

**The Bastion: Interview With Dr. Padma Sarangapani**

1. The HECI Act clearly states segregation of financial and administrative powers, with the former falling under the jurisdiction of the Central Government. The idea is to strip the Commission of any financial responsibility, so that it can concentrate merely on improving academic standards. Do you think such separation of powers can have the requisite impact and can work out smoothly?

Such a separation at one level seems necessary as in the past the grant making function and the regulation and standard setting function of the commission have interfered with each other, often with grant making assuming greater focus. However, without grants to disburse or to use to promote research and to incentivise high performance it is not clear how the HECI will achieve its objective of furthering its objectives. Moreover, it is not clear how grantmaking is going to be taken up by the MHRD. MHRD as such does not have academics or competence to judge academic worth etc. And will need to be guided in this matter with academic vision and ability to judge grant making and grant management. There is no clarity on how the grant making function will be executed. Currently UGC has more expertise and experience in grant making function. It is not clear how it is going to play a role on promoting and promote academic freedom necessary in the search for excellence and knowledge production autonomy and provide academic leadership in the sector, without resorting to 'control' regulation as has been the fate of most of the central regulatory bodies including AICTE, NCTE. If it starts dictating and controlling how disciplines are to develop and who is to be recognised and eligible to be employed in university departments of various disciplines it will lead to conservative higher education in the name of quality regulation; this will be a disaster for higher education. We have already seen the negative impact of AICTE, RCI and NCTE in this regard

2. The Commission's autonomy is also under question since it will be required to take prior approval of the Central Government before coming up with any norms or standards for universities. What are your views on this?

The overall design of the commission makes it subservient to bureaucracy. The appointment of chairperson itself has been opened up to appointments outside of academia. Rather than trusting and respecting academia, bureaucracy and government as a whole seems to be in the mood of making academic accountable and answerable. Already in many branches of academia, we experience this lack of trust and loss of perception of relevance. Instead of strengthening the process of appointing academics whose reputation and leadership is beyond doubt, and trusting that academia no less than bureaucracy works in the faith that we contribute to national development, it seems that academia is being placed in second position of a line department.

3. Is overhauling the UGC a good idea, if you simply look at the draft of the HECI Act? Do you think there could have been any other effective alternative, and if yes, what would it have been?

UGC definitely needs an overhaul. By appointing mediocre councils full of 'yes men' it does not inspire confidence. There are many aspects which are crying out for serious examination and reform: the NET, the API and criteria of publication in order to receive doctoral degree are some of the regulations coming out of UGC which has the effect of serious distortions on the day-to-day of universities and university life. Recently the UGC has also been playing into government hands mandating matters such as observing yoga day, and compulsory promoting of SWAYAM, which are matters in which it should not be dictatorial. Reforming the UGC is very much the need of the hour, but I am not sure that there is anything in the HECI which achieves this.

4. How do you think the general elections in the ensuing year will affect the efficient implementation of the HECI, especially if there is a change in the ruling party?

The change in an elected government should not bring about changes in policy of this kind. After all, policy in education should achieve high level of consensus that it can survive change of political dispensation. Unfortunately it is likely that this will not be the case. The change for 4 to 3 year under graduate programme was scrapped after the present government came to power. The change from 3 to 4 years itself was ill thought out and being forced down the system, without any consensus being built on the matter. The reversal also was not justified. It was accepted by those protesting, but if you think about it, such a peremptory reversal was as undemocratic as the original decision. Both are problematic. But that seems to be the way that current policy in education is being made and unmade. If the prospect of the general election slows down the momentum of the current speed at which major changes are being made, it would be good. A New Education Policy has been many years in the making and is due to be announced soon. Surely the thinking on higher education reform being articulated in the NEP should guide and be the basis of a HECI. The fact that the government has not waited or even invoked the NEP is surprising and also disconcerting.

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