

Liberating India's Best Colleges

HRD minister Javadekar has just announced the most far reaching reforms in higher education

Arvind Panagariya and B Venkatesh Kumar

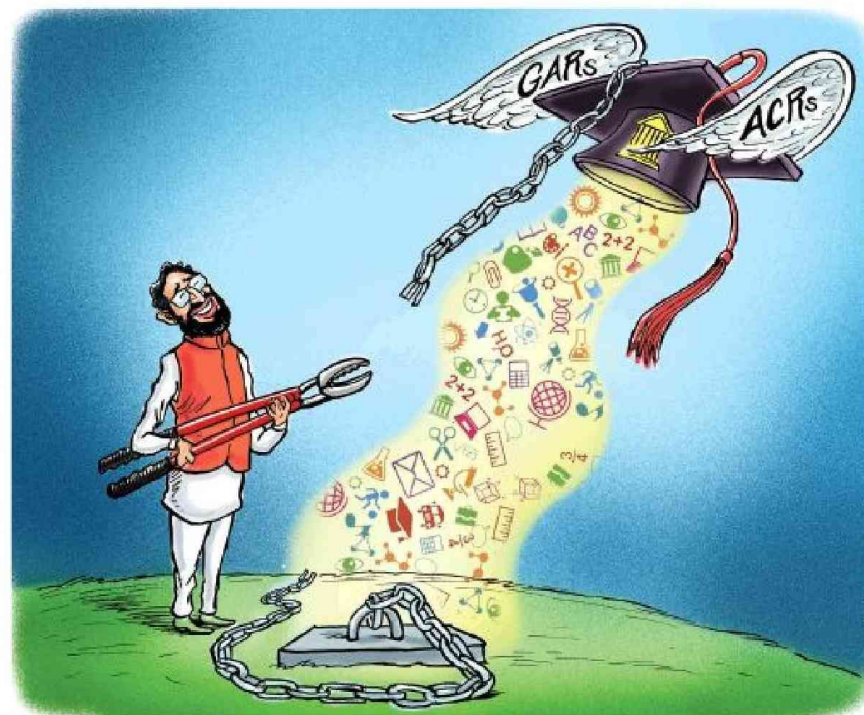


With approximately one year left before voting for the next Lok Sabha elections begins, you would expect the government to be seized by populism. Not the Modi government. On the heels of a pragmatic Budget, the human resource development (HRD) minister Prakash Javadekar has now announced the most far-reaching reforms in higher education. One of us (Panagariya) had lamented for long that the reforms in this important area had been cursed, with HRD minister after HRD minister failing to bring about fundamental change. Magically, Javadekar has broken that curse.

By way of background, during past several years, multiple commissions and committees have recommended reforms but failed to bring about any substantive change in the core regulations under the University Grants Commission (UGC) Act. Undeterred, in June 2017, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) appointed a committee at the Niti Aayog to recommend how progress could be made in this important area. One of us chaired that committee while the other joined it as an invited expert member.

It is nothing short of a miracle that Niti committee was successful in forging a consensus around the reforms among its members, which included the top officials of Niti Aayog, HRD ministry, UGC and All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE). The committee submitted its report to the PMO at the end of August 2017.

The announcement by the HRD minister has translated the recommendations by Niti committee into action in the areas of autonomy to universities and colleges. The far-reaching changes are contained in two separate Gazette notifications: Graded Autonomy Regulations (GARs) 2018; and Autonomous Colleges Regulations (ACRs) 2018. Recommendations by Niti committee in a third area, accreditation, have received approval by UGC but await a nod from



the HRD ministry.

GARs break away from decades long tradition of one-size-fits-all regulations for our universities. Based on National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) scores, they divide universities into three categories: those receiving more than 3.5 in NAAC scores (Category I); those receiving NAAC scores above 3.25 but not exceeding 3.5 (Category II); and those receiving NAAC score of 3.25 or less (Category III). Category I universities also include universities listed among the top 500 in international rankings such as the Times Higher Education and QS. Universities in Categories I and II are granted considerable autonomy while those in Category III remain subject to existing rules.

Under GARs, universities in Categories I and II are entirely free to start new courses, programmes, departments, schools and centres and open constituent colleges within their geographical jurisdiction in self-financing mode. They are also exempt from UGC inspections, can offer courses in open and distance mode, build in an incentive structure to attract talented faculty from their own resources

To make these reforms permanent, the government will need to bring a new legislation to replace the UGC Act, 1956. Absent such legislation, the risk of a future government reverting to old rules remains

and engage in international collaborations including hiring foreign faculty. Decision making authority has been shifted from UGC to statutory bodies of the university such as the finance committee, academic council and governing board.

Category I universities will additionally automatically come under Section 12B of the UGC Act without a UGC inspection. They will also have the freedom to open research parks, incubation centres and university society linkage centres.

ACRs, the rules governing autonomy to colleges, extend autonomy to a larger set of colleges so that they may evolve into high-performing institutions, even

independent universities. Historically, process roadblocks at the level of the affiliating university, concerned state government and UGC have discouraged colleges from seeking autonomy. Therefore, ideally, autonomy should be automatically conferred once a college is deemed eligible for it. But the existing technical difficulties forbid this path. Consequently, as a compromise solution, the new regulations make a conscious effort to minimise the roadblocks that the affiliating university, the state government and UGC can place in the path to autonomy once an eligible college applies for it.

Turning to accreditation, reforms recommended by Niti committee and approved by UGC propose to throw the door wide open to independent accreditation agencies. Despite efforts, NAAC and National Board of Accreditation have not been able to achieve the scale and credibility necessary to make a success of accreditation process. Many more entities and resources are required to correct this situation.

Under the reforms awaiting HRD ministry approval, an advisory council consisting of public figures and distinguished academics of unimpeachable integrity would be charged with empanelling the accreditation agencies. To ensure that universities and colleges are not able to influence accreditation agencies, they will be required to contribute the fees to a central pool from which the accreditation agencies would be paid.

Some would argue that we must grant autonomy to all institutions. An argument in favour of the graded autonomy in the initial round, however, is that the reform must gain credibility among stakeholders. This is best accomplished by producing success among the top-ranking institutions. There would be every reason to extend the autonomy to all universities and colleges over time.

To make these reforms permanent, the government will need to bring a new legislation to replace the UGC Act, 1956. Absent such legislation, the risk of a future government reverting to old rules remains. The new legislation would also provide the occasion to replace UGC by a less intrusive and more independent regulatory body.

Arvind Panagariya is former Vice Chair, Niti Aayog. Venkatesh Kumar is Chair, Centre for Public Policy and Governance, TISS