

Why Kerala is making drastic changes in higher education policies

TP Sreenivasan, Vice-Chairman, Kerala State Higher Education Council explains how they are bringing about a greater change in the state's Higher education in a planned manner.

So far the Choice Based Credit System has not been very well received in Kerala. To change matters, the Council has proposed adopting the UNESCO prescribed indirect grading system with a 7 point range. "It is more dynamic, transparent and universally accepted," says Sreenivasan.

ESTABLISHMENT OF FACULTY ACADEMY: Identifying the dearth of quality teachers as one of the biggest challenges facing higher education in Kerala, the Council has proposed the creation of a faculty training academy. "Access and equity have no meaning without quality education. Qualified, trained, passionate teachers are vital in any education system but hard to find in Kerala," opines Sreenivasan.

KSHEC has received the state government's nod for the creation of a residential training facility with the capacity to train hundreds of faculty annually. The academy will offer three-months professional training modules for faculty being inducted and regular follow up programmes of varying durations for senior faculty. Courses will focus on communication skills, governance and leadership, ICT, pedagogic skills, personality development, professional ethics and values and research methodology.

ESTABLISHMENT OF ASSESSMENT COUNCIL: To tide over the limitations of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council, KSHEC has proposed creating a state level assessment council. According to Sreenivasan, "The UGC and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council have welcomed this move, which will help assess more colleges. It will also help implement the provisions of Rashtriya Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan in the state," says Sreenivasan.

COLLEGE CLUSTERING: In tune with the UGC's proposal to establish college clusters, KSHEC envisages abolishing the university affiliation system in favour of College Cluster Multiple Campus Universities. The new concept entails a group of 10 to 30 autonomous colleges forming a College Cluster University. The university will be spread over multiple campuses and will only have its own centralised office to provide centralised examinations and academic monitoring. Constituent colleges will continue to be individually managed with their own respective fee structure. Clustering could be based on subject or location or financial status, etc.

"College clusters universities will improve the quality of higher education through sharing of resources, introduce healthy rivalries, and allow constituent colleges to receive the same UGC grants that are given to universities," explains Sreenivasan.

As an experiment, KSHEC has organised clusters of 5 to 6 colleges operating in an area of 10sq km in Calicut, Kochi and Trivandrum. “It is challenging to get private colleges’ buy in for this concept. They see clusters as a burden, especially because of the presence of government colleges. We are working on changing perspectives, to see college clusters as an opportunity for sharing and learning. So far, we are getting government colleges in the clusters to create virtual classrooms so that students from other colleges can take benefit from certain lectures in the other colleges of that cluster. We have also given them small grants to improve their laboratory, sports, and other facilities,” shares Sreenivasan.

Catalysts for change

“We act as evangelists for change,” says Sreenivasan about KSHEC. What are the expected outcomes of the measures the Council has seen success for so far?

Sreenivasan expects autonomy to improve academic areas such as curriculum development, organisation of courses of study, examination system reform, innovations in the pedagogy, induction of modern tools of technology to make learning student-centric, extending the academic calendar to maximise learning opportunities for students and designing of community outreach programmes to enrich the curriculum.

The new choice based credit and semester system is predicted to facilitate intra- and inter-university credit transfers and ease post-graduate admissions besides making teachers more free to introduce academic innovations.

Faculty training aims at helping teachers apply and evolve new teaching technologies and aids, familiarising them with trends in higher education, and helping them recognise students’ differential capabilities and modify the method of teaching accordingly. “We expect formal training to increase research and create a better learning environment resulting in more employable graduates and post graduates,” says Sreenivasan.

As for the college clusters, Sreenivasan sees the Council’s initiative as a small beginning for a better integrated higher education landscape.

Thanks to extensive groundwork, KSHEC is one of the Councils most prepared to implement RUSA. “But we are yet to prepare a perspective plan for submission to the Centre because of the reluctance of the bureaucracy to accept the paradigm shift involved in RUSA, which entrusts planning, funding and monitoring to the Council,” says Sreenivasan. A change in mindset is badly needed for this Council to improve on these positive outcomes.