AN AMBITIOUS PUSH FOR VALUES, ETHICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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"Mulya Pravah 2.0 lays stress on the criticality of 'encouraging persons at all levels to think and give their advice freely" | Photo Credit: Getty Images

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has been issuing regulations, guidelines and directives at break neck speed that some of the important ones miss drawing the attention of the higher education community. One such guideline is Mulya Pravah 2.0, a modified version of Mulya Pravah, which was notified in 2019. It seeks to inculcate human values and professional ethics in higher education institutions. The stated intention is to build value-based institutions by orienting individuals and institutions towards developing a deep respect for fundamental duties and constitutional values and bonding with the country.

The trigger is the findings of a survey of human resource managers which highlight unethical practices in various organisations. The most prominent of these are "favouritism in hiring, training, pay and promotion; sexual harassment; gender discrimination in promotion; inconsistent view on discipline; lack of confidentiality; gender differentiation in compensation; non-performance factors overlooked in appraisals; arrangements with vendors for personal gain; and gender discrimination during recruitment and hiring".

These vices may not be specific or exclusive to higher education institutions but could be rampant among them. None can assert that they are free of malpractices. The UGC must get credit for notifying the guideline, though it may not be sufficient to curb corruption and violations of ethics and integrity.

Unless backed by sincere efforts to ensure that the provisions of Mulya Pravah are effected in letter and spirit, the move may be no more than a mere formality. The higher education regulator(s) must demonstrate zero tolerance and act swiftly to quell even the smallest trace of corruption in the admission, examination, hiring processes or, for that matter, in any aspect of university administration.

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Mulya Pravah 2.0 underscores the need for utmost transparency in administration and highlights that decision-making in higher education institutions must be solely guided by institutional and public interest, and not be vitiated by biases.

It seeks to abolish the discriminatory privileges of officials and urges the administration to punish the corrupt. It lays stress on the criticality of 'encouraging persons at all levels to think and give their advice freely'.

The guideline expects higher education institutions to 'ensure integrity, trusteeship, harmony, accountability, inclusiveness, commitment, respectfulness, belongingness, sustainability, constitutional values and global citizenship'. This is a laudable and timely intervention, as these values are receding. The authorities in and officers of universities must ensure that the provisions of their acts, statutes, ordinances and regulations are strictly adhered to in letter and spirit.

The guideline requires higher education administration to conduct matters ensuring accountability, transparency, fairness, honesty, and the highest degree of ethics. It reminds them to act in the best interest of their institution, create a conducive culture and work environment for teaching, learning, and research and develop the potential of their institution. It further asserts that officers and staff must 'refrain from misappropriating financial and other resources, and refuse to accept gift, favour, service, or other items from any person, group, private business, or public agency which may affect the impartial performance of duties'.

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The emphasis on the need for and the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of information is bemusing as it runs counter to the right of information as an instrument to ensure accountability. Higher education institutions must, in fact, be mandated to voluntarily disclose all critical information and subject themselves to public scrutiny.

The guideline would do well to urge them to promptly upload agendas, proceedings and minutes of the meetings of their decision-making bodies, sub-committees and standing committees. They must put up their annual reports and audited accounts in the public domain. This will deter malpractices and go a long way in restoring public confidence in the workings of the institutions.

Asserting that teaching is a noble profession, and that teachers play a crucial role in 'shaping the character, personality, and career of the students', it requires them to 'act' as role models and set examples of 'good conduct, and a good standard of dress, speech and behaviour, worth emulating by students'. It asks them to abide by the provisions of the acts, statutes, ordinances, rules, policies, and procedures of their universities but maintain silence on the issue of teachers' associations.

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Mulya Pravah 2.0 expects staff and student unions to 'support the administration in development activities and raise issues in a dignified manner', although this sounds like suggesting that they act and be the team B of the administration and desist from raising issues concerning their members.

Associations and unions of stakeholders are pressure groups to exert collective influence to protect the rights and interests of their members. While no one could ever suggest that they always be at loggerheads with the administration, it may be too much to expect them to take sides with the administration.

Higher education institutions are communities of scholars where no one should be more equal than the other. Each stakeholder must be allowed to proactively participate in protecting,

preserving and promoting the culture and standards of their institutions. The idea of collegiality must require the administration to engage with and consult stakeholders in decision-making.

Mulya Pravah 2.0 insists that staff and students unions must 'raise issues in a dignified manner'. As the guideline does not define or delineate what 'dignified manner' entails, the provision could be misused to threaten, shun, silence or at least undermine the collective voices of the stakeholders.

The threat is real and imminent. Associations and unions of teachers, staff and students have often been banned and suspended on the slightest pretext. Their office-bearers and elected representatives have generally been accused of violating the code of conduct and acting against the interests of their institutions. Many are fighting battles for their survival in courts of law.

It is obvious that provisions such as these may cause more harm than good. Discordant voices may, at times, cause inconvenience to the powers that be. In the ultimate analysis, they only strengthen institutions by improving the quality and sustainability of the decisions.

Furqan Qamar, a professor of management at Jamia Millia Islamia, is a former adviser for education in the Planning Commission and Secretary-General of the Association of Indian Universities (AIU). The views expressed are personal

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