Higher Education Needs to Centre Merit

Mains: *GSII – Governance*

Why in News?

The governance gaps in IITs and IIMs, particularly the appointment of directors based on administrative considerations rather than academic merit calls for merit-based leadership, academic autonomy and accountability.

What is the context?

- **Commercialisation** – Former Harvard University President warned that excessive commercialisation could transform universities undermining educational excellence.
- IITs and IIMs are expanding courses, faculty and research centres to generate revenues, but weak governance creates operational and reputational risks.
    - In the AI era, even minor institutional irregularities can cause immediate and lasting reputational damage.
- **Merit-Based Institutional Governance** – Leading universities in the United States and China emphasise merit in student selection, faculty recruitment, research appointments.
    - India's IITs and IIMs must similarly prioritise academic competence, intellectual diversity and institutional integrity in governance.

What is the Existing IIM Governance Framework?

- **IIM Act, 2017** – Granted IIMs the status of Institutes of National Importance and *empowered their boards to appoint directors.*
- **IIM (Amendment) Act, 2023** – Made the President of India the Visitor of every IIM, strengthening the Central Government's role in board nominations, chairperson selection and appointment of directors.
- Consequently, government influence over institutional leadership has become more direct, highlighting the need for safeguards against arbitrary appointments.

What are the Major Concerns in Higher Education Governance?

- **Administrative Dominance** – Government influence in leadership appointments may weaken institutional autonomy and compromise merit-based selection.
    - Some IIT and IIM directors avoid classroom responsibilities because they are selected primarily for administrative capabilities.
- **Weakening Academic Standards** – Compromising faculty recruitment to fill vacancies quickly can adversely affect teaching quality and institutional reputation.

    - Newer IIMs may favour expedient recruitment practices over rigorous selection processes.
- **Commercialisation of Institutions** – Excessive emphasis on revenue generation, new courses and institutional expansion may undermine academic excellence.
    - Rapid expansion without adequate governance mechanisms increases operational and reputational risks.
- **Weak Vigilance Mechanisms** – Poorly structured vigilance systems can become instruments of interference rather than safeguards against institutional irregularities.
    - The IIM Rohtak controversy of 2019, involving questions about the director's educational credentials and arbitrary conduct, highlights governance weaknesses.
- **Declining Institutional Credibility** – Examination and recruitment scams, including Vyapam and NEET-UG, demonstrate how human manipulation can defeat technological safeguards.
    - Weak leadership integrity can damage public trust and India's international academic reputation.

What Safeguards are Required to Strengthen Higher Education Governance?

- **Merit-Based Board Composition** – IIT and IIM boards should prioritise academic merit and intellectual diversity while including experts from academia, industry, administration and finance.
    - Members should possess high academic standing and relevant institutional expertise.
- **Transparent Appointment of Directors** – Government appointments should adequately consider recommendations made by institutional boards.
    - Directors must possess strong academic credentials, teaching experience and research contributions alongside administrative competence.
    - Globally, business school deans at Harvard, Wharton and Stanford hold tenured professorships in their respective institutions.
- **Protecting Faculty Quality** – Faculty recruitment must follow transparent, rigorous and selection-based procedures without compromising academic standards.
    - Institutions should prioritise teaching competence, research excellence and intellectual contributions over expediency.
- **Strengthening Vigilance Mechanisms** – Vigilance officers should function as independent compliance and audit authorities rather than instruments of external interference.
    - They should be appointed through institutional boards and remain accountable to them in cases involving financial irregularities, director-level misconduct and senior faculty appointments.
- **Clear Institutional Division of Responsibilities**
    - **Board of Governors** – Should provide institutional oversight, strategic direction and accountability.
    - **Director** – Should manage the institution's day-to-day administration and governance.
    - **Academic Council** – Should regulate curricula, academic standards and academic selection.

What is the Way Forward?

- **Institutional Autonomy** – Protect academic institutions from arbitrary political and administrative interference.
- **Transparent Governance** – Establish clear, merit-based procedures for appointing directors, board members and faculty.
- **Academic Excellence** – Prioritise research quality, teaching standards and intellectual diversity over revenue-driven expansion.
- **Independent Accountability** – Strengthen internal audit, compliance and vigilance mechanisms through institutional boards.
- **Global Competitiveness** – Adopt international best practices in academic leadership, faculty recruitment and research governance.

What lies ahead?

- India's aspiration to place IITs and IIMs among the world's top 20 institutions requires more than infrastructure and expansion.
- Merit-based leadership, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and transparent accountability must remain the foundations of higher education governance.

Reference

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