparities in resources and quality may drive students to pursue education in foreign universities, exacerbating the existing socioeconomic divide between the affluent and the impoverished sections of India.

A weak regulatory framework prioritising bureaucratic control over academic excellence could deter talented educators from pursuing academic careers. This, in turn, could affect the motivation of students and impact India's long-term aspirations of becoming a global knowledge hub.

Any dilution of standards or regulatory inefficiencies can have long-term repercussions on India's academic and intellectual capital.

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