

## Why autonomy in higher education matters

Union human resource development minister, Prakash Javadekar, on Tuesday announced that [52 higher educational institutions](#) — five central universities, 21 state universities, 24 deemed universities and two private universities — will get autonomy, thanks to their efforts at maintaining high standards over the year. Expanding on the rationale behind the decision, Mr Javadekar said the government is striving to introduce a liberalised regime in the education sector with emphasis on linking autonomy with quality. However, this step — a giant leap by India's education sector standards — does not mean that the universities will be out of the ambit of the University Grants Commission, the higher education regulator, but will now have the freedom to start new courses, decide on the fee structure, set-up off campus centres, start skill development courses, research parks and new academic programmes. They will also have the freedom to hire foreign faculty, enrol foreign students, give incentive-based emoluments to the faculty, enter into academic collaborations and run distance-learning programmes. The policy of granting autonomy has been in the works since last year when the HRD minister said that institutions would be freed from the government's "micro-management" just as the Indian Institutes of Management Bill, 2017, has provided the management institutes autonomy to function.

The decision to give freedom to these select educational institutes is a positive step. First, this will work as a carrot-and-stick policy for the other institutes, pushing them to improve their educational and administrative quality. Second, these institutions will not have to bear the brunt of over-regulation due to the involvement of a plethora of agencies such as the ministry of human resource development, University Grants Commission, and the All India Council for Technical Education. Third, the administrative and regulatory obstacles meant that they could not respond to demands in the knowledge economy, leaving students under-equipped to face a changing world.

But the decision to give more power to select educational institutions will have positive results only if such autonomy is also given to faculty members. This is because the faculty must not just teach, but also expand the intellectual horizons of students. There are also a few criticisms of this decision, the key one being these universities could sideline students of marginalised communities and is a brazen attempt at privatising higher education. The ministry must allay such apprehensions and ensure that disadvantaged students don't face any kind of discrimination in any of the campuses.

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