

# Commission versus Commission in Higher Education

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The National Knowledge Commission and the University Grants Commission offer very strikingly divergent views on education. While the UGC recommends a greater focus on the establishment of new institutions and the need for larger public funding, the NKC lays stress on a largely unregulated framework for encouraging private players and foreign collaboration, and on maximisation of cost recovery.

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There is something that both the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) have in common: their mutual animosity. The NKC initiated the process. It did not involve the UGC in its consultations for framing its Report to the Nation<sup>1</sup> on higher education. Even the UGC chairman was not consulted. Now the UGC has reciprocated in equal measure. It has not involved the NKC in its consultations for framing its report on the Development of Higher Education.<sup>2</sup> In the October 10-11 national conference organised by the UGC at Delhi, two luminaries were conspicuous by their absence. One was the prime minister and the other, NKC chairman, Sam Pitroda.

Apart from their mutual distrust, there is little else in common between UGC and NKC. The UGC is the statutory apex body of the central government, responsible for distributing grants and maintenance of standards in higher education. The NKC is the prime ministers' think-tank, his coterie of personal advisers on knowledge-related developmental initiatives. In fact, the name National Knowledge Commission is a

misnomer. The commission is no national commission. Its so-called Report to the Nation is only a series of letters written by its chairman to the prime minister. The contents of the communication, "a few highly general, pedestrian observations",<sup>3</sup> would bear testimony to the cavalier approach which is characteristic of personal letters. The consultation that preceded the letter writing is even more revealing. Only a handful of experts belonging to the charmed circle of the chairman were consulted in camera. Even those in the commission, who did not agree with the chairman, like vice chairman P M Bhargava, claim to have been kept in the dark. On the contrary, the UGC has been uncharacteristically transparent and participatory in its consultative process this time. The UGC organised four regional conferences of vice-chancellors at Mumbai, Kolkata, Hyderabad and Delhi prior to the summit at Delhi on October 10-11. The conclusions arrived at the national conference was a consensus based on the feedback from the four regional conferences, thereby creating a model for a transparent, participatory, democratic decision-making process in the academic matters.

## Question of Priorities

A peripheral overview might give the impression that both NKC and UGC recommendations are comparable. Both swear by the triple objectives of expansion,

inclusion and excellence. But the views of NKC and UGC diverge at a deeper level. They have different perceptions on the synergies among these objectives. The NKC recommendations try to pit one objective against the other, and in the process, privilege the objectives of expansion and excellence at the expense of the objectives of equity and inclusion. The stress on a largely unregulated framework for encouraging private players and foreign collaboration in higher education and on maximisation of cost recovery from students is a reflection of the above strategy. The concern for equity is reduced to a concession for a minuscule minority of students in the form of scholarships. The offer of one lakh scholarships by the NKC would cover only 1 per cent of the present student population in higher education.

The UGC has made it clear that the objectives of expansion, inclusion and excellence are integral and complementary to one another. It is in recognition of such complementarities, the UGC has recommended that there should be greater focus on the establishment of new institutions in smaller towns, rural and remote areas and the backward regions where the gross enrolment ratio (GER) is lower than the national average. The recommendation for providing special assistance to the institutions located in underprivileged regions and also to those that have a higher proportion of social groups such as scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), minorities, girls and physically challenged also underline the need for operationalising the ideal of inclusive development. The UGC conference has stressed the need for greater public funding and has virtually ruled out the possibilities for further enhancement of student fees.

### **National Universities**

The NKC report has made a subtle distinction between different levels of excellence. It has recommended the establishment of 50 national universities which could function as "exemplars for the rest of the nation" and a large number of institutions across the country which could impart education at a lower level of excellence, obviously in imitation of the 50 national models of excellence. The

national level universities will have the best of students selected from all over the country by following a needs-blind admission policy; they will also have the best of teachers by providing for an appropriate system of appointments and incentives. The national universities will not be burdened with affiliated colleges and will have a proper ambience for experimenting with the latest teaching-learning models. On the contrary, the rest of the universities will have only namesake modifications in their structure and teaching-learning practices. The UGC conference has now suggested a totally different strategy for development. Its emphasis is not on developing a few islands of excellence, but on uplifting average universities and colleges with the objective of reducing the quality gap among higher education institutions.

Even as both NKC and UGC recommend greater public funding, there is a greater commitment on the part of UGC to public funding than NKC. The UGC has made it clear that the crisis in higher education is not as much due to lack of resources as it is of priorities. On the contrary, the NKC negates its own recommendations for greater public funding by simultaneously promoting commercial investment either directly by private entrepreneurs or indirectly through public-private-partnership (PPP). Even all the 50 national universities proposed by the NKC are not intended to be publicly funded central/state universities. These could be either public or private or public-private. The PPP model, where land is provided by the government and finances by private entrepreneurs is a sure recipe for private appropriation of public assets. This becomes all the more clear on consideration of the further recommendation for commercial utilisation of university lands for generation of income. Actually, the projected GER of 15 per cent (by 2011-12 as suggested by UGC and by 2015 as suggested by NKC) could be achieved even without much private investment, if only the NKC recommendation of an investment 1.5 per cent of GDP on higher education is implemented. Either the NKC has not taken its own recommendation seriously or it is ignorant of the implications of its recommendation. That the NKC is ill-informed even about the basic statistics is clear from the factual error

in its statement that currently only 7 per cent of the relevant age group is enrolled in higher education in India. According to data available with the ministry of human resources development (MHRD), it should be around 10-11 per cent at present.

### Differences over Framework

The UGC has also rejected the NKC recommendation for the creation of a new national regulatory framework by establishing an Independent Regulatory Authority for Higher Education (IRAHE). The NKC has conceived IRAHE as a regulatory agency independent of all stakeholders including the concerned ministries of the government. The IRAHE is intended to be an autonomous body established by an act of parliament. It would be the only agency responsible for according degree-granting power to higher education institutions, for monitoring standards and settling disputes, for recognising private as well as public institutions and domestic as well as international institutions and for licensing accreditation agencies. The role of UGC would be redefined to focus on the disbursement of grants and maintenance of public institutions in higher education. The UGC conference has ruled out the need for IRAHE indirectly by declaring that the UGC should be the sole regulatory authority for universities, thereby ensuring that the apex body of the government of India in higher education continues to exercise its role as the final arbiter in matters relating to distribution of grants and maintenance of standards.

The NKC has little faith in the affiliating system. It has, therefore, suggested three measures for mercy killing the affiliating system, by creating more autonomous colleges/college clusters, by transforming some of the colleges into community colleges and by establishing a central board of undergraduate education along with the state boards of undergraduate education which could affiliate undergraduate colleges. The remedy appears to be worse than the disease. The highly centralised set-up of the central/state boards could be more cumbersome than that of the universities. The cure for centralisation is not further centralisation, but decentralisation, which would also facilitate a greater academic diversification. The UGC

recommendation for smaller universities with no more than 50 affiliated colleges confined within the maximum geographical limits of three districts and separate undergraduate (UG) examination boards within each university appear to be a logical response to the maladies of overgrowth and over-centralisation.

### National Debate

It would appear that the divergent recommendations of the NKC and the UGC call for a fresh national debate on the strategies for the development of higher education. Such a debate should be helpful in evolving a consensus on the national policy on higher education. It should involve an assessment of the evolution of national policies, beginning with the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1966). It should help understand how the national consensus on expansion, equity and excellence articulated by the Kothari Commission was distorted by subsequent commissions, even while apparently advocating the same principles. This was done by various commissions by making subtle interventions to redefine the synergies and priorities among the objectives. While Kothari Commission had given an equal importance to expansion, equity and excellence, the new education policy (NEP) of 1986 privileged excellence by sidelining both equity and expansion.

The concepts of centres of excellence, potential centres of excellence, autonomous colleges and deemed universities which provided some justification for unequal transfer of public funds to a few selected institutions at the expense of a larger number of institutions, emerged as part of this paradigm shift. The identification of excellence as relevance for the job market further paved the way for the transformation of higher education institutions from the centres for intellectual discourses to centres for job training. The NKC recommendation with its prioritisation of expansion and excellence at the expense of equity has drawn its inspiration from the global trends which favour privatisation and marketisation of higher education and prioritisation of skill development over intellectual training. It is heartening to note that the UGC has tried to reiterate the Kothari Commission recommendations by arguing that the triple objectives of expansion, inclusion and excellence are integral and complementary to one another. The reiteration that universities should not be reduced to skill development centres and that they should have a strong intellectual focus is also a much needed intervention to reclaim the primacy of the role of knowledge-creation in higher education institutions.

The prime minister was never frugal in his praise of the NKC report. He had given

### Trial Coordinator, CHAMPION Trial

The CHAMPION Trial is a randomised controlled trial taking place in 464 villages in the Mahabubnagar District of Andhra Pradesh. As in much of rural India, the area has an unacceptably high rate of neonatal mortality, largely the result of treatable illness and birth complications. The trial will assess whether a package of interventions to facilitate systemic changes to the provision and promotion of healthcare may be able to substantially reduce neonatal mortality in this area and be cost-effective.

Currently under design, an experiment evaluating a program providing school supplies and supplementary instruction to girl children between the ages of six and nine will also be implemented by the trial in control villages.

To take responsibility for running the trial, we wish to engage a full-time Trial Coordinator.

The Trial Coordinator will:

- Manage and implement the CHAMPION Trial, including the health and education interventions, as well as a 500 person-strong research team
- Monitor all arms of the trial, ensuring financial austerity, high-quality service delivery, and error-free data collection
- Serve as the main liaison between implementation arms of trial and scientific advisors
- Start her/his job in February 2008 or as soon as possible thereafter

A successful applicant for Trial Coordinator will have

- At least two years of relevant work experience
- At least a master's degree in public health or a related field
- Impeccable management, organizational, and communication skills as demonstrated by past experience and performance in the interview
- Fluent spoken and written Telugu will be an advantage for applicants

Interested candidates should send an email with CV and a one-page cover letter explaining their interest in the trial and expertise to [championtrial@naandi.org](mailto:championtrial@naandi.org).

CLOSING DATE FOR APPLICATIONS: 23 December 2007

it seven marks out of ten, a high rating from a stern master. Now that the UGC has come out with an alternative agenda, the prime minister has an obligation to revisit his ratings. How would he compare the UGC agenda with that of the NKC? Better or worse? Do they represent the divergent views of the prime minister's office (PMO) and MHRD on the strategies for the development of higher education? How do

they answer to the commitments in the National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP)? Which – NKC report or UGC recommendations – would now represent the national policy? A decision of the government of India on the national policy on the development of higher education – whether it be inclusive as recommended by the UGC or exclusive as recommended by the NKC – would depend to a great extent

on the marks the prime minister would award to NKC and UGC recommendations on a comparative scale.

## NOTES

- 1 National Knowledge Commission: Report to the Nation 2006, <http://knowledgecommission.gov.in/report2006.asp>
- 2 UGC: A Brief Report of the National Conference on Development of Higher Education, October 10-11, 2007, New Delhi.
- 3 J B J Tilak, 'Knowledge Commission and Higher Education', EPW, February 24, 2007.