THE INDIAN UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION

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ABSTRACT

The Indian University Grants Commission (UGC), established shortly after Independence, has vested in its powers the responsibility of regulating academic standards as well as disbursing funds provided by central government.

Unfortunately, in spite of such responsibilities being entrenched by statute, the UGC has chosen not to exercise them which has had serious consequences for academic standards in Indian universities. The Indian university structure was modelled on the collegiate structure of the University of London with the result that the vast expansion of student numbers in the 1950s and 1960s led to an uncontrolled increase in the number and size of the colleges which themselves came to dominate the university system. Again the UGC chose not to intervene and did not attempt to co-ordinate the growth of the colleges. Bearing in mind the public pressures for an expansion of university education, it would have been unrealistic to expect the UGC to have tried to prevent expansion but it could have sought to moderate it and to impose co-ordination. One result has been the growth of research institutes and high calibre teaching institutes outside the established university system. The UGC is now attempting to remedy the situation but it is clear that this will be a long and uphill task.

Section I

When the University Grants Commission (UGC) was established in Britain in 1919, it was primarily conceived as a buffer between the state and the universities. British universities had begun to experience certain strains even before World War I. After the end of the war, in recognition of the changing situation, the UGC was established, quite appropriately, as an advisory body to the Treasury.

The situation in India was entirely different. Till 1919, education was controlled by the central government with the Viceroy as its executive head. In that year education was “transferred” to the Provinces and for the next quarter century or so the central government had very little to do with the way the
universities were managed. A mechanism for co-ordination was, however, developed. It was called the Central Advisory Board of Education and the Provinces were represented by their respective Education Ministers. For the rest everything was controlled by the Provinces; almost the only role which the central government played was to look after the universities at Aligarh and Banaras which had been established as representative centres of learning for the Muslim and the Hindu populations, respectively.

By the time the British withdrew in 1947, the Constituent Assembly had already been set up. It took India another couple of years to hammer out a constitution for herself. One of the important issues that came up during the constitution making related to the control of education. Broadly speaking, there were two conflicting points of view. One favoured education to be under the charge of the central government. The other held that for a country of the size and diversity of India this would be utterly unfeasible and the control of education should be vested in the states. Ultimately a kind of reconciliation was effected between the two points of view. Education, including university education, was accepted as a state subject. In respect of higher and professional education, the centre was given a supervisory and pace-setting role so as to co-ordinate and determine standards.

A proposal to make education a concurrent subject had also been mooted. This was not agreed to despite the fact that the University Education Commission presided over by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan had made a recommendation to this effect only a little earlier. It was only in 1976 that education was made a concurrent subject [1].

There were three important factors which persuaded the constitution makers to vest the centre with these far reaching powers. One was the conviction expressed most characteristically by the then Union Minister of Education, Maulana Azad, that “in the present state of development of education in India it is imperative [that] there should be central guidance, if not central control, on Provincial progress” (Ramamurthy, 1974). This was in line with the thinking of Jawaharlal Nehru who was in favour of checking “the growing tendency towards a lowering of the standard of university education which was already discernible in certain parts of the country” (Ibid). Dr. Ambedkar, the main architect of the constitution, more or less held the same opinion and in the course of an important intervention made the point that different universities ought not be allowed to prescribe or follow different standards.

Secondly, though some people differed with this point of view, the weight of political opinion was in favour of treating education as an agent of change. This point of view was fortified by Entry 20 of the Concurrent List under the heading Economic and Social Planning. It is by virtue of this Entry in the Constitution that the Planning Commission has been set up and the entire process of planning undertaken. Without some measure of control over higher and professional