

The Bastion: Interview With Ms. Mrinmayee Mandal

1. The government has introduced the system of 'upgraded autonomy' (It is called graded autonomy) when granting autonomy to institutions. This implies that not all institutions will have the same level of autonomy. How is this compliant with the HECI's aim to provide 'greater autonomy' to the institutions?

The question of graded autonomy itself is a dicey concept and in my opinion, not a very well thought out attempt at providing actual autonomy. Autonomy cannot come at the cost of withdrawing state support. While many will argue, I do opine that higher education is a public good, and in a globalised context of academic capitalism, the state cannot wash off their hands from the responsibility of ensuring higher education is accessible to all and of a quality that renders useful, employable skills. Based on NAAC ratings, institutions are placed in a scale that divides all higher education into categories for performance and therefore, different grades of autonomy. While category I, the best ranking institutes and universities are free to start their own campuses, new courses, hire (and fire, obviously) faculty, change curriculum etc, category II will still need UGC approval. Category III, the lowest performing institutes will be more scrutinised. Like you mentioned, different levels of autonomy, and I would add, severely disproportionate, misplaced and disempowering levels of autonomy. Why?

General Financial Rules (GFR) 2017 explicitly requires all autonomous organisations, with no exception to universities, to maximise generation of internal resources to eventually attain self-sufficiency and raise their 'user charges' to recover the current cost of providing services with a reasonable return on capital investment – basically, fees will have to go up and exponentially, teachers and/or staff will be contractual to incur lesser expenditure on salaries. Higher educational institutions are also not being given grants for the development of their physical facilities and infrastructure and are, instead, encouraged to borrow from Higher Education Funding Agency (HEFA). It was made mandatory for the universities to raise a minimum of 30% of the additional resources needed for the implementation of the 7th Pay commission awards. Additionally, considering education is heavily market-run as is explicit in the mushrooming of the private institutions and the kind of courses they run, it is not too much to assume that the kind of courses that would get precedence would tend to be more on the lines of engineering, management, business, etc over social sciences and humanities. The hurried advent of an engineering department in JNU is an example.

And what about the category III universities and colleges? They are inevitably the state-universities and institutes that are catering to the vast hinterlands, the small towns and cities, rural-urban fringes, many of which do not have basic physical infrastructure, access to academic peers or enough quality staff. These universities need consistent financial and academic support, more than autonomy, to meet national standards, as aspired by NAAC. All of this has severe implications on cost, access, employability in higher education and the trumping of accountability by the growing chant of autonomy is worrisome as, in its current form, it will make higher education in India more disparate than before. I am not sure, therefore, who does this graded autonomy set up help?

This I wrote to have some context for HECI itself, because HECI cannot be seen without referring to graded autonomy, or the NIRF ranking, or the diminishing funding for certain

streams of education and research. Removal of the UGC and bringing in of the HECI needs to be seen in the perspectives they carry. The autonomy promoted in the HECI Bill and in recent initiatives of the Modi government in general is the autonomy of *individual* institutions to deal on their own with the sources of their funding, to develop courses to meet the student demands or to hire (and fire) faculty. The UGC Act of 1956 visualises the autonomy of higher education as self-autonomy of the entire sector to regulate itself independently of the government in power. To realise this autonomy, the UGC, a body dominated by academicians, is conceived as a buffer between the chief funder of higher education, namely the government, and institutions of higher learning. The HECI Bill does the opposite. It removes the buffer, forcing institutes to deal with demands of the government on their own.

Thus, if graded autonomy concept and HECI were to be seen together, a clear progression can be charted towards which the higher education development is heading. HECI cannot provide for autonomy (academic or otherwise, the kind that matters to higher education), since HECI itself (as in the bill) is not autonomous itself! It is a way in which neo-liberal regulations are being imposed.

2. The idea of a single regulator has been on the table for quite a long time now. The HEERA was proposed by the Modi government in 2016 but did not take off as expected in 2018. How does the HECI improve on both HEERA and/or the UGC? Do you think sufficient time has been spent on formulating the HECI?

Not very conversant with HEERA.

Im not sure if it improves on UGC in principle, because UGC had very solid academic beginnings and understanding of higher education. The delivery of the work of UGC was not as envisioned and it micromanaged institutes with its stringent, often autocratic, regulations. However, in principle, when compared to UGC, HECI leaves room for enough doubt whether the idea is to improve higher education or control higher education. The proposed Government control over HECI is evident from the Bill that has substituted the word “academics” with “educational administrators” all through. It appears the Government believes that academic experience, ie teaching and learning, is equivalent to being an official at the MHRD. The constitution of the HECI allows itself not to be as autonomous as it claims to be - half of the fourteen members of the commission are ex-officio members, the three secretaries to the ministries of the Central government, chairpersons of two other regulatory bodies dealing with technical and teacher education, and two chairpersons of accreditation agencies. Besides these, there are two serving vice-chancellors and a ‘doyen of industry’. This leaves space for only two serving professors of universities as opposed the composition of UGC that mandated people in academics and in relation to teaching and learning mainly constitute the body. Additionally, the MHRD minister is sitting in the advisory committee despite already heading the CABE, meaning that there is enough space for political control of higher education, which UGC, at least in its structure, went to great lengths at avoiding. Also, HECI prides itself to be the authority which is “setting standards” but affectively not doing the physical monitoring through audits. My reading of HECI, albeit brief, did not reveal to me how the standards would therefore translate to action.

3. The HECI has a more stringent policy with respect to non-compliant institutions as well as those failing to maintain the minimum academic standards, to the effect that it

can even shut them down. To what extent will this uplift the higher education system, considering that the UGC regularly releases a list of bogus institutions?

Not sure how that power is going to translate into action while taking care of the student interests, as claimed. Also, while regulation, monitoring and maintaining standards are important and are justifiable goals of HECI, there also needs to be enough emphasis on how to bring institutes upto the standards. While NAAC and NIRF ranking always point out the better performing institutes, never is importance given to those institute not doing well and why. While some of them can be bogus, many of them are languishing due to government regulations, scarce fund, negligible academic resource, etc. Simply shutting them means what? What happens to the students? Where are these institutes situated and what would it mean for the region if the institute was closed down based on performance, that had little input from HECI to improve to begin with? Already the NIRF rankings have started to raise questions as to what about the universities, institutes and colleges that do not appear in the list (are they below the standards, did they not apply for ranking) meaning that it could lead to lesser demand for these institutes, creating greater implications for funding, resource generation, development of higher education in those regions in the future if this was to continue.

4. What do you think could be the possible reason for keeping the Institutes of National Importance out of the ambit of HECI?

Have not read into that detail! Sorry!