

Changing Higher Education Scenario in India

NEERAJ HATEKAR

The higher education scene in the country is set to experience a dramatic change but the ability of the state universities to cope with this change is extremely doubtful. The success of the new central universities and the proposed national universities will come about at the cost of the state universities, which cater to the majority of students in the country. This article proposes that postgraduate teaching and research in state universities will have to be taken over by the central government to ensure the survival of this important part of the higher education system.

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is mooted several significant changes in higher education in the country. Even when such changes are aimed at significant improvements in the quality and reach of higher education, a serious set of problems is likely to emerge at the level of the state universities. Higher education in India is a subject on the concurrent list and state governments may not adopt the same proactive approach to changing its structure as that which has characterised the MHRD in the recent past. In fact, in the majority of cases, state governments are likely to continue their apathetic attitude and this could have adverse consequences for the state university system in their jurisdictions in the long run.

A case in point is the MHRD's proposal to set up 14 new central universities and an equal number of national universities "aimed at world class standards". The "innovation universities" are supposed to be "state of the art" universities, where teachers and students will have the best of academic and other facilities. The funding structure is likely to be very flexible, and salaries as well as funds for academic resources are unlikely to be a constraint.

A Vicious Cycle

At the same time that such an ambitious proposal is being mooted, 14 new central universities have already been established and some have also started to recruit teachers. Both these developments are likely to have a tremendous impact on the state education system in the country. In general, state governments have not been anywhere as proactive in higher education as the MHRD and the University Grants Commission (UGC) have been in the recent past. A majority of the state universities have to contend with a large number of unfilled positions, massive doses of bureaucratic and government interference, old and archaic pedagogical methods,

outdated finance procedures in securing and utilising research funding, among other substantial weaknesses. As a result of years of neglect, they are finding it extremely hard to recruit and retain high quality faculty. It is a typical vicious circle: neglected universities do not find good faculty, and in turn, cannot attract good students, which leads to further marginalisation.

The matter is now being compounded by the partial acceptance of the Sixth Pay Commission-UGC composite scheme by various state governments. Maharashtra is a case in point. A majority of the university departments in the state are heavily understaffed. The average faculty strength per department in the University of Mumbai, one of the country's oldest universities, is around four! With such a small number per department, the university is finding it impossible to run anything but the basic traditional Masters courses apart from a very sketchy PhD programme. It is rather difficult to run choice-based credit systems, semester system, continuous evaluation, innovative interdisciplinary courses, and other innovations that define modern pedagogy.

It is significant that the University of Mumbai has been recognised as a "University with Potential for Excellence" by the UGC, but the fate of its academic programmes remains uncertain. The average faculty strength in the postgraduate departments of the SNDT University is even lower at three. Many departments are single person departments. Other state universities like Shivaji University, Kolhapur, RTM Nagpur University, and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University also have an average faculty strength of 5-5.5 per department. The University of Pune does somewhat better at 7.5 teachers per department only because some of its science departments are very large. It should also be noted here that the universities cited are the older and established ones in the state and the condition of the newer ones is even worse.

Universities with such poor numbers cannot simply be expected to carry out quality research and teaching. Their poor reputation means that they do not attract quality faculty when they succeed in advertising their posts. Very often, vacancies are not filled since the state government

The views expressed here are entirely in my personal capacity.

Neeraj Hatekar (neeraj.hatekar@gmail.com) is with the Department of Economics, University of Mumbai.

does not give the required permissions. Even when appointments are sought to be made, political interference either stalls the process completely, or leads to inappropriate appointments. In at least one major university in the very recent past, politicians have tried to park their favourites by demanding that the selections made by duly constituted selection committees be overturned. These universities also suffer from other pressures. The design of syllabi and the structure of the examinations also have to cater to many local level pressures, thereby compromising quality.

As matters stand, the handful of remaining quality faculty are looking to join the new central and national universities, attracted by the possibility of more rewarding research and teaching careers. The partial implementation of the UGC Sixth Pay Commission comprehensive scheme in Maharashtra has compounded problems. Now there is a wide gulf between the service conditions in central universities and the Maharashtra state universities, in spite of identical eligibility conditions and work requirements. A teacher in a central university retires at 65, whereas those in state universities retire at 60. This is leading several senior academics in state universities to contemplate a move to the central universities. There is also a substantial difference in several other allowances as well as pension and gratuity. There is a very real danger that a large number of established senior as well as young and promising teachers will move to the central and national universities. Also, the large number of existing vacancies will not attract talented teachers because of the inferior service conditions. To a very large extent, the reputation of university departments and the quality of the students that they can attract depends upon a handful of key teachers. When these teachers move, the whole system suffers in quality, setting in a vicious cycle of poor teachers-poor students-no fresh quality faculty-and so on. The entire state university system is therefore likely to wither away.

A Heavy Price

It must worry us that over the next few years, a triple layered higher education system will emerge in the country. At the top level, we will have the national

universities followed by central universities, and then, the last layer, consisting of state universities, looked upon as having the most inferior course contents and consisting of second or third rate faculty with the worst pay structure of all the three layers. In fact, a substantial amount of dynamism of the first and the second layers will come at the cost of the state university system, since good faculty and students will migrate from them into the first and the second layers, and will not be a net addition. The state universities in all likelihood will be left to wallow in their own mediocrity and petty politics by the faculty as well as the political establishment. One section of the country's higher education system will feed off the other parts of the same system. In that sense, the MHRD's aim of infusing dynamism in higher education will come at a substantial cost.

This is significant since the state university system still caters to the largest number of students in the higher education system. The ability of the proposed national universities as well as the central universities to reach out in terms of numbers is nowhere near that of the state university system which caters to an overwhelmingly large proportion of students.. Indeed, it provides a cheap and convenient alternative for students to acquire higher education closer to their homes. The system of national and central universities is simply too sparse to address this demand. It is in this context that the decline of the state universities will be a massive blow to higher education in the country. Rather than simply allow them to wither away, the need of the times is to strengthen the state education system by addressing its manifest weaknesses. Unfortunately, state governments are unlikely to have the political will. In addition, substantial improvements in syllabus design as well as methodological improvements in pedagogy are being stalled by local level pressure groups. In addition, there is a plethora of state level legislation which is not always in tune with the overall changes that the MHRD proposes for higher education. However, the state universities must upgrade in sync with the central and national universities if they are not to be wiped off completely. The ability of state

governments to do this is questionable. It is imperative that as a part of the restructuring of higher education that is happening, the university system, particularly the postgraduate and research component in the state higher education system must be taken out of the hands of the state governments. They can continue to exercise authority over the degree colleges, since the impact of the new central and national universities will be felt particularly by the postgraduate and research part of university systems in the states.

Total Central Financing Needed

The centre must also take on the financing of this section in its entirety. Appropriate governance structures that will maintain uniformity while granting sufficient autonomy can be evolved for these universities. This section, once it is taken over, shall have uniform service conditions, pay packages, and governance structures across the country. The new practices of pedagogy and research can be strengthened as a matter of national policy, which is now left at the mercy of local conditions. The political interference of local governments and pressure groups can be minimised at the level of postgraduate research and teaching. If given substantial autonomy, these state universities will also be able to share courses, credits, students as well as faculty.

Genuine interdisciplinarity will become possible in course design and teaching. Admissions to these universities can be done through a rank obtained in a nationwide entrance examination. This will automatically mean that students in any given university have a national composition. A majority of state universities lack appropriate infrastructure like hostels, in spite of having requisite funds. Generally, it has been a failure of recognising the need more than lack of funds. Such policy lapses can be taken care of by having a national policy. In general, there will be substantial quality improvement, which will reach student numbers several multiples of what the proposed central universities and national universities can on their own service. However, very few of these possibilities can be exploited if the state universities continue to languish with the state governments.