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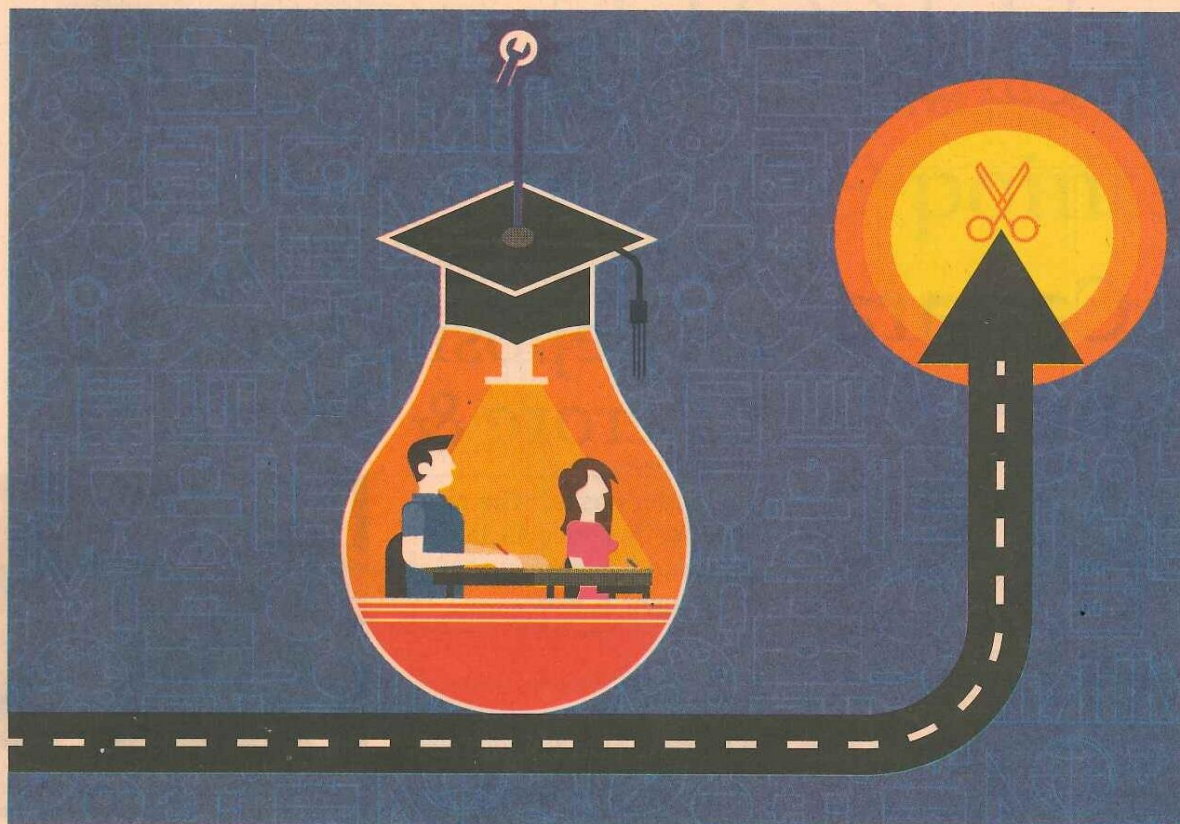


ILLUSTRATION: SHYAM

REFORMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

VIKRAM
SAHAY

Civil servant. Views are personal

The GST lesson for education

An IT-enabled registration process that also permits an automated system for offering various programmes of learning by the institutions (with a strong back end IT accreditation system) may pave way for unleashing the hitherto untapped resources that this sector possesses

THE INTRODUCTION OF Goods and Services Tax (GST), hailed as the mother of all tax reforms in India, underwent a process of prolonged discussion and consultation, spanning almost two decades, culminating in the enactment of the Constitutional 101st Amendment Act of 2016, thus paving the way for GST from July 1, 2017. It subsumed within itself five central Taxes, six state taxes, ratification by majority of the state legislative assemblies, thousands of tax administrators and officials working in the indirect tax administrative structures of the central government and the state governments. This 'one nation one tax' is intended to bring benefits to business, to governments and to consumers in manner and scale of unprecedented magnitude. These apart, the

transparency of transactions which the GST entails is expected to unleash a cleansing of the economy, increase direct tax collection, improve customer satisfaction, and according to some experts, may lead to an increase in the gross domestic product by 1-2 percentage points.

Are there learnings from GST for the higher education sector? Just as a plethora of indirect taxes of varying rates and structures on multiple points and destinations were levied concurrently by both the Centre and the states in the pre-GST days, the higher education sector is under control of both the Centre and the states through a myriad of regulatory bodies—both statutory and non-statutory. Central universities are governed by various statutes of the central government, state universities, including private universities

and affiliated colleges, are regulated by various statutes of the state government; in fact these institutions are governed by both the central and the state governments. A typical University/institution is regulated by the University Grants Commission of India (UGC India) under the UGC Act, 1956. If it has to offer a course in MBBS, the Medical Council of India has to be approached and permission obtained. If it proposes to begin a course in Dentistry, it has to approach the Dental Council of India, established under the Dentist Act, 1948. If it intends to begin a course in pharmacy, it has to seek permission from the Pharmacy Council of India, established under the Pharmacy Act, 1948. For a programme in Homeopathy, the Central Council of Homeopathy has to be approached. For a programme in Unani/Ayurveda, the Central Council of Indian Medicine has to be approached. Permission of the Council for Architecture, established under the Architects Act, 1972, is necessary for commencing a course in architecture. If a course in teacher education (B.Ed, M.Ed, etc.) is intended, permission has to be obtained from the National Council for Teacher Education established under the National Council for Teacher Education Act, 1993. For any course in technical education (B.Tech, MBA, etc.), the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) is the concerned regulatory body. For a programme in legal education (LLB, etc.), the Bar Council of India is to be approached. Again if an institution intends to commence a degree program in distance education, permission has to be obtained from UGC, which in 2012 replaced Distance Education Council (DEC) as the regulator for offering programs in distance education. It's difficult to believe that a Central university cannot establish a department or increase its faculty strength without the permission of the UGC. To add to these are the various regulations/statutes of the state governments.

It becomes amply clear that over time, the higher education sector has become increasingly regulated and segmented, and the very concept of autonomy of a University is under threat. Prime minister Narendra Modi at the Indian Science Congress in January, 2015 gave a call for giving more autonomy and academic freedom to universities. The creation of multiple regulatory bodies, each viewing education in silos, has led to the growth of standalone institutions, each offering a program of learning in a segmented manner, divorced from other knowledge disciplines. There is, at present, no institutional mechanism for coordination amongst the various regulatory bodies, as these are under administration control of numerous ministries/departments under the Government of India—the ministry of human resource development, the ministry of health and family welfare, the ministry of law and justice, etc, and similar line ministries/departments in the state governments. Each regulator lays down its own standards of infrastructure, instructional facilities, minimum qualifications for teachers, often without consulting other regulators, thus creating further fragmentation and division in the higher education sector, while also making mobility of academic staff sticky. From the perspective of a University/institution, which is the seat of knowledge and learning, dealing with multiple laws and regulations creates several inefficiencies—academics gets compromised as the institution is more concerned with the norms and standards that each regulation entails than the actual quality of teaching in classrooms. It is oft remarked that a college teacher is more concerned about enhancing the Academic Performance Indicators (API) score laid down by the UGC, which guarantees him/her career progression, than the outcome of classroom teaching and its impact on the learners. Denial of permission from regulators or withdrawal of recognition by a regulator leads to litigation cases, the number of which is mounting by the day in the Courts.

It is, therefore, time that we move the GST way in higher education. To begin with, a Higher Education Council be established at the apex level, with representatives drawn from the central government, all state governments, and the various regulatory bodies to draw a comprehensive roadmap—with an objective of de-regulating the higher education sector, unburdening it from multiple norms and standards laid down by multiple regulators, preparing a quality framework which encourages autonomy, innovation and academic excellence at the institution level, with a strong accreditation system, releasing energy for increasing competition, and making financing of education more liberal. If Indian higher education sector has to make a mark internationally, and give to its students and learners quality education which is at par with developed countries, it has to make a significant departure from the past in the way we govern and view the entire gamut of managing education. Autonomy—academic, administrative and financial,

has to be encouraged and a new era created where the 45 Central universities, 318 state universities, 185 private universities, 129 deemed-to-be-universities, 51 Institutes of National Importance and around 37,200 colleges, and many more to follow give to its learners quality education, increasing employability and skill development, unwound and unburdened from the shackles of a stifling regulatory environment. There is a need to develop a national level information technology network, which links all institutions of higher learning, their asset base, infrastructure facilities, teachers and student profile, research work, curriculum development, and all the soft skills so that knowledge is integrated, shared and improved upon. An IT-enabled registration process which also permits an automated system for offering various programs of learning by the institutions (with a strong back end information technology accreditation system) may pave way for unleashing the hitherto untapped resources which this sector possesses.

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