

Higher learnings

Global indices suggest Indian academia is deteriorating

Two sets of global indices recently yielded uncomfortable truths about India's premier institutes of higher learning and they come at a time when competitors in Asia — China and Singapore principally — are rising steadily up the rankings. First, in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings for 2018, no Indian institute made it to the top 200, and several dropped out of their ranking bands of the year before. Thus, our top-ranked university, the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, dropped out of the 201-250 group and landed in the 251-300 group. Likewise, IIT Madras and IIT Delhi have dropped down at least one ranking band. As if to underscore this poor performance came the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Graduate Employability Rankings for 2018 showing sharp drops by four out of eight institutes and only two — IIT Bombay and IIT Delhi — figuring in the top 200. The results of both indices paint a disappointing picture of a sub-par higher education system that is churning out graduates whose capabilities are out of sync with the requirement of employers.

These facts, however, do not come as a shock. Last year, a survey by Aspiring Minds revealed that 80 per cent of the more than 100,000 engineering students that graduate in India each year are unemployable. India has lived with this skewed reality for some decades now. When, however, the premier, cosseted IITs show dramatic deterioration in employability, it is clear that higher education is suffering a systemic crisis. How can this be fixed? In India, the solution of choice has been to rely on private universities to take up the slack and, otherwise, to expand the IIT/IIM franchise. The proliferation of fake degrees and universities — of the 31,000-plus higher education institutions in India, only 4,532 universities and colleges are accredited — shows that the first solution is not without its own set of pitfalls. And expanding the IIT/IIM brand does not address the needs of the huge numbers of school-leavers that enter the higher education system each year.

The higher education ecosystems in China and Singapore provide some clues. Principally, they rely on autonomy coupled with strict regulation and, more importantly, work constructively to attract top-notch foreign academics, including in the humanities, despite the fact that both countries are ruled by authoritarian regimes. Most of the world's leading institutes in engineering, management and even humanities have tie-ups with local institutes, offering young school-leavers exposure to best-in-class academic content and research capabilities. The high number of patents filed by Chinese entrepreneurs is testimony to this, as is the emergence of the National University of Singapore as a go-to institution for academics around the world.

To be fair, all regimes have understood this need but the conditions attached to setting up a university with foreign collaboration are daunting enough to discourage all but an intrepid few. The reality includes following not-for-profit strictures, bringing in a minimum investment, following niggling local regulations, and endemic political interference in appointments, syllabi and student politics. At both the Centre and states, governments urgently need to learn the ability to play the role of facilitator rather than interloper in higher academics so that India can truly convert its demographics into rich dividends.