

## A game-changer for higher education

The Union Cabinet's decision recently to not only continue with the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) — 'a Centrally sponsored scheme launched in 2013 to provide strategic funding to eligible State higher educational institutions' — but also give it due importance augurs well for the system of higher education in India. That the government is backing the scheme speaks volumes about the robustness and relevance of the scheme.

India is estimated to have over 800 universities (over 40,000 colleges are affiliated to them). About 94% of students of higher education study in 369 State universities. But the Central government's slant toward premier institutions has continued ever since the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12), where in spite of a nine-fold increase in Budget allocation State institutions have been left to fend for themselves with funding mainly directed towards starting more Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management and Central universities. Today about 150 Centrally-funded institutions (less than 6% of students study in them) — corner almost the entire funding by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). To make things worse, investment by State governments has been also dwindling each year as higher education is a low-priority area. The University Grant Commission's system of direct releases to State institutions which bypasses State governments also leads to their sense of alienation. Though they are the face of higher education in India, State institutions have been getting short shrift.

It was to address these critical concerns that the MHRD launched RUSA. The scheme is largely based on the conditional release of funds linked to reforms in the key areas of governance, learning-teaching outcomes, reaching out to the unreached and infrastructure support. Unlike other schemes which are foisted on State governments in a one-size-fits all manner, under RUSA, States and institutions have to give an undertaking expressing their willingness to the idea of reform and agreeing to meet the States' share of the cost.

RUSA is a process-driven scheme. Its design and conceptualisation were finalised through extensive consultations with all key stakeholders, especially State governments. Preparatory grants were released to States to have the required systems, processes, and the technical support in place. Despite being voluntary, all States except a Union Territory (Lakshadweep) are a part of RUSA. All the State Higher Education Perspective Plans for five/10 years have been prepared after extensive stakeholder consultations. RUSA began with a modest allocation of 500 crore, but over time has seen its resource allocation being increased.

For the current year, 1,300 crore has been provided. Since funding is conditional to performance, it is critical to have a robust monitoring and evaluation system in place. In this regard, geo-tagging, introduction of a public financial management system, a fund tracker and reform tracker system and regular video conferences have proved effective tools, since 2015.

Governance reform is central to the scheme. State Higher Education Councils (SHECs) which have eminent academics, industrialists and other experts have been created, playing a major role, from an academic and professional point of view, in the formulation of medium- and long-term State perspective plans. In order to avoid arbitrariness, a State, for example, has to also give its commitment to creating a search-cum-select committee in the selection of vice-chancellors. Mitigating the bane of the affiliation system is also a major objective. This is achieved through a reduction in the number of colleges affiliated per university by creating cluster universities and promoting autonomous colleges. An important precondition is the filling up of faculty positions and lifting the ban on recruitment (as in some States).

To improve learning-teaching outcomes, there is an effort towards improving pedagogy by

capacity-building of faculty, selecting teachers in a transparent manner, adopting accreditation as a mandatory quality-assurance framework, implementing a semester system, and involving academics of repute and distinction in decision-making processes.

An independent performance review (of four years) of the scheme was done by IIT Bombay in 2017. It concluded that the funding linked to reforms has had a visible impact on higher education. When RUSA began, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) was 19.4%, faculty vacancies were at a shockingly high level of 60%, and a large number of universities were bloated with a teacher-student ratio of 1:24. Today, the GER is 25.2%, faculty vacancies are down to 35%, the ban on faculty recruitment by States has been lifted, and the teacher-student ratio is now 1:20. Several universities in Karnataka, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have been right-sized, and critical governance reforms such as the formation of the SHEC and merit-based appointments of vice-chancellors in Odisha, Goa, Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu are visible. There has been an improvement in the number of institutions accredited and their scores. In 2012, 106 State universities and 4,684 colleges were accredited. By 2017, an additional 145 State universities and 5,445 Colleges were accredited.

RUSA can prove to be a real game changer for higher education in the country. It has not only reprioritised the country's needs, from funding just a few premier institutions to reaching out to institutions at the bottom of the pyramid, but has also changed the way regulators need to function. However its litmus test will be in how impartially the scheme is administered by the MHRD and the degree to which State governments allow the SHEC to function. Letting go of the governmental stranglehold over universities is linked to this.

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