

# UGC versus States



Time to hold the baby and throw  
out the bathwater

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THE UNIVERSITY GRANTS Commission (UGC) and the State of Maharashtra with other parties are engaged in a vicious legal battle. It has put the spotlight, once again, on the fraught nature of Centre-state relations in the area of higher education. The case is simple: Given the epidemic and concerns of safety, Maharashtra and some other states have cancelled the final year exams for college students and wish to award grades and degrees based on in-semester performance.

The UGC has said that this “dilutes standards” and has passed a diktat that universities must hold exams — online, off-line or blended — before September 30. It has claimed that the actions of the states have “encroached on the legislative field of coordinating and determining the standards of higher education which is exclusively reserved for the Parliament under Entry 66 of List I of Schedule VII of the Constitution.” It has also claimed that its directives are to “protect the academic future of students”.

These broad claims must be examined carefully. Right now, fresh graduates are losing job appointments simply because they cannot furnish a final degree certificate. And yet, the MHRD has not bothered to inform employers and institutions to defer this requirement.

Entry 66 does indeed spell out the Centre’s role as “Coordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education or research and scientific and technical institutions”. It has been repeatedly used by the Centre to shape the contours of policy and governance. In fact, it is the basis of the UGC Act of 1956. That led to the UGC-NET, a qualifying examination for college teachers. The IIT Act of 1961 led to the JEE and eventually GATE, and the 2016 amendment to the Indian Medical Council Act of 1956 gave us NEET. Thus, a single provision in the Constitution and a few key Acts have entangled India’s higher education in a web of qualifying and competitive exams, regulatory agencies and professional bodies. All this is in the name of upholding standards.

And yet, there have been few efforts to evolve standards and link them with concrete societal goals. There is the excessively bureaucratic national system of accreditation and rankings for institutions. This led to thousands of research papers in worthless journals and hundreds of crores spent on ex-

otic research areas.

The new National Education Policy (NEP) claims that the purpose of higher education is to “enable personal accomplishment and enlightenment, constructive public engagement, and productive contribution to society”. But what is this in concrete terms, for students, institutions, the state and the nation? Should a “good” student be able to write a newspaper article on a local issue, or conduct a study? Should IIT Bombay or Shivaji University analyse the Kolhapur floods or measure the parameters of the epidemic in their cities? Can the state rely on its colleges for research on drinking water? Should the nation expect that elite institutions will work to improve the railways and devise timetables for shramik services? These questions have never been answered.

Instead, national competitive exams such as the JEE, NEET and GATE have become the de facto standards for education. The folly of this is well known. They adversely impact the overall development of our youth. They encourage coaching and intervene in the state’s ability to provide doctors and engineers from the local population. They distort the meaning and practice of science. And yet their impact on students and society has not been formally measured or accepted by the MHRD.

The most exceptionable is the UGC-NET, the qualifying exam for college teachers. Their curricula are, of course, “national” or for that matter “global”. In Economics, it is the last chapter (of 10 chapters), where the Indian Economy is finally introduced. Missing is the District Economic Plan, a document which is regularly prepared by state governments, or the economics of the city. Sociology wends its way through Marx and Weber, ignores key development programmes such as MGN-REGA and forbids any regional content. In Engineering too, the national curriculum for civil engineering is the same for Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra. The national governing body for engineering has now determined that Virtual Reality and Quantum Computing are important emerging areas! Thus, the Centre decides the curricula, the teachers and their salaries. The states pay.

This standardisation is merely “world-class” wool pulled over our eyes and not based on any study of what the states need. In fact, the disconnect of curricula and teach-

ers with the real world is the real dilution of standards. It is perhaps the principal reason for poor student employability and the reluctance of the states to invest in higher education.

Pedagogically too, it is known that students learn better when presented with real-life problems in a familiar context. And yet the case study on local problems has been absent in the curricula. When states innovate, the MHRD is more likely to steam-roll it. This was witnessed in Maharashtra, where its innovative programme, Unnat Maharashtra Abhiyan, linking colleges with district administration was refused support by the MHRD.

Finally, about elite central institutions such as the IITs or IISERs, the less said the better. Most regulations of the UGC or MHRD do not apply to them. They soak up most of the funds and prestige and yet their output is not commensurate.

Setting standards in higher education requires us to connect societal needs and professions with training and research. The MHRD or UGC have failed to do this. Nor have they considered the harmful impact of the de facto standards on students and society. The new NEP continues to live in the same exalted evidence-free world of national curricula and nationalised testing.

So what is to be done?

The courts should point out that a constitutional right comes with duties. The UGC has failed to appreciate this. They should set aside the issue of encroachment and judge the case on concrete questions. Can the states really hold exams during a pandemic? Are they really that important? Can transport or access to computers be managed? Did the central committee consider all this? Does it have the data?

Secondly, students should understand that their future is bogged down by a higher education system and a scientific bureaucracy which is structurally flawed. It is an elite centralised system which is not accountable to meaningful jobs or welfare within the states. It is time for the states to create a system which opens up professional opportunities, standards and training for our youth to serve their community, of achieving excellence through relevance.

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