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Punishing Universities by Interfering with VC Appointments

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The UGC's 2025 draft regulations for selection of vice-chancellors require review. While currently the appointment processes do often prioritise politics, the proposed regulations – going beyond the UGC's remit – will see significant government involvement and are unlikely to improve matters.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) [draft regulations, 2025](#) for the appointment and promotion of teachers and academic staff have sparked considerable debate within the academic community, one of the main reasons being the blatant disregard of constitutional requirements. While this has been [commented upon by others](#), I will focus largely on the problematic implementation of the vice-chancellor appointment guidelines.

For whom do we have universities in the first place? India is a country with a huge population of young adults, and if we aim to convert this potential into tangible results, higher education is crucial. According to the [All India Survey on Higher Education \(AISHE\) 2020-2021](#), there were more than 40 million students in more than 1,100 universities (or university-like institutions) and more than 43,000 colleges. A substantial number of these institutions serve our rural population (43% of the universities and 61.4% of the colleges) and many of the students there are first-generation learners, anxious to use education to empower themselves. The true numbers are even larger today, but the functioning of the UGC does not always seem to operate with this interest group in mind.

For many years now, the UGC has routinely gone beyond the terms of the University Grants Commission Act, 1956 and arrogated to itself a range of unnecessary powers. The grant-giving role is now minimal, with more effort being expended in devising new rules and procedures, and even more in devising punitive actions for non-adherence to these rules. The 2025 draft regulation are yet another example.

In the preamble to these draft regulations, it is stated quite clearly that they apply not only to central and state universities, but also to all recognised institutions, their constituent and affiliated colleges, and all institutions in the [deemed-to-be-university](#) category. Further, all higher education institutions (HEIs) are required to “as soon as possible, but not later than six months of the coming into force of these regulations, take effective steps to amend their statutes, ordinances, or other statutory provisions governing it to bring the same in accordance with these regulations”.

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Quite apart from that carrying this out in 55,000 or more institutions within six months may be unrealistic, the desire to straitjacket all institutions into the same rigid set of rules does not recognise the rich institutional diversity of the academic landscape. A technical university for space science professionals and a liberal arts university for undergraduates have different governance structures.

The most important aspect of the vice-chancellor's role in our universities is to provide academic leadership, and therefore the manner in which a vice-chancellor is selected is most important. The choice of the vice-chancellor can determine the academic trajectory of the institution for better or for worse.

Keeping this in mind, the regulations need to be seriously reconsidered, starting with the very first clause in 10.1, which states that the vice-chancellor be

“A distinguished person possessing high academic qualifications and demonstrated administrative and leadership capabilities, strong alignment to constitutional values, strong social commitment, belief in teamwork, pluralism, ability to work with diverse people, with a flair for innovation and a global outlook in higher education, along with the overall vision of the institution and abilities to manage complex situations with a minimum of ten years of experience as

(i) a Professor in an HEI [higher education institution] or

(ii) at a senior level in reputed research or academic administrative organisations or

(iii) at a senior level in industry, public administration, public policy and/or public sector undertakings, with a proven track record of significant academic or scholarly contributions.”

Inclusion of the third category is not a welcome move. The skills that go into reaching the senior levels in industry or in the other areas of a non-academic nature are very different from those required for high academic achievement. In particular, the nature of a “proven” track record in higher education institutions is quite different from that in industry. Further, this is not equivalent by any yardstick to a senior professorship with 10 years of experience in higher education institutions or research organisations.

Regardless of academic discipline, professors in higher education institutions have an intimate idea of the structure and composition of universities, again regardless of its scope or size. Dealing with students and faculty can only be done when the terms of engagement are clear, and this is not learned in industry. A public sector undertaking or any industry has a very different set of “deliverables” and a different measure of success and efficiency, almost all of which do not and cannot apply to a standard university. The best academics will encourage independent thought, while the best CEOs will strive to groom uniformity in their ranks.

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It should also be emphasised that 10 years as a professor in any university should not by itself be the minimum requirement. It is crucial that candidates for vice-chancellor have substantial experience in administration themselves, as chairs of the departments they belong to, or as deans of faculties. The administrative capability has to have been demonstrated in practice.

For all central universities, the President of India is the visitor, and in most state universities, the [governor is the chancellor](#). Legacies of our colonial past, these largely ceremonial positions have outlived their function and there is no need of them in India today. The sooner these are dispensed with, the better. In all universities operating in the country, the buck starts and stops with the vice-chancellor—this is the only leadership role there is. The chancellor or visitor is advisory to the vice-chancellor at best. Whenever chancellors have attempted to interfere in the day-to-day functioning of a university, it has been an unmitigated disaster.

Existing procedures for selecting leadership in existing institutions are robust enough and have served them well. For instance, in central universities, the executive council of the university will nominate two persons who are familiar with academic governance and are familiar with the institution, along with one person nominated by the ministry of education or the chairman of the UGC. There are different rules in place in some very old universities such as Santiniketan, Banaras Hindu University, or Aligarh Muslim University, and it would be good to respect this history. The uniform regulations that are now specified have a selection committee where the input of the university is even further reduced.

The search-cum-selection committee will have a nominee of the visitor or chancellor as chairperson, a nominee of the UGC chairman and a nominee of an apex body of the university such as the syndicate, senate, executive council, board of management, or any other equivalent. The chairperson of the selection committee will in most cases be a nominee of a political appointee, and this is undesirable. Further, since education is a concurrent subject, there is often political disagreement between the governor or chancellor, who is an appointee of the centre, and the state government, and such conflicts are not in the best interests of the university.

The composition of the selection committee has been made mandatory in the draft regulations, and unless the nominations are done with great care, there may be little input from persons with a distinguished record in academics and academic administration. Further, it is not clear how this will apply to deemed universities—many of these are institutions that do not come under the Ministry of Education and have very specialised roles. A case in point is the Homi Bhabha National Institute, a consortium of 12 institutions that are funded by and administered by the Department of Atomic Energy.

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Given the basic mandate to “nurture in-depth capabilities in nuclear science and engineering and to serve as a catalyst to accelerate the pace of basic research and facilitate its translation into technology development and applications through academic programmes”, it is also clear that interference with the structure of these institutions is not in the national interest. It is a pipe dream to imagine that they can “amend their statutes, ordinances, or other statutory provisions” easily, or for that matter, willingly—and this will bring the UGC into direct conflict with other arms of the government.

Similar considerations apply to institutions such as the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR; under the department of atomic energy) or the Academy of Scientific and Innovative Research (AcSIR; ministry of science and technology) are both deemed to be universities with multiple campuses, as well as to privately funded institutions such as the Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT), SRM Institute of Science and Technology (SRM), and Gandhi Institute of Technology and Management (GITAM) that educate very large numbers of students on several campuses.

The UGC has also spent considerable energy and thought in deciding punitive courses of action against institutions that do not follow the draft regulations, without giving thought to the inconsistencies within them. It is not difficult to foresee a future filled with litigation and a colossal expenditure of time and money since the UGC promises to set up enquiry committees for all accusations of violation. Even if one anticipates that this will be a genuine issue in a small fraction of institutions, the total number that comes under the ambit of the regulations is large.

Further, if violations are established by the enquiry committee, the institution will be debarred from participating in UGC schemes, offering degrees online, and will be removed from the list of higher education institutions. With the commission sitting in perpetual judgement on institutions and deciding on more and more punitive actions, it seems clear that the price for all this will be paid for by the students.

There is reason for some deeper thought about the role of a university, its leadership, and its place in the society it aims to serve. All universities benefit from regulation and oversight, particularly on teaching and curricula, but more attention needs to be paid to local needs. The strategy of aligning all universities to a common, centralised set of regulations is insensitive to the ground requirements of the people who are the clients of these institutions and who will sustain them in the future.

The UGC was created to ensure that there were standards maintained in the degrees that were awarded to students and to ensure that adequate funds would be allocated to universities. These basic duties have been relegated to a minor role. In these regulations, as in much else that the UGC has been doing in the past several years, the adage that “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” has been ignored. Threats of de-recognition of universities based on an alleged violation of rules in appointing a vice-chancellor do not serve the best interests of the main stakeholders, the students.

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There is a definite need for the guidance of an organisation such as the UGC or what it will be replaced by under the National Education Policy 2020. A mature organisation needs to demonstrate its willingness to listen to the people for whom it was created in the first place, and to ensure that institutional governance can be carried out without endangering the future of students. There are already a set of solid guidelines in place that are consistent with the Constitution of India and with the needs of the country at large. The case for a new set of regulations needs to be made more convincingly.

These draft regulations need review and should not be passed in a hurry. Ultimately, the selection of a vice-chancellor is a subjective task that requires judgement on the part of the selection committee. It is common knowledge that the interference of political parties in the governance of universities has been a major issue. Appointments of vice-chancellors as well as other staff have not always been made on merit or on a principled basis, with political considerations playing a far more important role.

The present draft regulations are not in a position to reverse these trends, particularly since the mandated role of government is so major. The UGC should put in safeguards to ensure that the best possible practices are followed while showing sensitivity to the needs of the students as well as to the needs of the teaching community. Only this can serve us well in both the short and the long term.

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