

Govt. eases procurement norms for research labs

Finance Ministry allows select institutions to buy equipment outside the GEM portal; move comes amid complaints from scientists over sub-standard materials affecting their research

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Amid complaints from scientists on sub-standard equipment affecting their research, the Finance Ministry has rolled back restrictions imposed on how scientific labs procured equipment, through a circular issued on June 5.

The first significant change was allowing affiliated scientific institutions to bypass the Government e-marketplace (GEM), a Commerce Ministry initiative meant to prioritise made-in-India equipment. Existing norms require all government purchases – from laptops to furniture – to be made with the cheapest vendor identified through the GEM portal.

As *The Hindu* had previously reported, this was often a stumbling block for scientists who required customised equipment conforming to high quality standards to replicate experiments. The vendors of the GEM, scientists had told *The Hindu*, were often unable to meet such standards. For procurement outside the GEM universe, scientists had to first establish that the necessary wares were unavailable on the site. This often led to delays and compromise on research goals.



Science outreach: The circular has also doubled the ceiling on goods acquired by departments without quotations. FILE PHOTO

Thursday's notification allowed Directors of select institutes and Vice-Chancellors or Chancellors of universities to make "non-Government e-market place procurement of scientific equipment and consumables".

The Director of a leading biology institute, who declined to be identified, said he could "scarcely believe" that the government had eased procurement norms via GEM in a "single stroke". "This has been a major demand from the scientific community and a restriction imposed after 2019. It is a positive development and should greatly ease research and deve-

lopment," he told *The Hindu*. "This reverts to how procurement used to happen before the GEM, where institute heads had greater autonomy."

The circular also allows heads of scientific institutions to approve "global tender enquiry" up to ₹200 crore. Prior to this, departmental Secretaries – such as the heads of the Department of Science and Technology, Department of Biotechnology or Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) – were required to issue such clearances. This usually led to a "pile-up" of requests and concomitant procurement delays, a scientist told *The Hindu*.

The circular has also doubled the ceiling on goods that can be procured by scientific departments without quotations from ₹1 lakh to ₹2 lakh. For a purchase committee, the ceiling was raised from ₹10 lakh to 25 lakh and for tender enquiries, the upper limit was increased from ₹50 lakh to ₹1 crore. These limits were revised in July 2024 too and easing them reflects inflation while allowing scientific institutions greater control in choosing vendors.

However, all of these concessions are strictly for scientific equipment and consumables and meant only for organisations affiliated to the Ministry of Science and Technology, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Department of Atomic Energy and Space, Indian Council of Medical Research, Indian Council for Agricultural Research and educational institutions conducting postgraduate research under various Ministries.

Science Minister Jitendra Singh said that this was a "landmark" step. "This will reduce delays, also enhance autonomy and flexibility for research institutions – empowering them to innovate faster." He credited Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the "transformative reform".