

The Bastion: Email Exchange With Dr. Anupam Pachauri

1. To what degree do you think the 'Institute of Eminence' (IoE) scheme will promote competition among private players? Will this be enough to ensure progress in the majority of private institutes which lack funds or are profit-oriented?

The world-class universities are public universities except in the US. Even in the US these private universities, which are world-class, are different from the recently upcoming private universities. Competition for revenue or profit making is not a serious issue among world-class universities. In India, many private universities are profit seeking and accreditation as well as schemes like IoE are useful marketing tools to attract students and profits. Therefore in that sense, IoE scheme can promote competition among private universities.

The current IoE scheme is a renamed version of the previous scheme for developing world-class universities, discussed since last two years. To say whether IoE scheme will promote competition among private players, we have to look at firstly what the world class universities have achieved world over and to what extent they have been able to promote competition among private players. Secondly what are the objectives of the current IoE scheme?

The world-class universities unwittingly though tend to set quality benchmarks for other universities to follow, emulate and achieve. Translated in this manner the IoEs that come up through the IoE scheme may be expected to become pacesetters. The expectation seems reasonable more so, when the scheme guidelines for the IoEs emphasize on 'multidisciplinary and inter-disciplinary courses' and 'enhancing affordable access to quality higher education'. Since the regulatory architecture of the scheme is only for the institutions selected as IoEs, and to make an application to the scheme they require heavy investment, it does not look like that the scheme as such will promote competition among private players or will affect change /progress in the majority of the institutes in the private sector. The private sector institutions of higher education in India are very diverse, some catering to rural areas to those in urban locations, single institutions to chain of institutions run as family businesses, business philanthropy supported HEIs and so on.

2. IoEs and Greenfield Institutes will be given greater autonomy in functioning, yet without independence other private institutions will be unable to reach the same standard. What are your views of this part of the policy?

To some extent all private universities are autonomous and operate within regulations set by the higher education regulatory bodies in India. Even when there is academic autonomy for

the institutions in the public sector, they have very limited financial autonomy. Private institutions do not rely on public funding and to that extent are autonomous.

To my mind, it is important to have regulations. The standards are achieved and maintained in a well defined, clearly spelt out regulatory environment. The glitches in the regulatory structure that may exist for the majority of the institutions can be addressed. The recently introduced provision of graded autonomy for example is a step towards greater independence to institutions according to their performance and capacity. The graded autonomy is awarded to the institutions according to their accreditation ratings. So, this is also one of the ways where the government is offering to enable greater autonomy to other institutions not covered through the IoE scheme.

We have recently seen the havoc that unregulated fee charging in the name of financial autonomy has played on medical students in private medical institutions in Indian states such as Uttarakhand. Therefore it is important to have a comprehensive regulatory structure. Especially when more than two-third of enrolments are in private sector, it becomes all the more pertinent to regulate fee and delineate standards to assess the quality of courses offered by the institutes so that aspects of financial autonomy do not become conduits of corrupt practices and exploitation of students.

3. The Jio Institute has been currently given the Letter of Intent, and only after three years will it be judged whether it is “ready” to become an Institute of Eminence. However, no such parameters have been mentioned now. What do you think should be the parameters in this case?

The parameters are already mentioned in the IoE scheme guidelines e.g., the institute offering multidisciplinary courses, affordable access to quality higher education, no student who has gained admission can be turned away due to lack of finance. This is besides foreign faculty and foreign student intake.

4. If we take a closer look at the IoEs, a majority of them are those that are primarily known for their STEM courses. Will this prove to be somewhat disadvantageous to the holistic development of all disciplines, and ultimately India’s higher education system?

Although the IoEs covered through the scheme are known for their STEM courses, the current set of IoE scheme guidelines does expect IoEs to be multidisciplinary. That aspect raises some hope. Concurrently, the game of rankings is actually organised around the STEM courses. Therefore, if the aim of IoEs is to figure in the world rankings and they continue to focus only on STEM it will be inexpedient to the overall higher education system. The

reason is also because public funding for the public institutions has been reducing. In such funding environment huge amount of finances are being promised for government IoEs. So the detrimental impact is twofold. The first is lack of funds for a large number of public higher education institutions and the second is distorted focus on STEM.

5. In your opinion, what are the main areas that the IoEs need to focus on to attract more foreign students to India, and create 'top 500' institutions of global repute? (Similarly achieved in China, Singapore or Taiwan.)

Your question has two parts. The first is regarding attracting foreign students to India and the second is to create institutions of global repute which figure in top 500. To answer the first question, we need to ask ourselves, why would foreign students want to come to India? Globally, the trend is that foreign students are attracted to developed economies where there are opportunities for gaining post-study work experience as in the US and the UK, or the destinations which are affordable yet able to provide quality education as in China, Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia, UAE. Such possibilities of post-study work experience do not exist in India.

English as medium of instruction in our HEIs is a positive aspect of our education system to attract foreign students who are looking for affordable, at the same time quality education. Alongside the focus on science and technology, the IoEs also have great opportunity to celebrate the rich linguistic and cultural diversity and heritage of India to attract foreign students. However, whether that would fulfil the ambition of figuring in world rankings, is not certain. Personally, I would argue for IoEs to invest in developing functional and dynamic models of institutional support, research and teaching that enable all students who gain entry into the institution in achieving success in higher education. If, even one fifth of the institutions covered through the scheme are able to showcase this, it will certainly encourage other institutions to develop institutional support strategies and mechanisms to address diverse learning needs of the higher education entrants.

As far as creating institutions of global repute is concerned- the reputation is built/judged on parameters such as international research collaborations, publications by faculty in top journals, the graduates earning good placements in their field, to name a few. Institution building is a long term project. World class faculty may be hired if the institutions have ample finances, however, that is not a sustainable strategy because the moment the faculty gets better bargain, they will move on. The challenge for the IoEs will be to retain and nurture good faculty who can strive towards the envisioned goals of the scheme over a period of ten years.