

National Research Foundation Bolstering Scientific Excellence

THE Indian Cabinet recently approved the National Research Foundation (NRF) to streamline and strengthen the country's research ecosystem. While India's third rank in both scientific publications as well as number of PhD students is something to be happy about, the immediate challenges before the National Research Foundation would be improving the country's 9th rank in citations, 6th in patent filings and 40th in innovation. Besides, the NRF would also have to address the concern that India's spending on R&D is among the lowest in the world.

With a budget of Rs 50,000 crore for the next five years, the NRF has set its sights on catapulting India into a global powerhouse in scientific research and innovation. While the Central Government would be contributing Rs 14,000 crore, the remaining Rs 36,000 crore is expected to be gathered from public sector enterprises, industry, foundations, and international research organisations — in itself a challenging proposition but well worth pursuing.

As per the contours of the National Research Foundation unveiled until now, the Department of Science and Technology (DST) will be the administrative Department of NRF — it will be governed by a Governing Board consisting of eminent researchers and professionals with the Prime Minister being the ex-officio President of the Board and the Union Minister of Science & Technology & Union Minister of Education the ex-officio Vice-Presidents. NRF's functioning will be governed by an Executive Council chaired by the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India.

The National Research Foundation is expected to transform India's research landscape by providing a robust framework for nurturing talent, promoting interdisciplinary collaborations, and allocating substantial financial resources to support groundbreaking research initiatives. The NRF is expected to focus on research priorities with national objectives and aimed at addressing critical challenges and leveraging emerging technologies.

The NRF's emphasis on nurturing and empowering early career researchers is commendable. By creating fellowships, scholarships, and mentoring programmes, the foundation seeks to attract and retain the brightest minds in the country. Besides, the infusion of funding through the NRF mechanism will alleviate the long-standing financial constraints faced by researchers.

There is however a need to increasingly foster interdisciplinary collaboration to solve complex societal challenges. Further and closer coordination is required with other ministries and departments before conceptualising and embarking on a research project. Besides, industry and university participation needs to be strengthened and streamlined if India is to rationalise and bolster its research funding as a percentage of its GDP.

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