

Government to rework plan on world-class universities

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NEW DELHI: The Union government has formed an inter-ministerial group to rework a cabinet proposal that aimed to establish 20 world-class universities in India.

Consequently, the proposal of the human resource development (HRD) ministry, submitted last month to the cabinet after months of deliberations, is being deferred, said two government officials on condition of anonymity.

The inter-ministerial group comprises HRD minister Prakash Javadekar, textiles minister Smriti Irani, power minister Piyush Goyal and commerce minister Nirmala Sitharaman, the officials said.

"The four ministers will now decide the fate of the world-class university plan," one of the two officials said.

The inter-ministerial group held its first meeting last week and another one is scheduled later this month, the second official added.

In February 2016, the centre announced a plan to establish 20 world-class universities in India—10 each in the private and public space. While a select group of existing public institutions will be upgraded to world-class status, both existing and upcoming private institutions can bid for the tag which has been changed from "world-class university" to "institute of eminence".

Such universities, the government feels, will help Indian higher education institutions scale the global league table at a time when very few find a place among the top 200 best universities in the world. According to the latest QS World University Rankings 2018, only three Indian schools are in the top 200.

The world-class university plan aims to provide academic and financial autonomy and end the influence of the University Grants Commission (UGC). Such public institutions will get financial support of Rs10,000 crore from the HRD ministry.

The rethink on the proposal



HRD minister Prakash Javadekar

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was prompted because of four reasons, the officials said. The first was the issue of reservations, especially for foreign students. If public institutions reserve 50% of the seats (27% for other backward classes, 15% for scheduled castes, 7% for scheduled tribes and 3% for physically handicapped candidates) as per the Constitution and then reserve 30% of the seats for foreign students, general category students candidates could get squeezed.

Second, the choice-based credit system for such universities allows students to complete a course in a shorter period than they can do now. If implemented, it could mean that a student will be able to graduate with a masters degree in a year, an option not available at present.

Third, some in the government contended that the decision to grant complete autonomy from UGC should be a considered one as a situation could arise that could warrant the intervention of a regulator.

Fourth, the proposed financial support to the 10 public institutions may prove to be insufficient to build an institution of the desired quality.

"The problem with too many interventions and groups is that it may not yield quick results, a case in point being labour reforms that are stuck for the last two years," the second official said.

An HRD ministry spokesperson said he is not aware of the development.