

## EDITORIAL

### Higher Education: Rocky Road to Reform

The reform agenda set by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is a clear sign that the time is ripe for considering a major restructuring of the education system in India. Higher education (college and university education) has long been viewed as an area where major interventions by Parliament and Government may be necessary. The process of reform has been speeded up by the extraordinary haste with dozens of new institutions have been created, the controversies over corruption in the accreditation processes, the growing pressure for creation of private institutions of higher learning, the challenges posed by the impending entry of foreign institutions and the growing realization that the best of India's institutions must compete with the best in the world. Reform is being contemplated within a framework that abounds with constraints. The demands for equity must be balanced by the imperatives of excellence. The rules of the game for public, private and foreign institutions may have to be different, but the playing field must be largely even, if public institutions are to stem the tide of decay. The strongly federal nature of our governing structures dictates that Centre-State relationships must be balanced and cooperative. Both state governments and institutions view excessive ministerial interest with suspicion; reform measures can often be mistaken for attempts to interfere with local autonomy. The heavy, and often clumsy, hand of bureaucracy can ensure that even the best of intentions are misinterpreted by institutions which jealously guard autonomy. Over the last couple of years the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) and the MHRD, using the Yashpal Committee, have produced reports that spell out the contours of a reform agenda. Regulation of the education sector has become a critical area with the rapid growth of private institutions. Higher education is now a commodity to be sold and the pressures of the marketplace build up rapidly. The manner in which institutions are accredited and permitted to award degrees has been the subject of much recent discussion. Inevitably regulatory authorities, which have served admirably for many years after their inception, crumble under modern day pressures. Corrupting existing institutions and hastening their decay has unfortunately been a characteristic of India's turbulent, and at times dramatic, growth over the last three decades. The NKC and Yashpal

Committee reports are an attempt to address the issues raised by the crumbling foundations of the higher education enterprise in India, even as the sector is poised for unprecedented growth. These reviews have resulted in the drafting of legislation that intends to provide the foundations for reform and restructuring of higher education in India.

The National Commission for Higher Education and Research Bill 2010 (NCHERB) is being introduced as 'an Act to provide for the determination, coordination, maintenance of standards in, and promotion of, higher education and research, including university education, technical and professional education other than agricultural [and medical] education'. The parentheses that envelop 'medical education' are present in the draft copy downloaded from the MHRD's website. While agriculture is clearly excluded, there remains a hint of ambiguity about medicine. Curiously enough, the revolution in biology over the last half a century has had its most profound impact on agriculture and medicine. Genomics and all that has followed from the technical advances that have taken place over the last three decades have reaffirmed what was intuitively appreciated in the 19th century; the unity of organisms, plants, animals, microbes and man, despite enormous biological diversity. The bill, as drafted, places agriculture [and medicine] on a different pedestal; undoubtedly a recognition of political realities and the zealousness with which ministerial turf is guarded in Delhi, rather than the more esoteric grounds of academic unity. In an Act on 'education' the words 'technical and professional' in the opening paragraph strike a jarring note. Is science non-technical and unprofessional? Is the study of archaeology, history or literature also similarly labelled by implication? Is economics to be consigned to the backwaters of higher education by using the words 'technical and professional' to describe engineering, pharmaceutical science (clearly a misunderstood discipline in India in modern times) and possibly other subjects like veterinary science? It is time that the word 'education' is used and understood in its broadest sense. The distinctions in educating students (and teachers) in different disciplines need to be blurred and indeed removed. In a sense the draft Act seems to suggest that this may happen when it states that its purposes will be

achieved by establishing the 'National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER)'. Three broad areas may be excluded from the ambit of the proposed Commission; agriculture, medicine and law. This is a clear tribute to the power and influence of ministries and councils which control these areas. The curricula and requirements for degrees in these disciplines will lie outside the scope of the Commission to examine. Institutions in these areas will continue to operate as they have always done. Undoubtedly, government appears to have come to the conclusion that all is well with institutions in these areas and it is only science, engineering, humanities and social sciences which require the guiding leash of new legislation to walk along the road to reform.

The Act aims 'to further promote the autonomy of higher educational institutions for the free pursuit of knowledge and innovation, and for facilitating access, inclusion and opportunities to all, and providing for comprehensive and holistic growth of higher education and research in a competitive global environment through reform and renovation; and to provide for an advisory mechanism of eminent peers in academia'. Opening paragraphs of the Act unveil two new bodies; the National Commission and the body of 'eminent peers'. It is in Chapter III that the 'collegium' is unveiled as a body 'consisting of core Fellows and co-opted Fellows, being persons of eminence and integrity in academia in higher education and research'. The collegium will advise and 'recommend to the Commission a vision on the emerging trends in different fields of knowledge'. It will draw up panels of three persons for each position in the National Commission. It will 'recommend for inclusion in the National Registry' names of 'persons eligible and qualified to be appointed as Vice-Chancellor of a university or the head of an institution of national importance'. In the last few years the procedures for appointing institutional heads has degenerated to a level where any person of real or perceived 'eminence' is unlikely to be comfortable advancing a candidature. The 'national registry' seems both undignified and impractical. Surely, well intentioned 'search committees' carefully appointed by the National Commission will serve the purpose. The collegium is an interesting body. Core Fellows are restricted to those who are National Professors, recipients of the Nobel Prize or Fields Medal or Jnanpith award or members of 'an Academy of international standing'. The 'core' then coopts other Fellows. The premise that recipients of high international honours will commit themselves to the cause of reforming and uplifting Indian higher education is debatable. Any high level advisory or executive body must be filled with persons of integrity and commitment to the specific cause, backed by significant professional attainment. Government cannot disown the job of making judgements. The statement of intent in forming a collegium composed of a 'core', restricted by these para-

meters, reflects a sense of insecurity and a lack of confidence in the vast, chaotic but nevertheless resilient Indian academic system. The collegium as envisaged will consist of two groups; the high priests as the 'core' and the less accomplished as 'coopted' members. It is this body which will recommend the panel of names for the selection of the Chairman and Members of the NCHER. The selections will be made by a committee chaired by the Prime Minister and consisting of the Speaker and Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, the Minister for HRD and the Health Minister. Once constituted, the Commission will subsume the UGC, the AICTE and the National Council of Teacher Education. Interestingly, there are specific exclusions which specify that nothing in the Act 'shall be construed as restricting the power of the Bar Council of India to specify standards [of higher education] concerning practice in courts'. A similar exclusion is extended to the Council of Architecture. There is no reference in this section to the Medical Council of India.

The Act is intended to reform the regulatory process and improve the governance of institutions by influencing the manner by which institutional heads are chosen. The process of curricular reform and the raising of teaching and research standards across the vast network of institutions will require more than legislation and resources. It will need a broad movement that stirs the faculty in our institutions to collectively appreciate the need for change. The IITs, which we prize today, were the subject of a review in the mid 1980s. This was a troubled time; the 1970s were difficult years which affected many institutions. In a perceptive and thoughtful analysis, Rohit Manchanda notes that P. K. Kelkar, the founder of two IITs at Mumbai and Kanpur, felt that 'senior faculty had allowed themselves to slide into a trough of lassitude'. He quotes a letter to the IIT Review Committee in which Kelkar argued that most senior members of the faculty 'have a tired outlook and have very little enthusiasm for change or new ideas or an inner drive for achievement'. Manchanda notes: 'Perhaps more damningly, he believed them to have been estranged from their very métier, the call of the intellect' (*Curr. Sci.*, 2010, **98**, 570). Many of our public institutions today, once vibrant universities amongst them, may well be described in the words that Kelkar used quarter of a century ago. A reform agenda will require a groundswell of support from faculty, students, staff and the public. Laws and their implementation by the bureaucracy of government and interpretations by the judiciary can sometimes derail even the best intentions for reform. Undoubtedly, the new Act will be refined by constructive debate and discussion. When passed, the new legislation will launch the sector of higher education on the rocky and difficult road to reform.

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