

The Proposed Abolition of the UGC*

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The Modi government is bringing in legislation in the coming Monsoon session of the Parliament to abolish the University Grants Commission. The UGC has two important roles at present. One is the distribution of funds to colleges and universities; this will now be handled by the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The other role is a regulatory one, which will now be taken over by a Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). This Commission however will have no funds to distribute.

The proposed set-up will immensely increase political control over the academia. The fact that the distribution of funds will now be vested with the HRD ministry is an obvious indication of this. In addition the proposed HECI will be a more or less completely government-controlled body which will not only supervise higher education and give directives to institutions of higher learning, but the non-compliance with such directives will now attract dire punishment of a kind that was hitherto unthinkable. What is more, the autonomy which universities have been enjoying until now to develop new courses of their own will be taken away from them. All new courses henceforth will have to have the approval of the HECI.

Let us begin with the composition of the HECI. The HECI will have a Chairperson, and a Vice-Chairperson who will be selected by a Committee that will include the Cabinet Secretary and the HRD Secretary. In addition it will have twelve members that will include officials from the various “stakeholder ministries”, two serving Vice Chancellors, an industrialist, and two professors. The HECI will thus not only be a government-nominated body, but will actually have negligible academic representation. Even if we count Vice-Chancellors as academics, which need not be the case, only four out of the total fourteen constituting the HECI will be academics. The HECI therefore will in effect be an instrument through which what happens in the academic world would be decided by a bunch of government officials answerable to their political masters, and a few others appointed by the government of the day. And just in case the HECI still happens to go contrary to the government’s wishes, its members can be removed by the government. At present the members of the UGC, once appointed, cannot be removed by the government; this provision is done away with in the proposed HECI legislation.

As if this was not enough, there is an Advisory Council that is proposed to guide the HECI which will have the HRD minister as its Chairperson and which will meet twice a year. The HRD minister in other words will not just determine the composition of the HECI, but will actually poke his nose directly into its affairs as Chairperson of its Advisory Council. The Advisory Council no doubt will also have representation from states, but that is only a fig-leaf: if there was a serious desire to provide representation to states then they should have been accommodated in the HECI itself. This fig-leaf is meant merely to cover the political interference by the Central government in the country’s academic life.

To be sure, the UGC itself, though originally visualized as an autonomous body consisting of academics, nominated admittedly by the government, has of late taken on a political character. The BJP government which insists on appointing RSS

nominees, no matter what their credentials, to all important posts in all bodies, has not left the UGC alone. But the HECI gives an official imprimatur to this phenomenon of political interference. If the direction in which the UGC has moved is wrong, and is contrary to the original spirit of the UGC Act, then the HECI actually makes that direction the official desideratum.

The HECI will not only be an unashamedly government-controlled body, it will also be endowed with far greater powers than the UGC ever was. At present if a university disregards the UGC's directives then all that the UGC can do is to stop its funding. But under the new set up, if an institution disregards the HECI's recommendations then the HECI can simply close it down. And in extreme cases it can even initiate penal proceedings that can lead to fines on, or imprisonment of, the guilty parties. As the draft legislation states: "non-compliance of directions of the HECI could result in fines or jail sentence under the Criminal Procedure Act".

Bringing higher education under the direct control of the central government however is only one part the story. The other part becomes clear when we look at the justification that is given for abolishing the UGC, namely that several expert committees on higher education have already recommended it, the latest of which was the Committee headed by Professor Yashpal.

The question arises: why have these Committees been suggesting an end to the UGC? The argument has typically been the following: in the new situation of the growth of a "knowledge economy" the country needs an enormous expansion in the field of higher education, for which the government cannot take the sole or even the primary responsibility. There has to be a considerable tapping of private resources for such expansion; and hence an apex body is needed which is capable of deciding on the eligibility of private institutions, applying for recognition, at a far more rapid rate than the UGC with its cumbersome ways possibly can. What is needed therefore is a new apex body, in the shape of the proposed HECI. Even the Draft Legislation of the BJP government talks of the "Inspector Raj of the UGC", suggesting that the HECI will be more "liberal" towards such institutions.

Clearly therefore while the HECI will rule with an iron fist in the domain of public institutions of higher education, it will grant recognition with alacrity to private institutions, and its relations with such institutions will be marked by a benign tolerance. The recent move to have "autonomous colleges", where those who can raise their own funds will be allowed more or less to do what they like, is in line with this benign tolerance towards private institutions, and implies a massive privatization of the sphere of higher education.

This is the direction of movement that neo-liberalism dictates; and the reason why several committees have been advocating an end to the UGC is because that institution is a product of a different era, the post-independence dirigiste era, when it was recognized that the government had to play a major role in the sphere of higher education, that education in India had to be different from what Cambridge or Harvard provide, and that it was meant to serve a social purpose specific to our country which a mere clone of a metropolitan University could not possibly serve.

What is now being visualized in short is a duality within the education system. There will be a whole range of private institutions that would be running on commercial

lines, that would sell education as a commodity; and then there will be several institutions that may derive their funding from the government, but where the government will ensure that no “deviant” ideas, no critical thinking, no independent thought, manages to emerge.

Critical thinking that goes beyond the epistemic boundaries of the current bourgeois order, that breaks out of the epistemic “closure” sought to be applied in the realm of ideas by the votaries of finance capital, is anathema to neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism does not mind students believing that Darwin was wrong, that ancient India had plastic surgery, and that India had airplanes in pre-historic times. It does not mind the unreason of Hindutva as long as those who subscribe to this unreason acquire adequate skills to serve the needs of international capital. What it minds is creative, critical and independent thinking. Likewise for the Hindutva elements too any creative, critical, independent thinking is anathema and they would like nothing better than to suppress it through political intervention in universities.

The direction that higher education in India is now officially slated to take is one that represents the convergence of the interests of neo-liberalism and Hindutva. An obvious implication of this tendency is the exclusion of the dalits, and the other marginalized sections from the sphere of higher education. But an equally important implication is the sheer destruction of thought.

A major consequence, among others, of the education system fashioned during the dirigisteera in India, which was presided over by the UGC, was the emergence of a whole segment of highly articulate, thoughtful, brilliant and socially committed students from dalit and other marginalized social groups. The UGC arrangement can legitimately claim credit for it, notwithstanding all the faults of that particular institution. The effort now is to put an end to this process. That effort must be resisted.

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