Reforming higher education

The draft Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) Bill is now in the public domain. The HECI will replace the main regulatory authority, the University Grants Commission (UGC), to “provide for more autonomy and facilitate holistic growth” of this sector and offer “greater opportunities to Indian students at more affordable cost”. The new commission will cover all fields of education except medical and, presumably, agriculture, and institutions set up under the Central and State Acts, excluding those of national importance.

Point of departure

The main point of departure in the proposed Bill is a clear separation between academic functions and grant-giving ones, the former to be discharged by the HECI and the latter by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) directly. The academic functions include promoting the quality of instruction and maintenance of academic standards, as also fostering the autonomy of higher education institutions for, *inter alia*, comprehensive and holistic growth of education and research in a competitive global environment in an inclusive manner. In other words, the HECI will be bestowed with comprehensive and overriding powers, including ordering the closure of institutions, in all academic and related matters while the purse strings will be controlled by the MHRD.

The need for a single regulatory body arose largely in the context of multiple bodies set up over the years trying to cope with the ever increasing complexity of the sector, both in terms of rapidly expanding number of institutions to meet the demands of surging student enrolment, and the uneven and perhaps deteriorating standards in the quality of student output against the requirements of the job market. As Professor Furqan Qamar and others have shown, for almost a century after the first three universities were set up in 1857 till the UGC Act became operational in 1956, universities worked reasonably well without any outside regulator.

Problem of plenty

The regime of multiple regulators started in the mid-1980s and various professional bodies also started asserting themselves as regulators from around the early 1990s when the country embraced the new challenges of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. This was also the period that marked a galloping growth of the sector with the setting up of many private universities. The response of the government, arguably, was to meet the emerging challenges.

It can be observed that the heavy hands of multiple regulators (like the UGC and All India Council for Technical Education), together with the empowerment of professional bodies (like the Bar Council of India and Council of Architecture) have not yielded the desired dividends. Mushrooming of institutions and a steady decline of standards in most of them have not done much good to the image of the government and the architecture of regulation. While the proposed Bill seeks to empower the HECI with all academic functions, its role *vis-à-vis* professional bodies is unclear, and whether depriving the HECI completely of funding functions will affect its efficacy and stature in discharging its onerous responsibility remains a major question.

Question of funds

As of today, the MHRD has been directly funding more than a hundred institutions of national importance, including the Indian Institutes of Technology, National Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research. Funding 47 Central universities should not pose a problem for the ministry. The funding scheme of State universities, which account for more

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than 50% of the student enrolment, requires to be clearly worked out. If it is sought to be done through the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan, or RUSA, a clear and transparent mechanism should be spelt out. How effective the role of the HECI would be to regulate state institutions with less than inadequate Central funding merits serious attention.

The proposed Bill has to be situated in the context of certain new initiatives like granting near complete autonomy to the Indian Institutes of Management, providing graded autonomy to other institutions to free them from the clutches of regulations to enable them to develop into institutions of excellence.

On the one hand, the HECI is being conceived as an overarching regulator (albeit without the teeth of funding function), and on the other it is sought to develop mechanisms so that more institutions are encouraged to move out of its regulatory ambit.

Of the many functions of the HECI, specifying norms and standards for grant of autonomy and of graded autonomy is an important one. Linked with the issue are the recent initiatives to encourage public institutions to raise user charges so that they become self-sustaining as also to allow such institutions to take loan from the Higher Education Funding Agency to meet developmental costs. These are bold initiatives with major consequences, inducing institutions to abandon courses that have hardly any job prospects and starting ones that are market-friendly. Besides, the high fees to be paid by students for such courses might compel them to take concessional student loans. The first militates against the idea of higher education and the concept of the university and the second may result in the student loan crisis reaching alarming proportions on account of delay in payment and default. How the HECI would advise the government to surmount these problems remains to be seen.

The new setup

As regards the structure of the HECI, there will be a chairperson, vice-chairperson and 12 members of whom which the first two shall be whole-time salaried individuals. The chairperson will be of the rank of Secretary to the Government of India. The secretary of the HECI will be an officer of the rank of joint secretary and above or a reputed academic and will serve as its member-secretary. Will she have voting rights as a member, as she will be appointed by the HECI? Besides, the secretary, higher education is envisaged to don many hats, serving as a member of the search-cum-selection committee of the chairperson and vice-chairperson, then processing their appointment as a key functionary of the government, and finally acting as a member of the HECI. Such multiplicity of roles may create difficulties and conflict of interest. Also, the power of the government to remove the chairperson and members is rather overwhelming and should be constrained.

Despite some apparent infirmities, the proposed Bill shows the resolve of the government to move forward in reforming the sector. While many questions remain unanswered, the proposal appears to be a plausible one, if the public expenditure in the sector continues to hover around the present level of over 1% of GDP, against the minimum requirement of 2%. Major issues like making the universities the hub of scientific and technological research, restoring the value of education in social sciences and the humanities, ensuring that poor and meritorious students can afford to be educated in subjects of their choice, improving the quality of instruction to enhance the employability of the students, addressing the concerns of faculty shortage, etc. require a quantum jump in allocation of public resources to this sector. Tightening the screws of regulation in the absence of rapidly expanding public expenditure has obvious limitations.

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