

A list of questionable eminence

The government has announced a list of 'Institutes of Eminence' (IoE) among India's institutions of higher education. This was awaited for the simple reason that finding a place on it would save an educational institution from the clutches of a dreaded regulator. Regulators are meant to ensure that we have a socially desirable outcome, but in the case of higher education in India the opposite seems to have been the case. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has over half a century micro-managed this space to an unimaginable level of silliness. The result has been publicly-funded universities that are cavernous wastes, shattering the aspirations of our youth and producing low-level 'knowledge'. Evidence of the role of India's higher-education regulator may be seen in the feature that the few instances when this is not the case the institutions have enjoyed privilege that leaves them protected from its depredations.

Aware of the public anger at the functioning of the UGC, two governments in the past decade have tried to revamp the regulatory environment for higher education. The latest offering is in the form of a proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). The intention is to leave the HECI to focus on quality while leaving funding of public institutions to the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD).

This arrangement has raised the issue of the possibility of bias, in particular that the government may use its discretion to reward institutions according to its ideological predilections. While this is an ever-present hazard in a democracy, one cannot in principle object to an institutional arrangement whereby an elected government exercises the right to allocate funds. One can only pressurise it to be impartial and accountable in its actions. In higher education one would imagine that this accountability would be manifested in enabling the pursuit of excellence. It is not as if excellence is difficult to identify even if it may be impossible to measure. In the world of ideas, excellence lies in the participation as an equal in the global knowledge commons. The emphasis here is on engagement; it is not necessary that institutions in India ought to produce knowledge in every field or its members abide by every idea and protocol for its production in the fields chosen. It is moot whether the criterion of equal engagement is met by the majority of our universities. So attention to this problem may be seen as a priority of the proposed HECI.

Even as we observe the progress of the HECI and wonder if it is going to be any more than old wine in a new bottle, we have already have an inkling of what could go wrong. This springs from the government's announcement of a list of IoEs. For not, the government has chosen three public and three private institutions for this status. The public institutions are the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, and the Indian Institutes of Technology at Delhi and Mumbai. The private ones are the Birla Institute of Technology and Science Pilani, the JIO Institute and the Manipal Academy of Higher Education. This list suffers from a serious lack of credibility. Where in it are the universities of India? We understand that the government's aim is to rectify the low presence of Indian institutions in the global rankings of universities.

Universities by definition embody knowledge across a wide range of disciplines. While the early European universities may have started as academies of the arts they were soon to have medicine and astronomy as areas that they pursued with vigour. There was an emphasis on a depth of knowledge across a broad horizon. Somewhere along the line we seem to have lost this breadth and come to revel in a landscape dominated by engineering schools. These engineering schools, notably the IITs, have done us proud but cannot be equated with the great universities of the world for the simple reason that they are focussed on a narrow domain. Also, if the idea behind IoEs is that they will be left alone and given enhanced financial support, it must be acknowledged that until very recently the IITs have not been meddled with neither have they been starved of resources. The IISc is of course broader than the IITs but does not embrace the social sciences

and the humanities, the presence of which would be considered necessary for an university.

If a list of eminent institutions in the country is at all needed, the absence of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) from the first list of IoEs is striking. Here I combine my observation with the disclosure that I am an early alumnus of the institution. If the criterion of engagement with the global field of ideas is accepted JNU would count as one among India's eminent educational institutions. One need not agree with any of the political stances emanating from its site to recognise that if there is an Indian institution that engages as an equal in the global commons it is JNU. Research from JNU has adapted and contested ideas floating in the global pool of knowledge ranging from history to economics. Its faculty have brought many of the world's leading ideas to Indian students and in at least area came close to building a new school of thought, however controversial. It is not as if similar efforts in the social sciences have not occurred elsewhere in India but JNU has perhaps sustained its reputation as a university for longer. I am not qualified to assess the contribution made to the sciences from the JNU but it may be noted that it already had schools of Computer Science and the Life Sciences over four decades ago when these were fledgling disciplines giving it a certain breadth early on. Even as we may wonder at the exclusion of JNU from the list of IoEs released by the government one might wonder at how the private institutions that are on it made the cut. While BITS Pilani may have made a significant contribution to the country at a time when it desperately needed engineers, but is yet not what may be considered a university, the presence of the two others on the list leave one nonplussed. One of them, we are told, has been conferred the status on grounds of its promise, a dubious position to take as this institute has little to show except for the financial heft that will surely undergird it. The other is known largely for its association with the practice of charging capitation fees for education. Eminence is not usually understood in terms of money.

So where does all this leave us? Even before the HECI is a reality we can see what to expect when a limited approach to education guides the hand of the state. While there may be no political partisanship in having found eminence only in our engineering schools it does reflect a short-sightedness when the social sciences and the humanities are ignored as we set out to strengthen higher education. It is indeed conceivable that the politicians who govern us have little time to bother with the constitution of committees. But then we do maintain a machinery of government, at considerable expense one might say, that is meant to advise the minister. In this episode of drawing up a list of IoEs we are able to see what will determine whether the HECI will make a difference. Its membership will matter more than the institutional architecture governing higher education in India.

Pulapre Balakrishnan is Professor of Ashoka University and Senior Fellow of IIM, Kozhikode. Views expressed are personal .

Sign up to receive our newsletter in your inbox every day!

Please enter a valid email address.

This refers to the tendency to form friendships and other forms of interpersonal relationships with people we come across often in our daily lives.

Our existing notification subscribers need to choose this option to keep getting the alerts.

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com