Messing with Higher Education

What is the issue?

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The drastic cuts mandated by the latest University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines on MPhil and PhD are indeed alarming.

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What is the importance of MPhil?

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- The two-stage option is designed to address the need that master's students often feel for additional training and skills before taking on the challenge of conducting original research for several years.
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- The MPhil helps to orient students towards the new and entirely different activity of research aimed at adding to current knowledge by asking and answering new questions.
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- Moreover, an MPhil degree makes one eligible for a full-time teaching position at the university and college level, and is thus critical for expanding faculty strength.
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- Supervising an MPhil student is one of the best ways for an assistant professor to grow as a researcher and teacher, so much so that junior faculty should be encouraged to have more such students, at least initially.
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What is the recent controversy?

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- There has been a widening of access to students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are the first from their families to enter higher education.
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- Instead of enabling and strengthening this surge, the UGC's 2016 guidelines (which are mandatory for all institutions from the 2017-18 academic year) appear to be bent on halting and reversing it.
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- The "vision" of these guidelines is to severely curtail the number of MPhil students, perhaps with the intention of doing away with the degree altogether.
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- The previous guidelines of 2009 allowed **faculty to supervise up to eight PhD and five MPhil students,** with the overall cap intended to regulate faculty workload.
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- But, the 2016 guidelines say that an assistant professor can have just one MPhil and four PhD students; an associate professor two MPhil and six PhD students; and a full professor three MPhil and eight PhD students at a given point of time.
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- Moreover, it has been further decided that only full-time regular faculty of a given department can be supervisors; that arrangements across departments would require co-supervisors; and that supervisors from affiliating colleges must have at least two publications in refereed journals to be eligible to supervise.
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- Keeping in mind that the MPhil is a two-year degree, with supervisors being allotted during the course of the first year itself, **these guidelines amount to cutting down on student intake** every other year, leading to unviably small number at best.
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What will be the impact of these guidelines?

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- **MPhil will turn unviable** because of low numbers.
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- More students will try to get into PhDs straight from an MA degree and being ill-prepared for the challenges they will face, they are more likely to sink than swim.
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- Faculty will be less equipped to develop as research supervisors.
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- And most important of all, the necessary expansion in faculty strength both

to meet existing severe shortages, particularly in faculty from disadvantaged sections, and to meet the growth in students will not only be halted but also reversed under the new conditions.
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Source: The Hindu

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