

“HECI” to Regulate Higher Education

What is the issue?

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- “Higher Education Commission of India” (HECI) is being proposed to replace “University Grants Commission” (UGC) oversee higher education institutions.

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- But there is a palpable apprehension that HECI would micromanage universities, enhance government interference and stifle campus freedoms.

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What are the changes being proposed?

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- Education is the most potent instrument for shaping a country’s future.

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- Given India’s massive youth population, reframing the education system in a manner that will reflect the nation’s developmental aspirations is essential.

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- In this context, government has felt the need to replace the age old UGC, as it merely disperses funds, and hasn’t been able to monitor quality.

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- A “Higher Education Commission of India - HECI” is being proposed to replace UGC, and a bill for the same has been drafted.

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- HECI has been envisioned as a body to solely focus of educational quality and the dispersal of grants is likely to be done directly by the ministry.

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- Union Human Resource Ministry has stated that its new bill seeks to enhance autonomy to institutions and cater to the changing priorities in the sector.

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- While the draft bill has now been opened up for public consultations, but it has opened on a sour note as the window provided for feedback is just 10 days.

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What are the issues with the draft bill?

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- The systemic changes envisioned by the government can very well be done by the UGC, if it is restructured in a manner that will enhance its autonomy.

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- While the government is planning a comprehensive overhaul, merely shielding UGC from political interference would've gone a long way.

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- Nonetheless, as the draft HECI bill is already on the ministry's website, it is important to dwell upon at least six concerns raised by experts.

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- **Structure** - The government has vouched that it intends to minimise its interference in higher education through the new HECI bill.

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- But the provisions that are mentioned in the draft bill seem to indicate exactly the opposite, as they are likely to enhance government's role.

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- **Autonomy** - Sweeping powers proposed for HECI and envisioned provisions for implementing its dictates are likely to make it very authoritative.

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- Under the offered new terms, universities will have to take the concurrence of the HECI before offering a course, which enhances bureaucracy.

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- This also restricts the freedom of a university's "Board of Studies" and is a case of academic functions being usurped through this legislation.

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- **Micromanaging** - HECI has been constituted to improve academic standards with a specific focus on enhancing learning outcomes.

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- This, in addition to its touted role in evaluating the academic performance of institutions and training of teachers, is likely to lead to over-regulation.

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- **Appointments** - The draft bill mentions that HECI's chairperson and vice-chairperson can be removed by the government for "immoral conduct".
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- As "immoral conduct" can only be vaguely defined, this provision gives scope for the union government to curtail the functionality of HECI officials.
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- **Standardisation** - The "one size fits all" administrative model as furthered by the bill tends to subvert the vitality of diversity in knowledge dispersion.
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- Also, by not allowing institutions to evolve over time and denying the existence of specific needs, the bill is likely to corporatize the higher ed-sector.
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- **Centralisation** - The bill also has implications for federalism as it would inherently restrict the role of states in matters relating to higher education.
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- Strangely, despite the seriousness of this, only Kerala CM Pinarayi Vijayan has flagged this concern thus far.
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What are the fallacies in government's vision?

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- The turbulence for reforming 'higher education' started after our PM lamented with concern that "no Indian university features in the top 500 globally".
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- But this is a misplaced concern, as higher education continues to remain a privilege in India, and is unaffordable to a big chunk of the population.
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- Hence, rather than getting our universities into the top 500, our priority should be towards enhancing higher education opportunities for our masses.
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- Additionally, standards of our higher education can't be enhanced without improving our improving the quality of our poor school education system.
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- Notably, the percentage of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Muslims who don't have access to even basic education is still considerably large.
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- Hence, the quality and reach of our schooling system needs to be improved first, to nurture it as a conduit for the poor seeking upward social mobility.
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- Seen from this perspective, the biggest blot marring our educational system is not the dearth of top-notch universities, but its elitist outlook.
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Source: The Hindu

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