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Reform affiliating-varsity model

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Since a vast majority of our graduates are getting taught in colleges that are affiliated to some university, it should be clear that if the quality of higher education is to be improved, this system of affiliating university has to be reformed.

The importance of this has been stressed in both the Yash Pal committee report and the Knowledge Commission recommendations, but both do not dwell on this much as they focus on the creation of new universities, regulation, etc.

(Knowledge commission proposes that some colleges may be made autonomous, and some converted to community colleges. Yash Pal committee suggests that "it is necessary for the apex body in the field of higher education to address this vexed problem in a comprehensive manner as one of its first tasks and suggest a time frame for elimination of the present form of affiliating system.")

Why do we continue with this model in which the university designs the syllabus, conducts exams, and gives degrees while teaching is done in affiliated colleges that have no control on the academic content and minimal control on evaluation, when it does not exist in any developed country and even UK, where it existed earlier, has disbanded it?

The major reason is the strong belief that without some amount of centralisation of syllabi and exams, the quality of education will suffer, and many unscrupulous colleges will either start "selling" degrees and/or provide very poor education. Of course, there is some merit in this argument that a common syllabi, backed with external setting and evaluation of exams, does ensure some minimum standards.

Standardisation, however, not only has a pull-up effect for lower end players, it curtails innovation and change and also has a pull-down effect on those who can offer something superior to the standard.

There is no incentive for operating above the prescribed minimum standard, and colleges have no room for initiatives other than trying to improve their results in the common exam. The system is designed for achieving average performance for all and reducing variability at both sides of the average. More importantly, there are no competitive forces to push the quality bar higher.

It can be argued that this approach is workable for more static subjects where contents change slowly, and which have a defined and well understood body of knowledge making agreeing on uniform syllabi feasible. However, this will clearly not work in fast changing areas such as technology and sciences, where not only must education keep in tune with latest developments, but there are also differing opinions on what should be taught and how.

With varying opinions, what will one standardise? More importantly, when there is no agreement, a natural course is to let different approaches exist, compete, and evolve, so the better ones eventually survive. This fundamental force of natural selection is disallowed in this old centralised planning model, in which an apex committee is supposed to know the best.

It should be clear that ideally all colleges should not only have complete control over their syllabi, but should have complete responsibility of evaluation and quality control — the model that exists in most developed countries.

However, most colleges today are not likely to have the wherewithal for this autonomy and responsibility that comes with it. And the risk of abuse by some is there. So, it is best to evolve a way to make colleges more autonomous and responsible, without increasing the risk.

This can be done by allowing the colleges a limited degree of control of syllabi and

examination, which can slowly be increased. Currently, in many affiliating universities, the colleges are given some control in examinations though "internal marks", given by the instructors.

Given that many colleges benchmark themselves by the performance of their students in the university, this leads to the tendency of being extra liberal in these internal marks. So, this does not serve the purpose at all.

An alternative can, however, work. For each degree programme, the affiliating university can define some "core" courses, comprising of those subjects for which the body of knowledge is relatively stable. For these courses it will define the syllabi and will conduct the exam.

The University may also define some minimum number of courses (or credits) that must be done for awarding the degree. Then, for the remaining courses, it can allow the colleges complete control — a college defines the courses, defines the syllabus and text books for them, teaches the courses, conducts the exams, etc.

This will provide full ownership for part of the curriculum. If a college is too liberal with grades in the courses they own, it will become evident as any reader of a transcript will be able to see the difference between performance in the core courses and other courses.

The ability to completely own a good portion of the curriculum will allow colleges to introduce new courses and new ideas in education. It can also allow colleges to specialise, while maintaining the core. It can improve education of lab-based subjects as complete local control is really the only way lab-based courses can be done properly as they require continuous evaluation and once a semester/year evaluation is quite inadequate.

And it will allow the faculty freedom to design courses and methods for evaluating. This ownership can act as a huge boost to those faculty members who take their academics seriously, and it will act as a force for faculty improvement and upgradation as this responsibility will necessarily require faculty to understand how academics is evolving across the world.

With this system, colleges that have suitable faculty, mechanisms, and track record may be slowly allowed control of a greater percentage of the courses, thereby creating a controlled and gradual method of making colleges more autonomous, at least those who desire it.

The centralised system of education can be enhanced in this manner by giving academic autonomy to a degree that depends on the capability the affiliated college demonstrates. This is a sound way of gradually introducing autonomy without taking the undue risk that may result in dismantling the system.

It will make colleges more dynamic, responsible, and accountable, without giving up full control. The challenge, of course, is to have the controllers, who are used to the power of controlling and benefits that come from it, and who love the idea of centralised models imposing uniformity, cede even a limited degree of control to the colleges in the long term interest of education, colleges, and faculty.

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