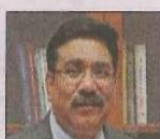


Transform Higher Education

How to restructure AICTE and change its role from strangulator to enabler of India's talent

Pritam Singh and Subir Verma



Since the time the Modi led NDA government assumed office, it has made education one of the central concerns for building a "new India". Recent announcements relating to the restructuring of regulatory bodies, autonomous accreditation board, national rating framework, testing agency and nurturance of 20 institutes of higher excellence, manifest its firm commitment to education.

The IIM Bill also revealed a transformation in governments' understanding that academic innovation and performance excellence is a direct outcome of autonomy enjoyed by educational institutions. These measures of the NDA government could not have been more needed or timely.

In this context, it is worthwhile to highlight that in the recent Global Talent Competitiveness Index (GTCI), surveyed by INSEAD and the Human Capital Institute, Singapore, India ranks 92 out of 118. The INSEAD study also identified government regulatory landscape and expenditure as significant enablers of a country's talent competitiveness.

The ranking of India on all these dimensions is symptomatic of the malaise afflicting our education sector. India ranks 94 in regulatory landscape, 107 in ICT infrastructure and 63 in formal education expenditures. This is not surprising. India's spend on education has been around 3.84% of GDP, compared to the international average of 4.4% (World Bank, 2012). In PPP per capita terms, India spends around \$2,419 on tertiary education as against US spend of \$10,888 and China's spend of \$17,851 (Unesco Institute of Statistics, 2013).

It is clear that if there has to be a transformation in the quantity and quality of talent, India needs to take some drastic measures on the above twin enablers of talent. Technical education in India is regulated by the government through the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). This bo-



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dy was set up by an Act of the Parliament in 1987 with the vision of being "a world class organisation leading technological and socio-economic development of the country by enhancing the global competitiveness of technical manpower and by ensuring high quality technical education to all sections of the society."

But beyond mere quantitative expansion, AICTE has failed to realise its objectives. GTCI unmasks this failure. It ranks India 86 in vocational and technical skills, 66 in high level skills and 66 in innovation output. AICTE in its own 2017 survey reported that 66% of the technical graduates in the country are unemployed or worse still, unemployable. AICTE cannot shirk its culpability by admitting this sad state of affairs.

A diagnosis of AICTE shows that its failure is not just strategic, but, more importantly, organisational. In the business world, great organisations have been those who were able to develop a "fit" between their external environments and the configuration of their strategy, structure, systems, management style and work culture. For a diversified organisation, the fit involves constructing a multi-divisional structure to effectively understand and respond to the strategic

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logic and performance imperatives of different operating contexts.

Structurally, AICTE represents this principle of differentiation. But it is in installing the matching integration mechanism that AICTE has totally failed. Instead of inaugurating a governance system founded on the pillars of open information sharing, widespread interaction and consultative decision making involving stakeholders, AICTE has relied on hierarchical control of operations and finance.

Centralised decision making and the search for one standard response has led to homogenisation and indifference to the variegated specificities of its multiple environments. These flaws can easily be corrected in just one stroke: make AICTE

include representatives of technical institutes and management schools in their management committee/ governing body/ advisory council. This aspect of stakeholder management is not just a good governance practice. It is a strategic necessity.

Another sound governance principle is woven around the twin themes of professionalism and continuity. This overarching need has been studiously negated by AICTE. Historically, its officers come on deputation, with no prior understanding and therefore sensitivity to the peculiarities and nuances of education. By the time meritorious officers are able to develop the much needed understanding, it is time for them to go.

The result is inadequate commitment to the vision and objectives of AICTE. This need could be easily addressed if AICTE develops a viable strategy to attract distinguished scholars and thought leaders to join in its different functions and activities.

At best AICTE has involved some members from IIMs and IITs, but scarcely have these educationists shown adequate understanding and sensitivity to the needs of the private sector. It is high time that AICTE creates a mechanism by which noted educationists and senior academics feel valued for their time and contribution.

In terms of its role, AICTE has been compliance centric - labs, land, infrastructure, curriculum, syllabus, teaching hours, etc. In this overarching preoccupation research, the most critical component in all good global ranking and accreditation, remains ignored.

Not surprisingly, the best ranked technical institute of India ranks 201st in the world. Development of impactful research, nurturance of research culture and readying academic professionals should have been the lynchpin of AICTE's strategy. Alas, in the last few years even the research grants have dwindled and almost dried up.

The need for all the above has been repeatedly brought to the notice of the AICTE. The reports and recommendations for reforms are all there - gathering dust or lost in the cupboards. The government must step in before AICTE strangulates the technical education sector beyond repair.

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