

India's Regulators Will Not Agree on Single Accreditor

By SHAILAJA NEELAKANTAN

India's 16 higher-education regulatory bodies are notorious, many here say, for mistaking regulation for governance. Every move to change a course, add more faculty members, or alter the examination format is stubbornly resisted while the system as a whole stagnates for want of leadership.

Now it appears that the latest effort to better coordinate higher-education oversight has fallen victim to the beast that is Indian bureaucracy.

The four largest regulators, which oversee India's national universities, technical colleges, and law and medical schools, have refused to agree to the creation of a single, independent higher-education regulator, a junior minister in charge of higher education reportedly told Parliament last month.

According to a local newspaper, D. Purandeswari said the ministry had washed its hands of the issue after the regulators termed an independent body "nonfeasible." *The Chronicle's* calls to Ms. Purandeswari for comment were not returned.

The problems facing India's higher-education system are staggering. They include poor academic quality at many institutions, a severe shortage of seats at public universities, tremendous challenges for private players — especially foreign institutions — trying to enter the system, and a vast gap between what universities offer and what the market actually needs.

Last year the National Knowledge Commission, an advisory body to the prime minister, harshly criticized the regulators, saying that strong institutions are hamstrung by bureaucracy, which discourages innovation and creativity. Meanwhile, storefront operations are allowed to open with little concern for quality control.

"There are several instances where an engineering college or a business school is approved, promptly, in a small house of a metropolitan suburb without the requisite teachers, infrastructure, or facilities, but established universities experience difficulties in obtaining similar approvals," the commission said in a 2006 report. "The complexity, the multiplicity, and the rigidity of the existing regulatory structure is not conducive to the expansion of higher-education opportunities in India."

In a telephone interview, the commission's chairman, Sam Pitroda, said that "regulators need to worry about [course] content more than regulations."

Last month India's former president, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, said that only 25 percent of engineering graduates were qualified for jobs. The rest lack the technical knowledge, critical-thinking skills, and English proficiency needed by India's booming information-technology sector.

The commission has recommended the establishment of an independent regulator at an arm's length from the government and not beholden to any stakeholders.

It would be the only agency authorized to accord degree-granting power to higher-education institutions. The existing regulators, the commission said, should function more as professional associations.

The commission had said the independent body should be responsible for monitoring standards not just at public institutions but also at the private institutions that have mushroomed across India in the last decade. Many of these largely unregulated institutions charge exorbitant tuition.

Just days after the minister's comment to Parliament, a 21-year-old student in India tried to kill himself when he realized that IIMR Pharma Business School, a New Delhi-based private college he was attending, was not recognized by India's technical-education or higher-education regulators.

Both regulators' Web sites post partial lists of unapproved institutions, but IIMR does not appear among them.

Will India ever have an independent regulator? Mr. Pitroda thinks so.

"I look at this as a process, and the process has started," he says, comparing higher education to the once-unregulated telecommunications industry, which the government eventually reined in.

"It happened in telecom," he says. "In this case, too, it will happen."

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