



## UGC and Higher Education in India

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# 1. Historical background and aims of UGC

University Grants Commission (UGC) was established in **1946** regulate Central Universities of Aligarh, Banaras and, Delhi. However, post-independence, the University Education Commission was set up in 1948 under the Chairmanship of **S. Radhakrishnan** and it recommended that the UGC be reconstituted on the general model of the UGC of UK.

It was given a statutory status by **UGC Act, 1956** and has the unique distinction of being the only grant-giving agency in the country which has been vested with two responsibilities: that of providing funds and that of coordination, determination and maintenance of standards in institutions of higher education.

## The UGC's mandate includes:

- Promoting and coordinating university education both public and private universities including deemed universities and affiliated colleges.
- Determining and maintaining standards of teaching, examination and research in universities.
- Framing regulations on minimum standards of education.
- Monitoring developments in the field of collegiate and university education; disbursing grants to the universities and colleges.
- Serving as a vital link between the Union and State governments and institutions of higher learning.
- Advising the Central and State governments on the measures necessary for improvement of university education.
- Enforcing regulations and punishing for violations.
- Accreditation for higher learning is overseen by autonomous institutions established by the UGC. These institutions include: AICTE (All India Council for Technical Education), NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council), MCI (Medical Council of India) etc.

# 2. Evaluation of UGC's performance

## General Performance of Higher Education Institutes:

- Some institutions of India, such as the IITs, IIMs, NIITs, University of Mumbai and Jawaharlal Nehru University have been globally acclaimed for their standard of education.
- The IITs enroll about 10000 students annually and the alumni have contributed to both the growth of the private sector and the public sectors of India.
- Several other institutes of fundamental research such as IACS, IISc, TIFR, are acclaimed for their standard of research in basic sciences and mathematics.
- Mumbai University was ranked 41 among the Top 50 Engineering Schools of the world 2012. ISB, Hyderabad was ranked number 12 in global MBA rankings in 2010 while the AIIMS, Delhi has been recognized as a global leader in medical research and treatment.
- Government universities through affirmative action like reservations has been able to cater to the most backward and deprived sections of the population.
- Foreign universities actively seek Indian students.

However, our higher education suffers from many limitations some of which owe their origin to the limited effectiveness of UGC. Therefore, before discussing the problems of higher education it is better to discuss the problems of UGC itself.

- **Politicization of education** with UGC becoming an arm of the HRD ministry, lacking autonomy and freedom.
- It is an **overburdened body** which regulates and oversees all the universities of the country including private and deemed, which is practically impossible for a single body considering the number of universities and affiliated colleges in the country.
- **Policy fluctuation and arbitrariness.**
- All the rules made by UGC need parliamentary approval but these are not always taken and hence they can be cancelled by the court, jeopardizing the future of thousands.

- UGC has not been able to check many malpractices prevalent in the sector as evident from the capitation fee still being charged by colleges in spite of its ban by Supreme Court.
- **Lack of representation to states.**

All this factors combined with government apathy and interference and status-quoist attitude of policymakers, has resulted in considerable malice in our higher education. In specific terms they are as follows:

- We have only 722 universities, as against the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) recommendation of 1,500.
- Not even one Indian higher education institution made it to the top 200 club in the Times Higher Education (THE) rankings for 2014-15.
- **Disparity in access to education**, especially in terms of economic class, gender, caste and ethnic and religious belonging.
- **Expansion of the private, self-financing education sector**, with commercial intent, has been another reason for the propagation of disparities. There has been a decline in the government institutes and increase in the private institutes. For 2013 the share of private undergraduate colleges and students is at 59 per cent and 37 per cent respectively. Out of the 712 universities, about 360 are of private, state and of deemed status. The high cost of private education has affected access by the poor to education.
- **Lack of autonomy and independence**, universally accepted as fundamental in higher education.
- **Narrow view of education** with education limited to attendance, exam, marks and degree. This results in poorly skilled students. As per a survey only 19% of engineering and 5% of non-engineering graduates are employable.
- **Unscientific, partisan and non-merit based appointment** of the faculty/vice-chancellor.
- **Outdated Curriculum** susceptible to tampering based on ideology of the government. It curbs creativity and critical thinking with skills set out of sync with modern times.
- **Faculty accountability is missing** in India. Worldwide, teachers are assessed by the students but the practice is yet to be followed in India in spite of rising salaries especially in the government universities and colleges.
- **Poor quality of Research and Development** in the universities, with the link to the industries missing and declining government support to R&D.
- **Lack of access to global courses** and knowledge.

### 3. Recent Events and Issues

- **Delhi University FYUP:** Last year UGC directed DU to scrap its FYUP. It took a U-turn as previously it had allowed the same. It argued that the FYUP was not in consonance of with 10+2+3 format. Also, DU did not have approval of the visitor i.e. the President of India. As a result, after a huge showdown between the university and UGC, FYUP was finally scrapped.

However, it must be remembered that under the Delhi University Act, 1922 DU has freedom to decide its own course structure, content etc. Also, FYUP had the option for students to exit after three years with a bachelor degree.

The arbitrariness on the part of UGC is undesirable as it discourages universities to take innovation and bold steps to improve, innovate and reform.

- **Introduction of Choice Based Credit System (CBCS):** Under the CBCS, students pursue **three types of courses** – **Compulsory Foundation Courses (relating directly to the subject of study)**, **Elective Courses (allowing for interdisciplinary studies)** and **Core subjects**, where it is compulsory to pursue core subjects every semester and choose electives from a pool of subjects unrelated to their disciplines. This means a Science student can opt for any subject of Commerce or Arts discipline as an elective. As per UGC the students under this approach can take courses of their choice, learn at their own pace, can take additional courses and acquire more than the required credits. It is also said that such a system **will facilitate student mobility across educational institutions within the nation and outside.**

The ultimate goal is to bring reforms in higher education so that students develop thinking, as well as an analytical ability, and they are equipped with necessary skills ultimately making them suitable for an employment and to integrate values of our culture with education.

The basic motive is to expand academic quality in all aspects, right from the curriculum to the learning-teaching process to examination and evaluation systems but the CBCS seems to narrow the role of education to training for marketable skilled workforce.

There are challenges such as drafting the entire new syllabus, defining the credit system, motivating and training staff for smoother implementation, encouraging students to stay involved throughout the term and improving attendance, and continuous evaluation.

It will increase the need for faculty and workload of teachers, as institutions are supposed to widen their offerings to provide more optional courses but unfortunately, there was no attention paid on reflecting upon the curricular or pedagogic issues involved. Thus, it will add to the complexity of the university education and has met opposition from large section of students, teachers and academia.

Therefore, it is needed that universities implement the CBCS following some rigorous elaborate steps such as review of curricular contents, subdividing into units and subunits as well as assigning numerical values and termed credits to bring more clarity to the faculty, students and examiners.

- **Proposed amendment to Central Universities Bill, 2009:** The amendment has been proposed to implement the following:
  - **Uniform Syllabus**
  - **Uniform Admission Process**
  - **Transferability of Teachers**

It is argued that it will lead to uniformity and standardization of education. It will also help UGC to better monitor the performance of university. Once the courses are standardized it will be easy to run the universities as government is intending to bring its own ranking system as international rankings do not incorporate special context in which the Indian universities operate. Transferability of teachers will lead to sharing of expertise across universities.

However, many have opposed the move on the following grounds:

- Leads to centralization and homogenization of education. Each university has its own uniqueness and specific context which will be lost.
- Loss of diversity and pluralism.
- Curb innovation and critical thinking.
- Transfers can be used to punish dissent and independent voices.
- Education will be subjected to politicization and tinkering as the governments will change.

However, there is a need for greater discussion between all the stakeholders and studying examples around the world before reaching upon a decision having lasting impact on education system.

- **UGC's Security Guidelines:** UGC issued safety guidelines for university campuses which call for measures like **higher boundary walls, barbed wire, police presence on the campus and biometric attendance**. Most central universities, including DU and JNU are yet to implement them amid objections.
  - A section of the academia and the students feel that these guidelines infringe upon the individual liberties and privacy.
  - Earlier the police was called in on specific instances, but now police presence on campus will be legitimate and can lead to undue interference from them.
  - Restricting entry points and CCTVs installed across the campus could also lead to excessive surveillance.
  - The guidelines call for regular parents-teachers meet so that grievances are addressed. Considering it targets students in colleges/universities who are adults.
  - The provision that every teacher be allotted 25 students to act as their guardian and counselor is being viewed negatively.

- **Draft IIM Bill:** HRD Ministry released the Draft Indian Institutes of Management (IIM) Bill, 2015 in June 2015. 13 IIMs are registered as Societies under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 and governed by a Board of Governors. Currently, these institutes can offer diplomas and not degrees. The Draft Bill seeks to declare existing IIMs as institutes of national importance.

Key features of the Draft Bill include:

- **Powers of the IIM:** Under the Bill, the IIMs will have powers to regulate admission, management and fees. It enables IIMs to grant degrees, diplomas and other academic distinctions. It also allows IIMs to conduct examinations and establish and maintain necessary infrastructure.
- **Powers of the central government:** Any regulations made by the Board are subject to prior approval of the central government. Prior approval of the central government is required in matters relating to: (i) admission of candidates to various programmes and specifying fees, (ii) determining posts and emoluments of faculty and staff, (iii) establishment and maintenance of buildings, (iv) conferring degrees and determining powers of the Academic Council, Chief Administrative Officer and the Board, etc.
- **Funding:** The IIMs will discharge their functions on the basis of grants received from the central government. All institutes will be required to maintain a fund.

It is alleged that Bill will enable some form of government intervention in the functioning of the IIMs rather than giving them greater autonomy.

- **Foreign Universities in India: Present rules permit foreign universities to collaborate with Indian partners** through various mechanisms. However, few globally renowned universities collaborate with India. Moreover, for opening a campus in India, an educational institution needs to be in the top 400 in one of three global rankings of UK-based Times Higher Education Ranking, UK-based Quacquarelli Symonds ranking and China-based Shanghai Jiao Tong University rankings.

There are **three views** on the issue of foreign educational institutions operating in India:

1. Proponents argue that it would increase choices for students and enhance competition in the sector. Indian students pay heavy tuition fees to foreign universities. It will help Indian students get foreign education at an Indian price. Additionally, it will help those Indian students who are unable to go abroad due to financial constraints.
2. Secondly, there are some experts who support limited entry based on the reputation of the institution.
3. Opponents argue that it would limit access and lead to commercialisation. It is not a great idea to aim for foreign investment in education when there is underutilisation of domestic capital in the sector. High ranking educational institutes are reluctant to open new campuses for the fear of brand and quality dilution.

However, there are several issues that pertain regarding the entry of foreign universities in the country:

- Over regulation and interference with attempts by the government to reinterpret and redefine the meaning and scope of that autonomy.
- With limited effectiveness of the UGC, the debate is whether they should be brought under the regulation of UGC.
- If they are given enough autonomy and independence then it will be unfair to the Indian universities.

Previous government brought Foreign Educational Institutions (Regulation of Entry and Operations) Bill, 2010 which eventually lapsed with the dissolution of the 15th Lok Sabha. Now, **Niti Aayog is preparing a framework for foreign universities to set up campuses** in India at the behest of PM who is also interested in bringing foreign universities into India. There is no doubt that there is a huge demand and supply gap in our higher education system. Inviting foreign universities to fill this gap seems attractive, but this should not stop us from building our higher education system indigenously.

## 4. Way Forward and Suggestions

### Suggestions for Higher Education:

- The **National Policy on Education (NPE)** that was adopted by Parliament in May 1986 and Programme of Action (POA), 1986, and updated in 1992. Last review done in 1965 by Kothari Commission. Like in west regular review of education policy including higher education. For example **UK** has an institute for education statistics, as policy making with reliable data on a regular basis to assist policymaking.
- Emphasis should be on better teachers with quality training modules for them. Given the low rate of enrolment, we need more quality teaching institutions at the undergraduate level.
- Massive expansion of government universities and colleges providing quality education at low cost is the need of time. Expansion of self-financing private institutions be restricted to a reasonable level or compensate low income strata students with scholarship to enable them to study in private colleges. The present method, of extending educational loans from banks with interest subsidy by the MHRD, does not help the poor. Else, education rather than being a socio-economic leveler will become a source of disparity.
- Infrastructure can be improved with an increase in financial allocation. Academic reforms should be after deliberations with all the stake holders and consistent to avoid unnecessary controversies like FYUP or CBCS. In the case of faculty, enforce the University Grant Commission's (UGC) teacher-student ratio for each State, and ensure that the financial requirement of additional faculty is shared by the Centre and States.
- English textbooks of concerned subjects should be translated to the hindi/regional languages. The **three-language formula** needs to be adhered to. Teaching in the regional languages would make understanding relatively easy while minimal language competence in English should facilitate student access to English books. This method has been successful in **Japan**.
- Allow foreign educational institutions to enter into collaborations with Indian institutions on a large scale. Use of **Massive Online Open Courses** be encouraged.
- Autonomy as far as academic and administrative aspects are involved is a must. It includes the appointment of heads of institutional and executive bodies. A UGC committee had suggested the independence of institutions from the government as the bottom line for autonomy.
- Efficient use of skill development program of the government and improving the apprenticeship scheme.
- Identifying and empowering 50 top universities in every possible manner to seek global excellence as done by Russia.
- Increasing funding, including corporate funding for Indian universities.
- Incentivising research and publications among faculty members.
- In Korea, the best students enter the teaching profession because the social status of a teacher is very high. We need such a system in India.

### Reforms Specific to UGC:

Higher education remains **over-regulated and badly governed** with far too many regulatory agencies in the picture. For such reasons, the NKC recommended the setting up of an **Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education** which would take on most of the roles of the UGC, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the Medical Council of India (MCI) and the Bar Council of India, all of which would either be abolished or assigned more limited roles. A government-appointed committee has already recommended abolishing UGC and replacing it with Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education.

Hence, it is important that structural and functional reform be introduced for UGC to make it relevant in contemporary times rather than an obstruction to the development of a world class higher education system. It should be provided autonomy so as to remain independent of changing ideologies of successive governments. Its regulatory and overseeing role needs to be relooked at to make them conducive rather than interfering. It should also be provided with representation from states for more holistic and grounded policymaking.

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