

Joining the dots

Poor governance and blatant commercialisation are just two of the myriad challenges facing higher education, argue scholars

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Higher education in India holds the key to inclusive growth and reaping the benefits of a demographic dividend India is arguably bestowed with. The much contested space in the emerging Indian landscape has been witness to conflicts and debates in the wake of reforms being implemented by the government. *Navigating the Labyrinth: Perspectives on India's Higher Education*, edited by noted political scientists Devesh Kapur and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, is a collection of articles written by scholars which deals with challenges facing higher education.

Kapur and Mehta begin with their hypothesis that higher education is faced with a 'trilemma'—scale or size, costs and quality. They argue that only two of the three can be pursued. For example, if the size of higher education sector is expanded by the government, cost escalation cannot be reined in unless we compromise with quality. If we want to ensure quality and are willing to step up budget allocation, the size has to stay put. They argue that India has embarked on 'massification'



■ **Navigating the Labyrinth: Perspectives on India's Higher Education**
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without commensurate rise in the budgetary allocation at the expense of quality with a substantial part of the costs being borne by students. Other than the imperative of conceptualising excellence in education, the 'trilemma' seems to undermine the role of governance reform in improving quality.

Achieving excellence in education is always a daunting task in the absence of technology, and this is where salience of governance reform lies, given the limited supply of human and financial resources. In India, poor

governance and rampant malpractices mar the functioning of a majority of government-funded higher education institutions, and blatant commercialisation has dented the quality of education being delivered by most privately-funded institutions.

The article on governance by Pankaj Chandra covers a number of pertinent and crucial issues, but a critical assessment of the implementation of the UGC Regulations 2016 particularly the implications of faculty assessment system based on the academic performance indicator (API) does not find any mention. Apoorvanand Jha goes back to the past to provide a historical perspective, shedding light on the gradual decline of government-funded institutions.

The book helped me navigate the labyrinth of Indian higher education, but I failed to wriggle out of it. The challenge is to understand the role higher education has to play in our economy, in the wake of the gradual decrease of 'publicness' of higher education and promotion of 'privateness' by policymakers.