

Regulatory Concerns

Professional education has been attracting considerable regulatory concern for over a decade now. With monotonous regularity the issue of students' fees in medical colleges and technical courses has come up for contentious debate every year. It is instructive to look at the dimensions of that debate. Interestingly, while the matter of ensuring equal access to students of all economic levels has been an issue, much less attention was directed at revising and updating course curricula. Primarily, the state's intervention has been sought to regulate the fee of private institutions that do not receive any government aid. What emerge from the welter of arguments on the issue are: that access to these well equipped colleges should become affordable to a larger number of students; two, there should be some uniformity in the selection process; and three, higher fee-charging institutions must ensure good quality training and not be only money-making businesses. Subsidies, the cost of equipping technical and medical education facilities, the shortage of good teachers and numerous other related issues have also received wide attention.

It is also important to acknowledge the context in which these issues were thrown up: a growing demand at all levels of the economy for trained manpower, whether in medicine or technology. It should not then be surprising that more recently, professional education of another kind has come up for scrutiny by the state, albeit in somewhat acquisitive terms. The ministerial decree reducing the fee to be paid by students for postgraduate courses in the Indian Institutes of Management by 80 per cent must be regarded as all of a piece with the state's increasing concern over the quality and reach of professional education. What must be debated then are the content and direction of the state's interventions; its financial implications; and its consequences for the quality of the out-turn of management professionals.

Take for instance, the argument put forward that lowering the fees makes management more affordable. For one, as the management institutes have pointed out students have not been turned away on the affordability issue. But then, would a student, knowing the fee requirement, even apply for such a course? Even more importantly, how many of those who, say, enter degree colleges can afford to even aspire for an expensive education? It is true that admission to these courses makes a student sufficiently 'creditworthy' for bank loans. But here too, not all can afford to designate a large proportion of future earnings for repayments.

Significantly there are 953 institutes of management, many privately run, charging higher fees than the IIMs.

Who will make up the loss of fees? Can the management institutes, which have established world class facilities to produce professionals of a high standard, afford to cut costs to manage with lower fee payments? If not, what will it cost the government in terms of subsidies? Even as it is, management education at the state-supported Indian Institutes of Management is heavily subsidised. The additional burden will make these institutions more dependent on state subsidies or will eat into their hard-earned corpus funds. It will undoubtedly lead, over a period of time, to a neglect of research. Is this an effective and efficient way of funding higher education? And in any case how will it come about given that the central government's expenditure per student in higher education has actually decreased over the years? Government support for IIMs in 2004-05 has shrunk from Rs 59.73 crore to Rs 45 crore even though the budget estimate for 2003-04 provided for Rs 75 crore. Among the alternatives reportedly suggested by the IIMs was a targeted subsidy for students who need the aid. Surely and especially given the state of banks' liquidity today, would it not have been a better option to put in place creative loan schemes and such like rather than a blanket subsidy for every student?

The entire development has also raised other worries. Significant among them is the question of state interference in the management of higher education. Should the state have the right to directly regulate and monitor professional education at all? And if it does what are the limits and contours? Should it not be left to an autonomous authority, with the participation of associated professional bodies without obstruction from the state? These already exist, but are only now being strengthened and revitalised. Any discussion on this must be against the backdrop of the fact that while professional education may have old roots in colonial history in countries like India, the emergence of a professional social layer, especially visible among the political class is fairly recent. It is important not to confuse or conflate the urgent issue of regulation and monitoring of professional education with that of critical assessment of the political agendas of the professional class. For there is the danger that further modernisation of professional education and the expansion of its access may fall by the wayside in the more immediate and understandable concern about the obtrusive state. **EPW**