

Remove The Barriers

Follow Niti Aayog recommendations on higher education, give students a chance

The Union government has just 20 months left to redraw the higher education landscape. Wallowing in a sea of mediocrity no sector is more ripe for reform, yet the chokehold of politicians and bureaucracy has survived. An opportunity beckons with official thinktank Niti Aayog writing to finance and HRD ministries demanding amendments to laws that inhibit private investment and foreign university entry. It flagged the “not for profit” requirement for trusts/ companies running universities/ colleges, which hasn’t prevented many entities from amassing crores through underhand practices like capitation fees.



Such profiteering has incentivised the wrong sort of “educationist” to enter the sector with no commitment to quality. Conversely, curbs on tuition fee and student intake have stunted the growth of colleges into universities and universities into centres of excellence. Contrast this with a scenario where foreign universities could set up campuses freely, listed companies could invest in education, regulation was light mainly focussing on ensuring transparency in fee structures, and UGC/AICTE restricted themselves to accreditation, scholarships and grants. A consequence of today’s licence raj is that no Indian university figures prominently in global education rankings. Indians studying in the US doubled from 84,000 in 2005 to 1.65 lakh in 2015. Those are damning indictments of failure on the quality and even the quantity front.

The government is finalising norms for 20 public and private universities that can be categorised as “world class” or an “institute of eminence”. However, assigning quality through legislation or officially conferring labels cannot substitute for the hard work, creativity, functional autonomy and return on investment that would organically promote quality. Instead, new players need legislative and regulatory changes that promise minimal state intervention. Rather than 20 elite institutes, remove barriers so that many more can flourish.