

Reform 101: On higher education

The provisions of the new Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) Bill drafted by the Centre have far-reaching implications for the expansion and quality of human resource development, at a time when access to skill-building and educational opportunity are vitally important. There were 864 recognised universities and 40,026 colleges in the country in 2016-17, while the gross enrolment ratio of students was only about 26%. To put this in perspective, there were only 20 universities and 500 colleges at the time of Independence. Previous attempts at system reform involving expert committees and even legislation to create a new body for higher education and research had advocated changes, with an emphasis on promoting autonomy, access, inclusion and opportunity for all. That challenging goal will fall to the [HECI, the proposed successor body to the University Grants Commission](#). For this very reason, the Centre should give sufficient time to academia, the teaching community and society at large to submit considered opinions on the draft proposals. Among the key questions that need resolution is the future role of multiple regulatory bodies that currently exist for engineering, medicine and law; the Yash Pal Committee had recommended that they should be brought under the ambit of a single commission. There is a case to include other professional education streams as well, including architecture and nursing. The aim should be to set academic benchmarks for each stream, with sufficient autonomy to innovate on courses and encourage studies across disciplines.

Among the more contentious issues arising out of the draft Bill is the Centre's decision to shift grant-giving powers for higher education institutions to the Ministry of Human Resource Development or a separate body. The UGC has been doing this so far, covering a variety of functions, and whatever the flaws, it ensured a separation of funding decisions from political considerations. Maintaining a balance on allocation of funds and ensuring transparency will now depend on the proposed advisory council to the HECI. It is welcome that the States are represented on the advisory council, giving it a federal character, although it is the Centre that will have the final say in all matters, not even the apex HECI. At a broader level, higher education is challenged today by fast-paced technological changes affecting the economy and the need to create a workforce that has the requisite skills. Reform should, therefore, lead to the creation of an agency that has the intellectual corpus to help universities and colleges adapt, and the vision to plan for public funding in the emerging spheres of activity. There is a positive attempt in the draft legislation to weed out degree mills and dubious training institutions, with a provision for prosecution and imprisonment of management officials who defy the HECI. Yet, this will take political will, given that over the past three decades *laissez faire* expansion of higher education has been pursued purely for commercial motives.

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