

A Year of the Second State Higher Education Council (2011-2012)

Vice-Chairman's Report

October 2011 marked a new beginning in my life—after 40 years of diplomacy and international relations, the mantle of an educationist fell on my shoulders quite unexpectedly. The post of the Vice-Chairman and Executive Head of the Kerala State Higher Education Council was meant for “an eminent educationist, preferably a former Vice-Chancellor” and by no stretch of imagination could I be described as either of the two. But I had secretly desired to join the academic world after my diplomatic career, like some distinguished diplomats, such as Sardar K.M.Panicker and Hamid Ansari who were invited to run Universities. K.P.S.Menon (Sr) had said in his book that several Universities had offered him the post of the Vice-Chancellor. I felt that there was something logical about a diplomat becoming an educationist and gladly accepted the honour.

The challenge was indeed greater than I had expected. Although the general public, including the opposition parties, accepted the appointment in the light of my international experience and my seven years in Kerala since my retirement, I found the whole higher education scene too complex to understand. I was expected to operate from the first day as the head of a Council, which was still finding its feet after four and a half years under my predecessor, a distinguished educationist. The role of the Council was far from clear, even though the Act, which had established it, had given it a very broad mandate to advise the Government on all matters relating to higher education.

With my own limited knowledge of a complex system, the strategy I adopted was to begin by following up on a few issues that the previous Council had taken up. In my many meetings with cross sections of the stakeholders, I got a sense of the response to the old agenda of the Council and proceeded to add a number of items as the new agenda on the basis of the advice of the Executive Council, consisting mostly of teachers. In about three months, we had an Agenda 2012, consisting of some of the old and the new areas we chose for ourselves. The Government did not give us any guidelines on this matter, nor did it object to any of the items on the agenda, when it was brought to its attention. The first signal of the approval of the Government came when some of the items found a place in the Governor's address to the Legislative Assembly in April 2012.

The Choice Based Credit and Semester System (CBCSS)

I discovered in the early days of my term that there was an expectation that the new Council would modify the CBCSS, introduced by my predecessor, as it was seen to be some devious method of making the Universities fertile ground for the leftist ideology. In several meetings that I attended in several parts of the state, many teachers and students demanded a return to the annual system and they seemed disappointed that I had no plans to do any such thing. But having taken note of the practical problems that had arisen in the implementation of the CBCSS, I requested my own English teacher, Prof.Hridayakumari, to examine ways and means by which the system could be rectified, without reversing it. She and her colleagues, notably the Convener, Prof.Lopus Mathew, worked diligently for six months and submitted a report, which formed the basis of our

recommendations to the Government. Essentially, the proposal is to reduce the number of examinations, revise the grading system and request the Boards of Studies to revise the syllabi and textbooks to suit the CBCSS. We have since received the approval of the Government, in principle, of our recommendations.

A New State Policy on Higher Education

The previous Council had done a report on a higher education policy, but it was considered necessary to appoint a new Committee to review that report and to make recommendations for a higher education policy. Simultaneously, I presented a theme paper at a National Seminar in June 2012 entitled, Higher Education 2.0, highlighting the main elements of the change necessary to close the gap between our system and “world class education.” Infrastructure, connectivity, research, faculty recruitment and training, industry linkages and autonomy were some of the necessary ingredients of the new generation of education necessary to use the opportunities and to meet the challenges of the 21st century India. The paper received the endorsement of the seminar. These ideas, together with the report of the Council Committee Chaired by Prof. Thareen and convened by Dr. Sheena Shukkur will form the policy recommendations of the Council.

Review of University Acts

The University system in Kerala has been facing many challenges from all corners of the society, both inside and outside the State. A Committee chaired by Dr. Chandrasekharan Pillai has been working on a model University Act which will be a useful frame work which enables the Universities in Kerala to have some uniformity in their governance, organization and management to conduct their functions smoothly and discharge their responsibilities to the knowledge society more effectively. The adoption of the Act, with the necessary changes to suit the needs of each University, will facilitate better coordination among the Universities. The Committee, convened by Dr. Veeramanikantan, is likely to report at the end of the year.

State Accreditation and Assessment Council (SAAC)

The University Grants Commission and the National Accreditation and Assessment Council (NAAC) envisaged a State Accreditation and Assessment Council (SAAC) to make the accreditation and assessment of educational institutions in the state. An assessment system, which is mandatory and includes assessment of teachers will enhance the quality of education. A Committee was formed under the chairmanship of Prof. Gnanam to frame the structure and rules of SAAC. With the hard work put in by the Committee, particularly its Convener, Dr. Jayaprakash, the Committee has nearly completed its work. After a round of consultations with some international experts, the report will be submitted to the Government. The setting up of the Council will be a huge task, with a big outlay and a sizeable staff.

Industry-Institutions Linkages

The involvement of the industry in shaping and supporting education is still in its infancy in Kerala. A report commissioned by the Planning Commission under the chairmanship of

Shri. Narayana Murthy envisages that the industry should share half the outlay of higher education in India. We have constituted a Committee with Prof. Rajeev Srinivasan as the Chairman and Prof. C.I. Abdul Rahiman as Convener to frame the modalities for industry involvement from the stage of curriculum planning to campus recruitment. It consists of industry representatives and academics. The report of the Committee is expected by the end of the year.

Other Committees

Committees have been constituted to revise the rules of the Cluster of Colleges Programme and service conditions of non-teaching staff. The reports of these groups are also expected shortly.

Scholarship Programme

The Higher Education Scholarship Scheme was envisaged to assist the needy and meritorious students of the Arts, Science and Business Studies streams by giving five-year scholarships from a corpus fund of 100 Crores. Only 1,12,63,633 + 3 Crore from the Government has been collected to corpus fund so far. The Council has decided to undertake a campaign to collect maximum possible contributions from stakeholders, including NRIs, for the holistic social initiative. The Scholarship Committee has been reconstituted, but a meeting is yet to be held. One of the first things that the new Council did was to earmark reserved positions for OBCs to rectify an omission. The scholarships have been finalized for first year students and 856 second year students for the year 2012-13.

Erudite Programme

While continuing the Erudite Programme, the Council has decided to be more selective in choosing scholars and to make them available to more Colleges.

Journal Higher Education 2.0

A specialized journal on higher education has been on the anvil for quite some time. Efforts continue to get an Editorial Board together and to finalize arrangements with a Publisher.

Monthly Lectures on Higher Education

In order to cultivate a group of knowledge enthusiasts, who will thereby act as a catalyst to the formation of a knowledge society, the Council has put forward small step by instituting a series of monthly lectures on higher education for the stakeholders. So far, eminent experts in various fields have delivered 5 lectures.

Coordination with other State Councils

An initiative was taken to compare notes with the other State Higher Education Councils. Out of the six Councils we could contact, four (Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West

Bengal) participated, while Andhra and UP were not able to come. The discussions were extremely useful and among the decisions taken were:

1. A database of all the State Councils will be prepared with the help of the UGC and MHRD.
2. The Councils will study the information provided and adopt the best practices from each other.
3. The Councils will meet periodically to share experiences.

E-Governance

E-governance has been introduced in the Council through DDFS. We expect to move to a “paperless” world in due course. We have also made some progress in strengthening the Council Database and providing websites for Colleges.

Agenda for the Future

Apart from following up the initiatives and programmes of the first year, I propose that the Council take up the following:

1. Setting up of a Teaching and Non-teaching Staff Training Institute.
2. Setting up of an Open University
3. Identification of a new set of courses in various areas in consultation with the Boards of Studies.
4. An IT@Colleges Programme

The combination of information and communication technologies has created ICT, possibly one of the most powerful technologies devised by humanity. But disparities exist in access to, and use of ICT between the school education sector and the higher education sector. Taking inspiration from the commendable work done by the IT@School project of the Govt. of Kerala, the KSHCEC wish to initiate an IT@College programme to minimize the ‘digital divide’ between these two sectors

5. An Earn while you Learn Programme

Although entrepreneurship is a term seldom associated with educational institutions, student entrepreneurial activities are not a recent development. Known as sponsored research, knowledge commercialisation or academic capitalism, the multifaceted phenomenon of student entrepreneurship has existed for some time on educational institutions worldwide. Considering the fluctuations in the global economic scenario, more and more students are now attracted towards the idea of starting a career from the college itself. The Council envisions a novel initiative, which will assist students to follow their dreams and build career plans based on social responsibility and their own passions, interests and ideals.

6. A Communicative English Programme at Graduate and Post-Graduate level for all students. This will be a follow-up of the Hridayakumari Committee.
7. Planning and seeking approval for the construction of a KSHCEC Headquarters.

Functioning of the Council

Having had the experience of one year and having compared notes with the other Councils, I would suggest the following measures to improve the functioning of the Council:

1. The Governing Council and the Advisory Council should be constituted at the earliest so that wider consultations can be held with stakeholders as envisaged in the Act.
2. There should be greater coordination between the Higher Education Department and the KSHEC. There is no system of the Council being informed regularly of the initiatives being taken by the Department. The Council may be able to make a contribution to such initiatives.
3. The Council does not see the periodic communications between the Department and the UGC and MHRD. Some of the relevant communications may be shared with the Council.
4. Reform ideas emanating from the Department may be shared with the Council for advice. The Council is not aware of the details of many of the reforms the Government has introduced. As for the Council, the minutes of the Council meetings and other developments are invariably sent to the Principal Secretary for Higher Education.

The Council is poised to enter the second year with a clear vision and points for action. An Agenda 2013 will be unveiled very soon and sent to all stakeholders. With a bewildering number of issues and a multiplicity of decision makers, changes in higher education will be slow in coming. But, in keeping with

the mandate of the Council, it needs to constantly advise the Government on all aspects of higher education, which need attention.

I must acknowledge with gratitude the guidance and support I have received from the Chief Minister, Education Minister, Principal Secretary for Higher Education, Member Secretary and other members of the Executive Council and the Council staff during the year.

T.P.Sreenivasan
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