

New education body may be free of political interference

Two vice-chancellors as members in the 14-member commission could be from private varities

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New Delhi, 12 July

The ministry of human resource development (HRD) is mulling a rethink on including the minister in the advisory council of the newly proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HEC), which would replace the University Grants Commission (UGC).

This would make the new higher education regulator statutorily free from direct political interference, according to educationists and former government officials, who had criticised the inclusion of a minister in an independent body.

"Based on the suggestions received, we will re-examine provisions of the draft Bill including the role of the advisory council," R. Subrahmanyam, secretary of higher education in the HRD ministry told *Business Standard*.

The HRD ministry released the draft version of the HEC act on June 28 and had sought comments and suggestions from educationists and stakeholders till July 7. The deadline for the same has been extended to July 20.

The University Grants Commission was established in 1956, and the long-standing reform of the UGC was initially sought by the United Progressive Alliance-I (UPA-I) government. The then government had proposed an all-in-one body to



The proposed advisory council could be chaired by HRD minister

regulate higher education in all streams.

Acting upon it, the current government has proposed the new HEC, which changes the nature of higher education regulation in the country, say experts. After formation, colleges and universities would be subject to a set of certain norms and quality standards, which if not abided to, they will face penalties or cancellation of authorisation at the extreme.

The ministry is also considering making corrections in the draft to address the special needs of regions,

THE NEED FOR AN AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education – age 18-23 (%)

General	25.2
Scheduled castes	21.1
Scheduled tribes	15.4

SLUGGISH IMPROVEMENT

Change in GER over years



Source: AISHE 2016-17

institutions and sections of society lagging in access to education and quality, with the objective of making the independent body more inclusive, sources in the HRD ministry said.

Only 25 per cent of Indian youth (aged 18-23) were able to gain access to higher education in 2016-17, up only 4 percentage points from 21.5 per cent in 2011-12. For SC/ST students, the ratio was 21.1 per cent and 15.4 per cent, respectively.

The ministry has received more than 5,000 responses on the draft,

with the inclusion of minister and lack of facilitation of affirmative action the major points of criticism. "We are taking the comments positively," said Subrahmanyam.

The HEC Act promises to elevate the standards of higher education in India and makes ensuring learning outcomes and quality of education its prime responsibility, as against the UGC, whose chief objective was to disburse grants, scrutinise and monitor funding.

However, experts said the HEC falls short on the front of making higher education accessible and affordable to the underprivileged sections.

"The act still remains silent on affirmative policy actions such as reservations in teaching and non-teaching staff, executive bodies in a university, namely the senate, courts and executive council," Sukhadeo Thorat, former chairman of the UGC and professor emeritus in Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), said.

The UGC was aware of this and used to regularly send letters to colleges and universities to ensure affirmative action policies were implemented, he said. On private sector participation, Subrahmanyam said that two members in the 14-member HEC who would be serving vice-chancellors of universities could be from private universities as well.