

Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari with Vandita Mishra, National Opinion Editor, The Indian Express, at the Express Adda in Mumbai, Friday. Amit Chakravarty



Allow foreign varsity campuses: Niti Aayog

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BRIGHTENING CHANCES of a UPA-era proposal that was once opposed by the BJP, the NITI Aayog has submitted a report to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD) in favour of inviting foreign universities to set up campuses in India.

NITI Aayog has suggested

three routes to permit entry of foreign education providers: a new law to regulate the operation of such universities in the country; an amendment to the UGC Act of 1956 and deemed university regulations to let them in as deemed universities; and, facilitating their entry by tweaking UGC and AICTE regulations on twinning arrangements between Indian and foreign institutions to permit joint ventures.

THE THREE ROUTES

- Bring new law to regulate operation of such universities
- Amend rules to grant them deemed university status
- Tweak regulations on twinning arrangements

The report has justified NITI Aayog's support for the proposal on the ground that foreign universities will help meet the demand for higher education in the country, increase competition and subsequently improve standards of higher education.

"India stands to gain from setting up of foreign universities in terms of availability of resources both human and financial, state-of-the-art teaching

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Let foreign universities set up India campuses: Niti Aayog

methodology, research and innovation... Capital expenditure in the cost of setting up an institution is high and land and buildings are also a major issue. Entry of foreign universities and leveraging FDI will offset some of these costs," the report states.

Last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked NITI Aayog to study all reports regarding setting up of foreign universities and the reasons on why it could not move forward. He had even called a meeting of senior bureaucrats in June 2015 to discuss the feasibility of encouraging top foreign education providers.

This issue is also one of the discussion points for the new education policy which

will be unveiled this year. The proposal, incidentally, was backed by ten state governments including Haryana, Maharashtra, Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir where the BJP is in power.

Governments in the past have made several attempts to enact legislation for entry, operation and regulation of foreign universities in the country. The first was in 1995 when a Bill was introduced but could not go forward. In 2005-06 too, the draft law could not go beyond the Cabinet stage. The last attempt was by UPA-II in 2010 in the shape of the Foreign Educational Institutions Bill, which failed to pass muster in Parliament and lapsed in 2014 since it was opposed by the BJP, Left and

Samajwadi Party.

One of the reservations on foreign universities operating in India was that they would raise the cost of education, rendering it out of reach for a large part of the population. On this, the NITI Aayog has said "financial assistance in the form of loans and scholarships should be made available to deserving students irrespective of their ability to pay based on merit-cum-means".

There are currently 651 foreign education providers in India which have either entered into collaborative twinning programmes, share faculty with partnering institutions and offering distance education.