

## Shelving education reform

An education sector in crisis can't survive if this is done

**G**IVEN HOW BADLY India needs to recast its higher education regulation, the announcement that the government planned to scrap/merge the University Grants Commission (UGC) and All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) to bring in the Higher Education Empowerment and Regulation Agency (HEERA) had been greeted with much cheer. However, the government seems to have had a rethink in the matter, with junior HRD minister, Mahendra Nath Pandey, telling the Rajya Sabha that no proposal to "merge" UGC and AICTE was being considered at present. The government also appears to have shelved its plan to allow foreign universities—unnamed HRD officials quoted in media reports last week seem to suggest that the focus will be on developing world-class institutions in India to attract foreign students and faculty.

Despite the many decades since their creation, both UGC and AICTE have failed to create an ecosystem of high-quality higher education though there are some universities/institutions perceived to be of global standards. At the same time, UGC, which is also tasked with disbursal of grants to universities and institutions, has seen its financial heft grow—in 2015-16, it decided on the disbursal of over Rs 10,000 crore. With many government-run universities and certain deemed universities dependent on UGC grants, an inspector raj has flourished. The regulator has also impeded institutional autonomy at even top-notch universities—it allowed a four-year undergraduate programme at Delhi University before unilaterally scrapping it after a year. AICTE, on the other hand, has presided over the mushrooming of technical institutions without any grip on ensuring quality—a 2016 survey of some 150,000 engineering graduates (who graduated in 2013) found that only 7% of them could handle core engineering tasks.

HEERA was expected to bring regulation of both technical and general higher education under one umbrella, with a focus on ensuring quality of education with greater autonomy for top-rated colleges, universities. Funding was to be hived off from regulation and vested with the proposed Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA). With the HEERA proposal in abeyance, the old regulatory structure with all its flaws is likely to continue, unless the government chooses to incrementally reform the structure. As far as allowing foreign universities is concerned, if reputed foreign universities and institutions would have set up shop here, that could have meant some savings of forex outgo given some of the 300,000 Indians who seek a foreign-university degree annually could have enrolled at campuses here. To be sure, it is not certain if foreign universities, and especially the top-notch ones, would have been interested in setting up campuses here. But it isn't also clear why the government thinks its "institutes of eminence" proposal is a substitute for having foreign universities, and not complementary to the effort.