

# HECI should stand for support of higher edu

## JOY OF LIVING



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Higher education has seen phenomenal quantity expansion in the last two decades. Between 2001-02 to 2014-15, colleges in India have quadrupled and Universities have tripled. Now, India has 867 Universities and over 40,000 colleges, according to the latest statistics by the University Grants Commission (UGC). More than 3.5 crore students are studying in these Institutions. The Gross Enrollment Ratio has more than tripled from 8.1% to 24.3% in the same period. But the main concern has been the quality of these Institutions. The government has been worried that none of the Indian Universities is in the top 200 world ranking.

In June this year, MHRD released a draft of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) Bill to repeal the University Grants Act (UGC)-1956 which for more than six decades, has controlled the establishment, growth and functioning of Universities and colleges in India. Through HECI, MHRD wants to downsize the regulator and separate academic function from grantmaking. The government claims that HECI will improve academic standards and bring quality in higher education by ending license raj, setting uniform standards through evaluation of performance and monitoring of

Institutions. But this bill has been harshly criticized by the academic community and activists as leading to curbing of autonomy of institution, overregulation of Institutions, government control of funding, excessive emphasis on “quality” over access and equity.

There is tremendous pressure from International agencies, economics circles, and think tanks within India to measure and rank everything. While measurement itself is not bad, one measure fits all approach, without understanding context is deeply flawed. The HECI has set out to “specifying norms for learning outcomes, lay down standards of teaching/research”. The primary mode it seeks to achieve this by having sweeping power to “grant authorization for starting of academic operations on the basis of their compliance with norms of academic quality, revoke authorization granting to a higher education institution, recommend closure of institutions which fail to adhere to minimum standards without affecting students’ interest”.

The underlying assumption of the HECI bill is that quality can be ensured by command and control. It is supposed to create a regulatory body which knows all streams of higher educations, precisely understands the specific learning outcomes in every branch of knowledge,



and by holding a stick, it can control the Institutions to improve their quality. It thinks that by beating a child for scoring low, performance will improve.

Quality cannot be a command; it emerges when you set the right rules of operation, put the right people in, provide adequate sources, and create a nourishing environment. Measurement, by itself, cannot improve quality. Higher education is so vast and diverse that none of the institutions has the knowledge, capacity and bandwidth to define or assess the “quality”. The very concept of “uniform standard”, which HECI seeks to specify, is a misnomer in higher. There is no one way to teach Physics or Political Science. On the contrary, it is desirable that teachers experiment with diverse methods of

teaching and evaluation for continuous improvement. It is the Instructor who should decide what to teach and how to measure student learning- not the Institution. The centralisation of authority to define quality can only be counterproductive.

Let us look back in the history of modern higher education in India to understand the structural bottlenecks which hindered quality. The structure of the current University and college system in India is largely borrowed from the colonial policies. The Education Despatch of 1854 led to the establishment of first three western style Universities, which were mainly affiliating bodies to colleges, empowered to conduct exams and award degrees. It was only after Indian University Act -1904, that Universities started teaching and Conducting Research. Post Independence, the University Grants Commission (UGC) was established based on Radhakrishnan commission recommendations, continued the old structure. Universities remained mainly affiliated bodies and teaching was restricted to post-graduation level. Colleges were made isolated units controlled by the rules of UGC and professional councils like All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and Medical Council of India (MCI).

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