



The Curious Case of Deemed Universities

Ministry of Human Resources and Development's (MHRD) decision to de-recognise 44 deemed Indian universities, pending in the Supreme Court, has turned the spotlight on the autonomy system; especially on the three-point process adopted to establish a deemed institute in this country.

The model that an average Indian university follows—a federal structure of management with colleges being affiliated to a university, and the latter controlling the academic processes, curricula and examinations—has been discarded in almost every other part of the world. The system disregards students' feedback, as the university continues to shroud the examination process in a blanket of secrecy, appoints anonymous groups of teachers to set and examine question and answer papers. Admission criteria, tuition fee, faculty qualifications and laboratory equipment are decided by a university as well. But, the process does not entail accountability, as colleges and university indulge in a blame game for the poor state of affairs.

Deemed Dilemma

In India, a university can be established through an Act passed in the Parliament, or in the State Legislature, and through an "executive decision" taken by the MHRD. While central institutes (such as an IIT) are established through parliamentary Acts, state universities, including private ones, are a

state legislature's responsibility. On its part, the MHRD can declare an institute to be "equivalent to a university" based on recommendations of University Grants Commission (UGC) after which an institute becomes a deemed-to-be-university or deemed university.

MHRD's de-recognition decision has ruffled a few feathers and thrown up questions related to this executive decision. To answer the questions, one needs to consider a scenario where the option is not available. It is natural for a college, providing quality education for decades, to demand academic autonomy. When it does, should Parliament debate on such a demand, and if yes, for how long? Parliament has steered clear off such decisions in the past 60 years. When it comes to such decisions, track records of state governments and legislatures are blemished—most have sat on the autonomy issue for months, even years. If India is to set up thousands of technical and medical hubs, as it plans to do, informed debates on each and every one of them, either in Parliament or legislatures, seems implausible. Executive action is indispensable. For now, the Centre is mulling a super-regulator, merging functions performed by UGC and AICTE, to monitor the establishment process. Though guidelines are not clear yet, the new system may ask newly-formed universities to "report" before Parliament. But, if the Parliament will not debate each addition, then such a move has limited value.

Status System Snags

While there is no doubt that bodies such as AICTE and UGC need an image makeover, the snag—in our accreditation and establishment system—needs to be identified first. At a personal level, I believe that the overall problem has been exaggerated.

Interestingly, in the past five years, approximately 50 institutes received the deemed university status. Between 2008-2009, eight new IITs were set up, while in the previous 50 years, only six were established. It seems that for the first 50 years the Centre was not preoccupied by Gross Enrollment Rare (GER), till it began to fire all its cylinders—establishing IITs, NITs, IISERs, central and innovation universities. Even state governments began permitting a number of private universities and approved a number of deemed universities. It is being implied that the rate at which universities are being deemed, and new ones are being set up, is mala fide. However, fact remains that India still has a low GER. And, more schools, colleges and universities are needed. If it is found that institutes have resorted to unfair

Is there any reason to believe that the presence of family members in the administrative or the managerial rank necessarily leads to poor quality of education in an institute? An associated argument goes on to stress that often the “appointed relative” does not have a background in the field of education. But, are all IAS officers—appointed as vice chancellors or registrars by the government—experts in education?

The government has also slammed institutions for hiking fees substantially, especially after receiving the deemed status. However, a closer look would reveal that most institutions opted for this alleged (and, according to the government, unfair) hike more out of necessity, than to make profit.

Ideally, a college is supposed to have a faculty-student ratio close to 1:20 (the standard being 1:15). While running an institute, 35 percent of expenses go into recruiting and retaining a faculty. A quick analysis reveals that the combined sum of the tuition fees of five to six students go into the remuneration of a single teacher—especially, since the sixth pay commission report rec-

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means to obtain the deemed status, then a probation-penalty system should be used. However, a rise in the number of deemed universities is no reason to suspect that all of them provide poor education.

A Way Out?

The government recently slammed several Indian universities for possessing “poor” infrastructure—a declaration I find surprising.

The MHRD-appointed committee, sitting at New Delhi, interacted with a vice chancellor for 20 minutes to arrive at a truth that escaped a UGC team, consisting of experienced professors, that visited these campuses for three days, before the ministry made its assessment.

The Centre has also slammed some universities for their “nepotism”. But, is it not true that a number of family-owned Indian businesses are doing extremely well, globally?

comends a further boost to teachers’ salaries. So, a college either has to be creative to survive—or, it has an option to charge for the quality it offers.

According to reports filed by National Assessment and Accreditation Council, most deemed universities do provide quality education. The process for granting deemed university status in this country is reasonably robust, admittedly sometimes the process fails due to human greed—as does any other process. In such a scenario, the government should identify the exceptions. More importantly, the government should not discriminate between institutions on the basis of their ownership pattern.

If the Centre is serious about maintaining the quality of India’s universities, it should set up a benchmark of quality—applicable to all institutions irrespective of ownership. If it results in closure of government institutions as well, then so be it. ■■■

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