

IT: Idea whose Time has come

BY DR ARUN NIGAVEKAR

FORMAL education in India began with the establishment of the Bombay, Madras and other universities over 150 years ago. In the early days, however, it was confined to the higher social classes. The spread of education, though, happened with the realisation that education could be a means of development.

Like the Stone Age, ice age and other times through the evolution of man, the current time can safely be called the information technology age. Tools such as the Internet, cellphones and other related equipment bear testimony to the fact that this is the age of information and telecommunication. The new technologies are evolving on a daily basis and are ready to be deployed in the field of education. Over the past century, education has truly reached the masses. In terms of the numbers, but unfortunately, not qualitatively.

The bitter truth remains that even today, some sections of society are deprived of even basic education. This is the real challenge all of us face. In the new century, we should take the onus on us to improve the quality of education and ensure that it reaches all. This can be facilitated through ICT (Information and Communications Technology) and can also allow us to develop seamless educational systems.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has taken some concrete steps to meet with this challenge including some schemes in the Tenth Plan. Grants earmarked for colleges and universities have been hiked 1.25 times to help them improve their quality. However, not all colleges receive these funds. There are 15,434 colleges in India. UGC grants are available only to colleges permanently affiliated with universities. The UGC provides grants as per Section 12 (B) of the UGC. As a result, almost 10,000 colleges are denied grants.

The UGC is considering providing these colleges with grants. The UGC had written to vice-chancellors of all universities to relax the rules regarding affiliation of colleges. A proposal to this effect has also

been submitted asking for an ordinance to amend Section 12 (B). Should this come through, all colleges will receive grants helping them improve facilities.

India, though, is more in the villages than cities and the UGC has treated colleges and universities in remote areas in a special manner. Institutions located in such areas are given additional grants and special aid is also being given to them to bring them in the mainstream.

In today's age of globalisation, though, quality plays a pivotal role. Several of our colleges and universities have the capacity to develop into high quality institutions.

The UGC is involved in screening such institutions and is providing them with special grants. Universities of Potential with Excellence (UPE) have already been announced and are given special grants of Rs five crore each.

A decision to establish Colleges of Potential with Excellence (CPE) was taken last year. A decision was taken to select one per cent colleges for this and accordingly, 47 colleges were selected during the first stage.

The fact of the matter is that information technology is needed to provide qualitative education for all. The UGC net scheme was planned for this very purpose. In this scheme, the UGC provides Internet connections of minimum of two MBPS to colleges and universities. Several international research journals and valuable reference materials were made available to colleges and universities through UGC Net. The use of these facilities is examined through 'Inflibnet'.

The GATT pact has included higher education in the service industry. We have universities providing high quality education and many foreign students are now studying here.

The UGC is, trying to meet the challenges of the new age. The vice-chancellors conference is a part of this attempt. I am confident that this attempt would be successful.

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Commission (UGC) and spoke Shreedhar Loni



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