

IITs Still Struggling With Students Drop-out Problem

27 Sept 2019. The Council for Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) chaired by Human Resource Development Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank had to come up with solutions for the number of perennial problems faced by the IIT management during the past 20 years or so. The Council, headed by the HRD Minister, is the highest decision-making body of all the 23 IITs, the country's premier engineering institutions.

Overview.

It was the 53rd meeting being held in New Delhi. The IIT Council identified such problems as shortcomings :

- there are 'academically weak students' at the IITs who drop out from the IIT system,
- IITs do not have sufficient financial or admin autonomy yet,
- their 'internationalisation' through renewable contracts for foreign faculty and test OCI (Overseas Citizens of India) students directly for JEE Advanced is not being encouraged,
- the system sees overlap and duplication of beneficiaries,
- IITs do little on research. They do not identify thrust areas and do not set up national-level laboratories for the same,
- the IITs do not mentor other nearby engineering colleges.

As per HRD Ministry data, nearly 2,500 undergraduate and postgraduate students dropped out from the 23 IITs across the country in the last two years. (both at the undergraduate and postgraduate level). These include cases of expulsion on account of weak academic performance. For instance, in 2019,

IIT-Kanpur expelled 18 students on the grounds of poor grades, of which half were B.Tech students.



IITsIIT students

As per the latest All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), a study by the HRD Ministry, the number of students who enrolled into BTech and Bachelor of Engineering (BE) courses fell by 0.05 million: from 4.25 million in 2014-15 to 3.77 million in 2018-19. More than 75 engineering and technical colleges across the country have opted for “progressive closure” in 2019. Such institutions will not take fresh admissions from this year.

The data on the steep fall in engineering admission and drop-out rates at the IITs is thus worrying the HRD ministry.

The Council, in its meeting, thus admits that there are indeed ‘weak’ students since they have to drop out while they are halfway into their studies in the IIT. As such, the said IITs have not achieved their objectives. They are still struggling with the inherent flaws in the system which were finally revealed in the solution proposed by the Council :

“Academically weak students, who are not able to secure the

required credits for promotion to the next semester, maybe allowed an exit option with a degree programme after the second semester, rather than being forced out of the programme.”

How did the situation arise

It has been surveyed that most drop-outs from IITs and IIMs are from the reserved category. Nearly 48 per cent of students dropping out of the IITs and over 62.6 per cent from IIMs in the past two years are from the reserved category.

- Quota system allows students with below-par merit being inducted into IITs,
- Due to reservations, fundamentally weak students somehow though manage to get into the IITs, but inside they have a really tough time keeping up with the pace of studies,
- Teachers are not able to cultivate and motivate,
- IITs do not examine the intelligence of the students nor develop their creativity,
- The credibility and reputation of the IITs get gradually eroded.

The HRD minister had brought up this issue in the Parliament in July 2019. “Dropouts in undergraduate programmes are attributed to withdrawal due to wrong choices filled, poor academic performance of students, personal and medical reasons,” he had said.

The Irony

The Council assumes that this suggestion will be good for the weak student who can't cope up with rigours of IIT study. It said that those who are unable to keep pace with the required academic standards can be allowed an 'honourable' exit after the second semester. Officials say that academically weak students will be able to choose BSc degree after the second semester and leave after three years, provided they have met the minimum academic standards.

However, it becomes logically wrong to label people as 'academically weak' if they are exiting the program early. If such students are labelled as weak, then the BSc solution will be like a loser's option. The student may be reluctant to accept it. Moreover, the industry and the potential recruiters also may not give such students any importance. What's the point in getting into an IIT and getting out of it as a weak student carrying a BSc paper?

Thus the so-called BSc scheme will not be of any use. Being professional, the IITs should not have kid gloves for weak students. It will be prudent if reservation policy is given a rethink and only students with merit are offered seats. The aspirant should be good enough for IITs and avoid getting inside IITs through the reservations route because it defeats the purpose of social justice. If such selected students turn out to be weak, then there is an equal possibility that some students who did not get selected may have been bright after all.

An estimated 0.9 million students take JEE (main) that's held twice a year. Out of these, about 13,500 get an IIT seat. Since students get into the IITs after clearing a cut-throat competition, they are presumably quality students but are not able to cope up with the academic requirements at times. It was felt they should be given an exit option rather than the entire effort going waste.

The proposal reveals that the HRD ministry does not wish to consider improving the entrance test and admission process that matches the IIT education standards so that the right candidates are selected rather than selecting candidates and later giving degree discounts to weak students.

The Council could not provide any solution to other students who could have continued but failed due to admission of less suitable candidates through the quota system. The Council did not recommend any reforms for the process of JEE selection

which urgently needs some tinkering. Let there be a uniform policy for all IITs if the brand has to be saved.

IITs Autonomy

Autonomy on the lines of the IIMs under the new IIM Act still eludes the IITs. The recent Council meeting also proposed a new model of financial autonomy for the IITs in consultation with the NITI Aayog. The institutes will charge tuition fees based on actual costs (nearly Rs 0.07 million a year) from the students. Currently, IIT students pay only Rs 0.02 million per annum as tuition fee. Moreover, almost half of the BTech students at IITs under the SC/ST category are exempt from paying any tuition fee. The institutes bear the difference between actual cost and income through their internal accruals and block grants received from the government.

The government, while following socialism principles, will provide financial help directly to the students through scholarships or "in any other manner as it deems fit". Formulae like direct fee reimbursement to students through DBT instead of subsidising them are under discussion. The IITs will not receive the block grants from the government. They will be free from government restrictions on using their financial resources.

The Council will also consider empowering the Board of Governors of an IIT to pick its members and chairperson. Currently, the HRD Ministry appoints them. IIT directors, according to the agenda, will continue to be selected by the government. However, apart from the IIT Council's approval, the IIT Act will also have to be amended to finally empower the IITs.

The council has indicated that it was open to all templates on greater financial and administrative autonomy for IITs. The institutes should be affordable for students from all sections of society. Each IIT must review the 'Merit-cum-Means' scheme

to ensure that there was no overlap and duplication of beneficiaries. The council also called upon the IITs to concentrate on research. Each IIT should identify 4-5 thrust areas and set up national-level labs. Each IIT should mentor 10 engineering colleges in its vicinity. To 'internationalise' the IITs, the council felt it was necessary to recruit foreign faculty on renewable contracts rather than the current five-year tenure.

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