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EDITORIAL

Higher Education Commission of India: challenges ahead

Now that the Government of India has decided to set up the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), it is time to look at the challenges ahead.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) will cease to exist. All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) will continue to function. National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) will continue too.

The proposed Act delineates the regulatory authority and the means of fund allocation. UGC will be replaced by HECI without financial responsibility. The fund release will be directly under the control of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). The result will be a nightmare.

MHRD is already distributing funds to IITs, NITs, IISERs and other institutes of national importance. Distribution of funds to the central universities will be much more demanding on MHRD. State universities need funds too. UGC was doing much more than just releasing funds, albeit with limited efficiency.

The proposed draft emphasizes on the functional autonomy of the universities and deemed universities and at the same time gives the regulatory body the powers to 'authorize' the existing institutions to continue or close down within a period of three years. HECI will lay down the guidelines for the award of degrees and publish the curriculum to be followed by academic institutions. One nation, one curriculum does not work. India is a diverse country and we need enormous flexibility in formulating curricula.

The proposed draft outlines what HECI would do in terms of review and the actions that it could take. Annual review is unrealistic and is likely to become a ritual. Review every five years is more realistic. The clause, 'The Chief Executive and other members of Management of such institution who do not comply with the penalty imposed by the Commission shall be liable for prosecution as per procedure laid down under the Criminal Procedure Code and may be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend up to three years' is draconian and goes against the spirit of autonomy.

In terms of numbers, India has done well in educating the masses in the last seven decades after independence, as is evident from the reports of All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) published by MHRD each year. The bottom of the pyramid has been enlarged to

ensure gender equity and societal inclusiveness to ensure that the socially disadvantaged are given a helping hand to move up the ladder. The next task is to improve the quality of education and infrastructure for teaching as well as research to reach the pinnacle of excellence. This requires massive input in terms of funds to improve the basic infrastructure in central as well as state institutions. Unless the quality of education and the infrastructure (laboratories) is improved at the college level and the university level, leaders of science and technology and arts and humanities will simply not emerge!

A closer look at individual institutions would reveal that the infrastructure in many state and central universities is appalling. Efforts have been made over the years to remedy the situation through the Fund for Improvement of S&T Infrastructure in Universities and Higher Educational Institutions (FIST) operated by the Department of Science and Technology, New Delhi. But the rules of the game made it clear that the funds could not be given for buildings and other basic infrastructure. Equipment grants made sure that basic equipment was available in most of the colleges and universities. But the improvement in the basic infrastructure has not kept pace with changing times.

A look at developed countries would reveal that the difference in infrastructure between the top institutions and the institutes down the line is limited. Regardless of where a student joins, certain minimum quality of education is guaranteed in those institutes.

India is still a developing nation, eager to become a developed nation. The purpose of this Editorial is to state what is needed to be done if we wish to take advantage of the demographic dividend and emerge as a leading scientific and technological warehouse.

We need to invest heavily, not just in top institutions, but from bottom up. Demolish/renovate old buildings (some of them have the heritage tag) and make all laboratories state of the art. Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) loans would not do!

Setting up Institutes of Eminence is essential, but this also requires that the basic infrastructure in the feeder institutes (read colleges and universities) is improved. Let us not forget the old dictum: quality input begets quality output. Quality faculty will ensure quality graduates and they in turn will ensure quality faculty input into the

system. There is a convective relationship between quality students and quality faculty.

There is an urgent need to internationalize our academic institutions. We need to actively admit foreign students and appoint foreign faculty. We must make our campuses conform to global standards. Safety in the laboratories is not an option. It is a way of life. During my visits to neighbouring countries, I found that they are eager to send their students to India for higher education. If they could get scholarship, it is even better. There are scholarships available, in principle, to students from SAARC nations. But nobody seems to know how to go about applying for them.

One can make estimates of the amount of funds required to improve the basic infrastructure in all academic institutions. Miracles do not happen. We need to plan and invest over a period of time, in a systematic manner. Very quickly the argument gets diverted into state versus centre. The Centre has to ensure that funds are provided to central as well as state institutions. The taxpayer has been paying educational cess over the years. This can be made use of.

Recently, there was a big news about UGC granting autonomy to many institutions. Acts and Statutes of many institutes provide autonomy to them. This has been eroded over the years. This has to be restored across the board. Autonomy is needed in admission of students and in designing the curriculum with changing times. Institutions of national importance have used their autonomy in ensuring quality education and research over the last five decades.

Ensuring quality in academic institutions has to start with the appointment of quality educationists as Directors and Vice-Chancellors. Search cum Selection committees have been reduced to Selection Committees. Candidates are expected to apply. Many qualified and deserving candidates would simply not apply.

In many institutes, funds allocated are not utilized in time, thanks to archaic purchase procedures. The Government is fully aware of the problem with L-1 (lowest quotation). Administrators are afraid of taking decisions as they are afraid of audit objections and reference to the Central Vigilance Commission. Best practices elsewhere have to be adopted in Indian institutions in a time bound manner, if we are serious about saving them.

In most of the Indian institutes, the research done is incremental in nature. Colleagues should be encouraged to take risk in undertaking projects that are in frontiers of science and technology. This can happen only in an atmosphere of trust and freedom.

It is time to let the society know what we are doing. There is a need to increase the outreach programmes in each institute. Students from all walks of life should be encouraged to visit individual labs and institutions so that they would come back for higher studies. Many institutes find their 'open house' programmes a big success. Busloads of students and teachers and parents come visiting. They are curious to know what is happening in the citadels of learning. If the public is convinced, the govern-

ment will have no choice except to increase funding for academic institutions.

Summary: decentralize and deregulate higher education; appoint able leaders as Directors and Vice-Chancellors; give them training in academic administration and financial management; provide adequate funds; come up with user friendly GFR for academic institutions; keep decisions of academic institutions outside the microscopic purview of the Government and Judiciary.

Autonomy is essential in all aspects: autonomy in recruitment, in admission, in curriculum and in functioning. India's strength is its diversity. There is a need to diversify the structure to meet the aspirations of the students from various backgrounds. There is no need for everybody to become an engineer or a doctor. The country needs scientists, sociologists, philosophers, economists, historians, artists, linguists,... It will be a pity if all academic institutions become IITs.

Teaching and research have to go hand in hand. For practical reasons, colleges will continue to focus on teaching, but research has to become an integral part. University departments may focus on research, but without undergraduates, research will not flourish.

Continuous evaluation of students is essential. Continuous evaluation of the faculty is needed too. Bodies like NAAC need to become independent to ensure strict evaluation of institutions.

MOOCS and Swayam cannot be a substitute for classroom teaching. They can supplement. If the availability of quality material is the key factor, MIT courses available online should have raised the standards across the globe. NPTEL could have raised the standards across the country. But that did not happen. Therefore, there is a need to ensure quality in every aspect of higher education.

Academic institutes are not government departments. They need to procure things and make things for effective teaching and useful research in a time bound manner. Many institutions receive funds, but they cannot make use of them because of the archaic procedures. Purchase procedures need to be simplified.

In a letter of 19 August 1943, Homi Bhabha wrote to J. R. D. Tata: 'The four years I have spent since my return from Cambridge have convinced me that the lack of proper conditions and intelligent financial support hampers the development of science in India at the pace which the talent in the country would warrant.' (Bhabha, J. (ed.), *Homi Bhabha as Artist*, A Marg Publication, November 1968, p. 37).

Unfortunately, 75 years later, the situation remains the same.

We as a nation simply cannot afford to remain the same for the next 75 years.

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