

The road to education reform is leading to a dead end

The editorial in the 10 March 2010 issue has rightly pointed out that 'The bill [NCHERB 2010], as drafted, places agriculture (and medicine) on a different pedestal; undoubtedly a recognition of political realities and the zealotry with which ministerial turf is guarded in Delhi, rather than the more esoteric grounds of academic unity'¹. What went wrong with the well-meaning reports of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) and the Yash Pal Committee?

The setting up of the proposed National Council for Higher Education and Research (NCHER) was based on the observations of Sam Pitroda's NKC Report and the Yash Pal Committee report. Both these luminaries had observed the over regulated higher education system (and involving corruption in many cases) and had also expressed the concern that 'education' as provided by the university higher education system was not holistic and all inclusive. Both the reports had proposed the integration of several regulating agencies (including ICAR and the MCI) into a single agency.

Eventually, following the Yash Pal Committee's recommendations, the NCHER was evolved. But areas of education were once again fragmented into the three baskets: agriculture, medical and 'others'. The National Council is proposed to be set up through a Bill that will not be applicable to agriculture and medical education. It is also proposed that the National Council will be similar to the prestigious National Election Commission. Further, the salaries and appointment of the members to NCHER are compared to those of the National Election Commission. However in view of the fact that the new Bill will not be applicable to agriculture and medical education, it is perhaps implied that there may be separate commission(s) for these two areas. Drawing a comparison with the National Election Commission, implies that 'elections' in states like Delhi (and some other politically important states) will not be held under the National Election Commission, but a new 'State Election' commission will have to be set up!

The proposed Bill has several other clauses, highlighted in the editorial that gives one an impression that the purpose of de-regulation and giving the autonomy

to the Universities is not being respected in the highly bureaucratic and regulatory structure that is being proposed in the Bill. The way the members of the Council are to be appointed (four full time members to be paid the salaries of the Election Commissioners, and three members to be paid only for meetings). What kind of discrimination is this amongst the members of the high level National Council? The political game starts right here. How can distinguished academics agree to sit on the same table with some sitting on the 'high' table and others with a lower status? Either everybody is paid or nobody is paid the full salary! Then there is the so called large 'collegium' which consists of 'core fellows' and 'co-opted' fellows. One already sees the rush for being included in the 'collegium' and the 'sifarish' letters for being included in this. The next to follow will be the government diktat and we will see the provision for 'reservation' in the collegium for various sections of the society. Why not accept and use the expertise of the various professional bodies and the academies that exist for various areas of education and research? To be counted as an expert, one will have to be elected to the 'collegium' of the National Council. We have seen enough of heartburns and concerns of scientists and educationists for not being included in the list of fellows of the various academies. To the credit of the academies, the 'government' does not appoint their fellows so far! The NCHER will be another body where experts will scramble to get in – some through genuine competition and others through political intervention. Then there is the proposal of preparing a central registry where all the names of the future vice-chancellors will have to be entered into. Again we will see the requests for special favours and dispensation – and quota and reservations! The universities will lose their autonomy (whatever little that exists now) of appointing vice-chancellors!

Bhanu Pratap Mehta, Director of Centre for Policy Studies had recently criticized the way this new body is being constituted. He had felt that not only this body will be a huge bureaucratic structure, but will be a 'Super UGC' – the body which is proposed to be subsumed (with others like AICTE) in the New Council. Is anybody listening to him?

At a recent meeting of the forum of the Emerging Directions for Global Education (EDGE) held in Delhi, Sam Pitroda, the architect of the NKC report and the major reforms proposed therein, commented on the fact that he is unhappy with the way the new NCHER is being planned. When asked what he plans to do about it, he promised to take it up with Kapil Sibal, the Minister for Human Resources Development. He further appealed to the members of the audience that he alone cannot fight the battle but the academic community should 'speak up'! While this is indeed what should happen, it will be useful if Sam Pitroda and Yash Pal could openly declare, if they firmly believe so, that their original intention, as expressed in their reports, are being misconstrued by the Government in setting up the new NCHER. If they take the lead there will be many who will follow, to check what the Government is about to set up.

It is clear that the Government has no intention of giving the freedom and autonomy to the academic community for giving new directions to our higher education system. The government knows best how to run all enterprises – from Education to Defence. As Sam Pitroda appealed in Delhi – 'will the academic community speak up?'.

The editorial is the first step, but I am afraid these writings should now be on the walls and not confined to scientific journals alone.

Note added in proof: It has been recently reported that the president of the Medical Council of India has been arrested on charges of corruption. This does not augur well for the independent functioning of MCI. It may be recalled that under similar charges officials of AICTE had been arrested earlier. It is hoped that, in view of such events the MCI (and ICAR) will be brought under the proposed NCHER Bill.

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2010, **98**, 595–596.

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