Earlier this year, in September, Union Human Resource Development Minister Smriti Irani joined the vice chancellors of Central universities at their two-day retreat in Chandigarh. There, among other things, a working group of select vice-chancellors was constituted to frame guidelines on five key issues: a common admission test, a common curriculum, student mobility, faculty mobility, and a national system of credit transfer. The working group recently submitted its proposals.

These proposals are aimed at achieving standardisation on these five issues for all 45 Central universities in the country. It is not clear whether the working group considered linking standardisation to the imperative of improving the quality of education at these institutions.

In all fairness, some of the proposals of the working group appear reasonable. For example, there seems to be nothing particularly objectionable about introducing a common entrance test for admission to Central universities. However, there are other recommendations which, if adopted, threaten to diminish the quality of research and teaching at some of the best educational institutions in the country, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, Panjab University and Delhi University, and damage their national and global reputation.

The most controversial of all the proposals is one that recommends faculty members to be transferred from one university to another. At this point, it is not known whether such transfers are to be voluntary or compulsory, the period of time for which each posting would be tenable, or who would be responsible for deciding when and where faculty members are to be transferred. But if the transfers are made mandatory, it will bring down the quality of education at our best Central universities without lifting the lesser ones. Further, the “power to transfer” could be routinely abused by vice chancellors, heads of departments or whoever else has the authority to effect them, to the detriment of faculty performance, especially in terms of research output.

On the face of it, the argument in favour of faculty transfers appears noble enough — lesser institutions that are normally unable to attract accomplished faculty members will benefit from the arrival of teachers and researchers from prestigious institutions. However, this line of reasoning doesn’t take into account the rationale for creating and maintaining Central universities. These are our flagship universities, which are meant to be both teaching and research institutions. Unlike the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management, they are also institutions that serve as models for state universities. Further, since it has become increasingly evident from world and regional university rankings that most of our universities are not up to global standards, primarily because of their low research output, we have been asking and expecting faculty at Central universities to do more and better research.

For the most part, certainly in most STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) disciplines, good research often requires expensive infrastructure — labs, equipment, libraries etc. Central universities are unequally endowed in this respect. Some of the older ones have built good infrastructure over time, so their faculty members are able to carry out cutting-edge research. However, many Central universities are functioning with jugaad facilities. Now consider the following scenario — a solid researcher at Delhi University is asked to move to a lesser Central university. It would be impossible for this researcher to replicate the same lab and working conditions at her new institution. This could bring down, if not entirely kill, her research output.

Consider another scenario. It is well known that the best research is often carried out in teams, when a number of faculty members with similar research interests work with a dedicated group of postgraduate students under fairly optimal conditions. Now imagine that one or two key faculty members of a research team are transferred out. It would be impossible to carry out collaborative research over long distances when the locations at which team members are based vary greatly in terms of facilities. Where does that leave the research team, including students?

The recommendations of the working group do not take into account the fact that transferring research-oriented faculty will hurt their performance and hence the standing of their respective departments and the university. Such transfers make sense for faculty that is made up primarily of teachers, as is the case with colleges where the faculty is required to be dedicated to undergraduate teaching. Transfers would also be reasonable for those faculty members who have taken to administration and can contribute to building institutions. They certainly do not add up for researchers.

The current set of proposals suggests that the members of the working committee either do not understand what good research involves or have deliberately aligned their proposals to suit the agenda of the human resource development ministry officials.