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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, TUESDAY, MAY 2, 2017

THE IDEAS PAGE

Higher education, low regulation

Regulators were meant to promote excellence in institutions. They didn't



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THE UNIVERSITY GRANTS Commission (UGC) notification, that higher educational institutions once selected for being developed into world-class universities, shall be freed of regulatory clutches, is a public admission that regulation is a major stumbling block in promoting excellence in education. The idea is further reinforced by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) moving to significantly reduce its involvement in the constitution of the IIM board and the selection and appointment of their chairperson and directors.

Disquieting as these may sound in view of the long-held belief that higher education is too important to be left to the vagaries of market forces, and that regulations are supposed to set norms and standards to ensure quality and promote excellence, the harsh realities on the ground leave one with no option but to concur with this approach.

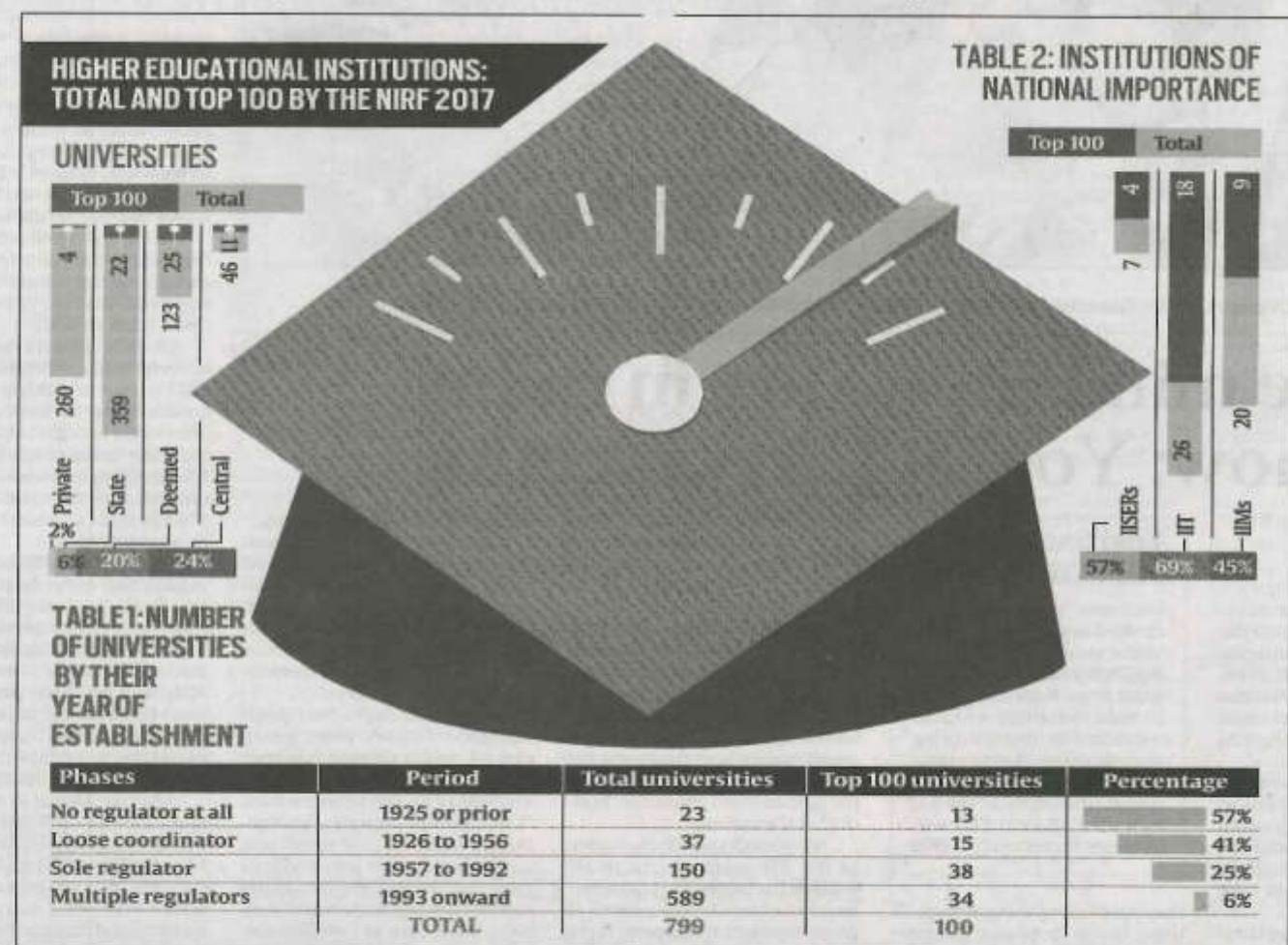
Time bears this out. The first three universities in modern India were established in 1857, whereas the first regulator of higher education, the UGC, came about only in 1956, though a loose coordination mechanism, the Inter University Board (IUB), a precursor to the present Association of Indian Universities (AIU), had come into existence in 1925. Thus, in the first phase spanning over seven decades, higher education in India grew on its own, in a self-regulatory environment. This period saw the establishment of 23 universities, all of these regarded as better institutions, so much so that 13 of them (or 57 per cent) are listed in the top 100 universities in the MHRD-led National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) listing.

The second phase that commenced with the formation of the IUB lasted for three decades, during which universities continued to function as autonomous bodies, with a loose coordination and consultation mechanism to guide them. During this period, 37 universities were established in the country — of which as many as 15 (41 per cent) are today ranked in the NIRF list of the top 100.

The third phase began with Parliament enacting a law to establish the University Grants Commission (UGC) as an autonomous body, to aid and advise the government on higher education policy and financing, and to coordinate and maintain standards in higher education. Armed with statutory powers to prescribe standards, the UGC, as a sole regulator, went on to become the final word on all aspects of university life; it used its financing function as a mighty lever to curtail the powers of universities to take their own decisions.

During this 36 year-period, the number of universities grew rapidly to 150 — but only a fourth of them today find place in the NIRF list of the top 100 universities.

The current and fourth phase began in 1992, with the establishment of a series of new regulators like the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), etc., and with



the empowerment of existing professional bodies like the Medical Council of India (MCI), the Council of Architecture (CoA), the Bar Council of India (BCI), etc., to regulate higher education falling under their professional domains. The phase is characterised by an intense regulation of higher education by multiple regulators. This period also witnessed galloping growth in public and private universities; 589 universities have been established since 1992 — a mere 6 per cent were good enough to find a place in the top 100 list.

Sadly, the elaborate regulatory paraphernalia working overtime to set standards in higher education, and to inspect in order to ensure adherence by higher educational institutions, has only proven counter-productive. It has not only manifestly failed to promote excellence, it has even failed to check the rapid and unabated growth of a large number of grossly unequipped, mediocre higher educational institutions.

Obviously, the absence of regulators did not necessarily destroy the universities, but most importantly, too close a monitoring and micro-management system by one or many regulators has not necessarily helped universities improve their performance.

Lest the above conclusion is challenged on the ground that the older an institution gets, the better endowed it becomes in terms of funds, facilities and faculty, and hence, it is age, not regulation, that matters, two more

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bits of evidence become eminent. The first one, as presented in Table 2, speaks for itself. The fact that a significantly larger proportion of the IIMs (45 per cent), IITs (69 per cent) and IISERs (57 per cent) find place in the top 100 list, as compared to the ridiculously low proportion in the case of Central (24 per cent), Deemed (20 per cent), State (6 per cent) and Private (2 per cent) universities, clearly proves that institutions outside the purview of prominent regulators are, any day, better off than those under their direct command.

The second bit of evidence is all the more ubiquitous. None of the 16 central universities established in 2009 and onward find a mention in the top 100 list of universities.

In contrast, at least three of the IIMs and three of the IITs established in 2009 or after have been able to make it to the top 100 list of the overall higher educational institutions. Similarly, four of the IISERs and one NIPER established in 2006 or after have made it to the coveted list.

Such proof is more than a wake-up call for regulators in higher education, facing urgent existential challenges. While no one doubts their intentions or credibility, their approach is simply not working. The regulators need reform — and these reforms need to come from within.

The writer is secretary general of the Association of Indian Universities (AIU)