

Focus on liberalization of higher education

POLICY Higher education in India has been witnessing a gradual transformation

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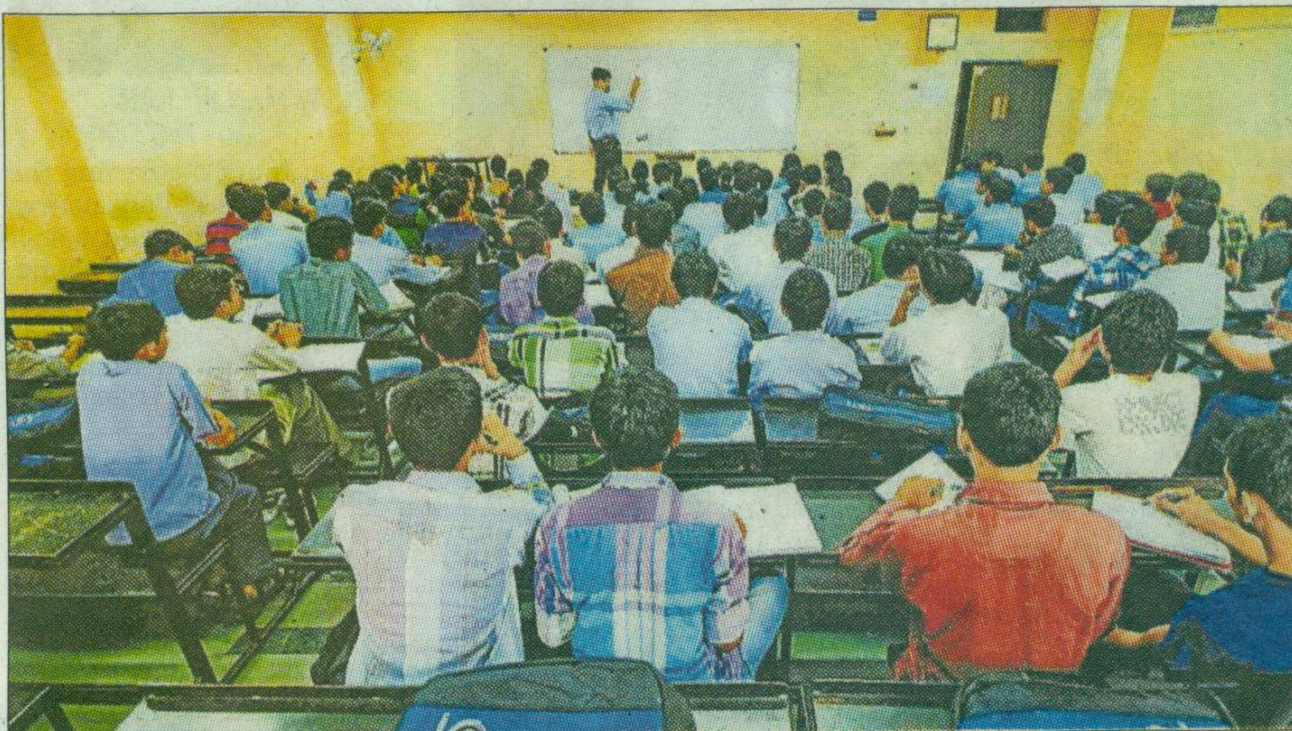
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NEW DELHI: The long promised new education policy is still in the pipeline, but the Union government seems to have taken up a new task — liberalization of higher education.

Over the past few months, the Indian higher education sector has been witnessing a gradual transformation from a restrictive regime to a liberalized one in all three key aspects: finance, academic and administrative.

“Higher education liberalization is a requirement and the government is taking steps to achieve it. You will see key regulatory bodies like the University Grants Commission and All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) getting reformed for better management of higher education,” said a top official of the human resource development ministry. “From legislative measures to executive orders, the ministry is now busy reducing the restrictive regime in the sector. In the next six months, you will see some more initiatives,” he said.

What he was referring to is a series of initiatives the ministry has already initiated over the past few months. It enacted the IIM Act, allowing Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) to become virtually free of government control. It has brought in a set of guidelines for autonomous colleges allowing them freedom to prescribe courses, become more industry linked and start self-financing courses to become financially sustainable. Besides, it has put in place a non-banking financial corporation to aid infra



■ Higher education liberalization is a requirement at the moment

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growth of educational institutions on a borrow and pay concept — a move that will reduce the financial burden on the government and make institutions accountable for their own infra and research growth. In March, the Union government for the first time provided graded autonomy to 62 universities and colleges both in private and public space to operate with relatively less interference from the education regulators. HRD minister Prakash Javadekar called this a “liberalized regulatory regime” and said on the sidelines of an event recently that the Indian higher education sector often complains about restrictive rules but now the government is making a conscious effort to liberalize it. “Of late, there seems to an intention of liberalizing the sector. Autonomy

and liberalization are a necessity for the higher education section to thrive. The moment you allow freedom and competition, the best will survive and others will strive to improve quality as it will be a requirement for survival,” said Harivansh Chaturvedi, director of the Birla Institute of Management and Technology in Greater Noida. Chaturvedi, who is also the alternate president of the Education Promotion Society for India, a confederation of private education providers, said technical education colleges under AICTE should also be granted autonomy based on their rankings and accreditation scores.

While some of the recent moves are important, a new education policy is almost paramount and the government should bring that in to give

direction to the education sector, Chaturvedi said. Of all the steps the government has taken, the establishment of a higher education financing agency and its expansion in the past couple of months is perhaps the most under-rated but far reaching, said the official cited above.

The government has already sanctioned loans worth over Rs2,500 crore to nearly a dozen top schools. “While individual sub-sectoral moves like autonomy for IIMs, graded autonomy for a group of colleges and universities have their merits, the financing agency will perhaps reduce government spending by Rs10,000 crore per year, and push top higher educational institutions to become more accountable and financially prudent,” said the official.