

To subsidise higher education or not?

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Recently, the question of whether higher education in public funded universities should be subsidised or not has received quite a bit of attention. Not only has JNU decided to roughly double the fees - including boarding, lodging and services - for its PhD and master's students, but even the IIT Council has tentatively decided to increase the MTech fees to ₹2 Lakhs per year from the current approximate figure of ₹10000 while doing away with the current stipend scheme. Whereas the IIT step is ostensibly motivated towards deterring unviable legacy master's programmes of little interest to the industry and move towards more attractive industry sponsored programmes, understanding the provocations at JNU have not been easy of late.

It is well understood that the burden of high loans limits the choices of graduating students, and narrows the spaces for their intellectual explorations. This, in turn, ultimately hurts the society. Post-graduate research is usually fully supported everywhere in the world. Boarding and lodging charges are either directly subsidised, or are factored into the stipend or assistantship. At ₹8000 per month stipend, which most of the post-graduate scholars at JNU receive, the proposed increases are bound to pinch. Post-graduate research - especially PhD research - cannot be self-financed, anywhere, because that will necessitate subsequent remuneration with high salaries, forcing research to be entirely market-driven and killing the spirit of free enquiry. Parents supporting post-graduate studies is also a bad idea. One needs independence at that age for any kind of free thinking to be possible. Post-graduate research must be supported by research grants, whenever feasible, either from public or private sources, as is common in the sciences, engineering, economics or finance.

However, it is hard to envisage the industry funding research in areas not directly of interest to them, for example, in philosophy, particle physics, topology or geometry, or even in climate change, pollution, poverty mapping, history, gender studies or socio-economic understanding of public health, except as philanthropy in a limited way. Developing understanding in topics such as these is crucial for society and humanity, and it is therefore essential to internally support them to the extent possible by publicly funded universities.

This is where JNU plays a crucial role, especially in the areas of social and political sciences. It is a one-of-a-kind post-graduate university in the country that has promoted inter-disciplinary research and a vibrant culture of free enquiry where learning outside the classroom has been as important as inside, and where it has been possible to challenge every doctrine and discuss it democratically. Moreover, JNU has set exemplary standards for an inclusive admission policy which extends beyond the mandatory reservations to affirmative actions for gender and other marginalised categories, including for backward regions. The resulting diversity is enriching and must be celebrated rather than attacked.

Students from JNU have not only moved to conventional careers such as in the civil services, armed forces, academics and journalism, but some have also opted for active politics and other forms of activism. JNU can boast of producing a significant number of educated politicians, and there are at least two even in the current central cabinet of ministers. There can be no doubt that there is scope for improvement, including in research, but the same can be said about most other things. It certainly is not the case that JNU is the most broken thing in the country that requires urgent and violent fixing.

Indeed, fees and stipends require periodic adjustments in any university. But the sudden doubling of fees without adequate consultations, and the continual unduly combative posture of the administration, is more indicative of waging a war on what JNU represents, rather than nurturing and shaping it with sagacious insight. The unusual belligerence may have something to do with some unfortunate tax-payers' perception of JNU as a den of 'useless sociologists', 'leftists' and even 'anti-nationals'. Such simplistic and illogical calumny is all the more reason for supporting more such public funded centres of liberal education and research.

In contrast, the IITs have turned to seek their relevance from university rankings rather than from original impactful contributions in engineering, sciences, public policy and education. Projecting wonderfully multidimensional entities like universities onto straight lines to enforce linear ordering is conceptually flawed, and is a fundamentally mistaken way of seeking excellence that leads to faulty reward models and bio-data engineering.

The IIT system has some top-class academics, researchers and students, and they indeed have made sporadic outstanding contributions of both fundamental and applied nature. However, sustained high quality response, either to fundamental questions, or to societal imperatives such as climate change, public health, clean water, pollution or digitisation and society, have, at best, been muted. This is mainly because of faulty metrics and failure to define collective priorities and action groups.

While industry sponsored research in public universities is crucial, not all research and higher education can be market driven. Public funded universities also have the responsibility to train people to ask fundamental questions not of immediate interest to the industry, identify and conduct independent enquiry of societal problems, provide directions, and, if required, raise voices of dissent if policies go awry. Public funding of higher education is thus crucial for any society. And, ultimately, education needs to be free and equitable for all, even if not subsidised.

Of course, the requirements of higher education need to be balanced against the even more fundamental demands of primary and general college education for all. This is where prioritisation and policymaking becomes crucial, and the strategic response and guidance from our academic leadership - both in our universities, and in our policy making bodies and academies - need to become more thoughtful. And the education budget, still among the smallest world-wide as a percentage of the GDP, needs to go up significantly.