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## Something wrong if an IIM can't offer online courses

Just when it appeared the government was readying to reduce its chokehold on education by giving both colleges and universities more freedom in setting academic and other standards as long as they met certain quality standards, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has come out with new regulations that suggest it is in no mood to let go. The UGC's new rules on distance education, for instance, stipulate that only recognised universities or deemed-to-be-universities would be allowed to offer such courses. So, an ISB or an IIM, for instance, will not be able to offer distance learning programmes under the new regulations. Apart from the fact that the UGC seems to place great faith in universities, it is not clear why it has come out with these rules since there is already a National Assessment and Accreditation Council in place to rate all institutions based on their faculty, curriculum, etc. If, in addition, standardised SAT/GRE-type examinations are available, that will also help in the ranking of institutions. Any college/institution that has a good rank should then be free to offer various courses. Keep in mind that an ISB that did not even get government accreditation has a lot more credibility among employers than several accredited colleges/universities. The IIMs, similarly, were not allowed to offer 'degrees' thanks to antiquated rules, but this has not affected their standing in either India or overseas.

Indeed, once there is transparent, and independent, scoring of institutions, this will be a better check on quality than can possibly be done by the rules being put in place by UGC. Looking at video feeds of examination halls, and mandating that examinations be held in government schools as is being suggested by UGC will be unnecessary if those giving such degrees are ranked—any institution that thrives on cheating will automatically score lower marks and that, in turn, will affect its ability to attract students. UGC just needs to look at the track record of colleges/universities certified by it to know this. It is especially ironic that UGC should be looking at putting curbs on distance learning just when MOOC are becoming increasingly popular for a variety of reasons including the fact that, if continuing education has to be the norm, this cannot be provided by existing colleges and universities—Coursera already has 2 million Indian students and edX has just over 1 million. Students are gravitating towards these institutions because they are recognised as providers of good quality course, not because they are UGC-certified. Once government certification becomes the main criterion for being able to run

## Death of distance

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an institution, people learn how to game the system; rankings based on constant evaluation of marks/alumni/faculty, etc, keep institutions in check like nothing else.