

## Global benchmarking of Indian learning

The UGC's move to give full academic autonomy to universities and colleges is a step in the right direction



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**T**he competitive landscape of advanced manufacturing and services places India in direct competition with advanced countries of the world such as the US, Germany, China, and Japan.

To successfully compete, India needs to benchmark its education and skills systems with the best in the world. This is even more significant for our country as it has envisioned being the 'Skill Capital' of the world driven by its favourable demographics. The dream of 'Make in India' and leading the Industrial Revolution 4.0 can be achieved only if there is a seamless alignment of vision for skill development, education and research with the overall economic agenda of the country.

The developments in the educa-

tion space in the last two years have been very encouraging.

### Autonomy push

The government through the regulator UGC has provided almost complete academic autonomy to universities and colleges through gazette notifications in February. Top rated universities are freed of UGC inspections; can start new programmes and skill courses without prior approvals; set up open research parks and incubation centres; engage in foreign collaboration with leading global universities and hire foreign faculty at self guided norms. Universities can also open constituent units and off-campus centres. Autonomous colleges' regulations have also been liberalised on similar lines.

### Financing

Regarding financing of higher education institutes (HEIs), they now have to take concessional loans from the Higher Education Finance Agency (HEFA) for their capex requirements which would be paid back by the government. The institutes would only be liable to pay the



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interest amount for the loans taken. This is expected to bring a lot of accountability in the public higher education system and should be seen as a first step to build a credit market for public higher education.

### Vocational education

Considering the parallel needs of basic skills for low end manufacturing and high end skills for IR 4.0, we need to take a multi modal approach to build relevant skills in the workforce. The government has

done a great job in consolidating varied skill initiatives under the Skills Ministry, listened to voices outside the government including private think tanks and increased funding of skills significantly. It has been piloting several skill initiatives with other countries; this is expected to result in major breakthroughs in fine-tuning the skill ecosystem.

### Learning outcomes

Quality of education both in K-12 and higher education is crucial. A granular approach with focus on district level indicators, proposed re-entry into PISA evaluations and linking funds with quality are steps in this direction.

Also steps for mutual recognition of Indian higher and vocational education qualifications abroad which shall go a long way in global benchmarking of Indian learning. The recent agreement with France, Australia, Malaysia, Qatar and Mauritius among others for cooperation is significant in this regard.

We however need a continued stream of structural reforms to catch up with the world. These in-

clude administrative and financial autonomy to HEIs, increase research spending manifold and create an environment of innovation and entrepreneurship.

While the government's role as the ultimate financier (payer) of education has to continue (it needs to be enhanced to touch 6 per cent of GDP), it needs to earmark funds for research, quality and innovation in all forms of learning and distance itself from managing execution. The process for 'Institutes of Eminence' and complete freedom to elite institutions like IIMs is a good start.

Adding to this momentum is a whole new generation of ed-tech companies which are transforming learning, sometimes mitigating the necessity of brick and mortar institutions and providing hope to potential learners to bypass the rickety public education system. It is time that our regulations enable education entrepreneurs.

Let a billion dreams be given wings by ensuring equality of education opportunity!

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