Concerns With Plan on HECI

What is the issue?

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- Union government has planned to replace the UGC with HECI.
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- The Centre’s bid to replace the UGC with a higher education commission does not inspire confidence.
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What is government’s plan on UGC?

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- Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) will be the new, apex regulator for university and higher education in India.
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- It has to set benchmarks for academic performance, ensure that institutions adhere to these and act against those that violate standards.
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- Draft legislation appears to be part of a stated overarching strategy towards greater autonomy in institutes of higher learning, including the premier Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management.
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- The broad thrust of the Higher Education Commission legislation is to separate governance from funding.
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- The proposed commission will focus on academic issues, such as course curricula, faculty standards and outcomes, leaving “monetary matters” to the ministry of human resource development.
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What are the concerns with HECI?

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- The Centre has invited a barrage of criticism after placing in the public domain the HECI (Repeal of University Grants Commission Act) Bill 2018.
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- A fundamental feature of the proposed HECI, as opposed to the UGC, is that it will focus only on enforcement of standards and not disburse grants.
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- The latter role will be vested with the Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD).
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- With reference to proposal that the grant functions will be carried out by the HRD Ministry, the draft Bill merely hints at a regime of direct governmental control, contrary to its promise of autonomy.
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- The UGC agreed to the Centre's proposal to have a four-year undergraduate programme, going against its own rules.
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- Likewise, State governments of all hues have had no qualms in politicising key appointments in universities and colleges.
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- HECI as an extension of the MHRD may end up legitimising all of this, while also raising apprehensions of ideological control.
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What measures needs to be taken?

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- The Centre should modify this proposal to vest the role of disbursing grants in an independent agency.
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- The autonomy of universities in framing curricula should not be tampered with.
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- Higher education needs both autonomy which has led to the IITs, IISc and IIMs emerging as centres of repute and accountability in the right measure.
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- A present system of according 'graded autonomy', depending on independent rankings and assessments, should be continued, without the MHRD superimposing its own views.
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- An independent regulator, manned by individuals of probity and academic excellence, could make a difference.

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- Reforms in higher education are finally about creating the right ambience of liberalism, academic rigour, universal access and, above all, accountability.
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Source: Business Line

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