

**Inaugural address by
Former Ambassador T.P.Sreenivasan, .
Vice-Chairman of the Kerala State Higher Education Council
at the first session of the Executive Council. November 2, 2011.**

Distinguished Member Secretary and Members of the Executive Council,

I am delighted to congratulate you on your appointment as the members of the Executive Council of the Kerala State Higher Education Council. I look forward to working with you to enhance the value and prestige of higher education in Kerala.

You have brought to the Council a wealth of experience in the field of education. Each one of you has been chosen for your eminence and wisdom. I have myself spent much of my working life in diplomacy, but my heart has been in education. With both my parents as school teachers, I have grown up in the midst of the joys and tears of educating young minds. I began my career as a teacher and even after I returned to India after 37 years abroad, I found immense satisfaction in teaching in several universities in India and outside. I was pleasantly surprised when I was offered this position, previously occupied by a veteran educationist.

Education and diplomacy have much in common. Unlike the other civil services, the Foreign Service has very few files and it demands constant education as we change countries and continents every three years. The challenge to cope with a new country, a new civilization, a new language and a new system can be met only by remaining a student throughout. Reading, research and writing are as essential for diplomats as for academics. Perhaps, this is the reason why several distinguished diplomats, among them Sardar K.M.Panikkar, Shri.G.Parthasarathy, Shri. K.R.Narayanan and Shri. Hamid Ansari, were appointed as Vice-Chancellors. Shri.K.P.S.Menon (Sr) has recorded that he was offered the Vice-Chancellorships of several universities when he returned from Moscow. I welcome this opportunity to bring to this position my exposure to the world and my zest for igniting the young minds, in the words of former President Abdul Kalam.

Allow me to pay a tribute to my predecessor, Dr.K.N.Panikkar, and his team for building up this Council from its very beginning and for laying the foundations for making higher education in Kerala purposeful and relevant to the demands of modern times. They have introduced several reforms and suggested many more, with the help of other experts. Our first task is to give attention to these reforms and promote their implementation after critically examining them in the light of past experience and applying the correctives as necessary. The scholarships scheme, the clustering of colleges, the Erudite Scheme, combating of ragging in the campuses, the Teacher Exchange Programme, the publication of

a journal etc have broad acceptance and must be pursued vigorously. The reforms on which there may be difference of opinion in the academic community should be examined with the realization that the pursuit of perfection should not endanger the existing good. The advice we give to the Government on policy formulation should be well considered, they should reflect the consensus in the academic community and they should be practical and beneficial. Effective monitoring of the programmes and utilization of funds must be one of our important functions.

The general approach I would recommend is one of continuity and change. As a student in Kerala, I was often bewildered by frequent changes in the education system. We should not subject our student community to needless experimentation and change. Our purpose should be to fashion an education system that will meet the challenges of the future. Swami Vivekananda used to say that the end of all education is “man making.” Education is “the manifestation of the perfection already in man,” he observed. Education, for him, means that process by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased and intellect is sharpened, as a result of which one can stand on one’s feet.

The lofty ideals of a broad education that will elevate the society must be upheld, but after everything is said and done, our education system will be judged by the extent to which it equips our youth to compete nationally and globally for careers. We have had a long tradition of seeking fortunes abroad and the fact that many have succeeded in building successful careers abroad is a compliment to our education system, however inadequate it is perceived to be. We should, therefore, keep an eye on the opportunities worldwide and fashion courses that will suit the needs in different countries. The system should be flexible enough to introduce courses at short notice to cater to urgent demands. Even while stressing the importance of the study of Indian languages, proficiency in the English language must be given high priority to make our graduates able to compete in the international markets. Study of international relations should also be expanded with the same objective. Needless to say, education should inculcate not only our values and culture, but also the civic sense of our citizens to make them valuable members of the society.

I hope the reconstituted Council will be thoughtful, innovative and fast in devising new schemes to bring about the necessary changes in higher education. There is no dearth of studies, reports and recommendations to choose from. But more important is the implementation of decisions in a highly complex system. We should be conscious that there is no level playing field for our academic community. While the variety of different managing and financing systems will remain, it should be possible for every institution to give equal opportunities to the academic community. The role of the Council should be to

create a level playing field for higher education in Kerala. We can secure the cooperation of the multitude of agencies and administrations, whether in the Government or the private sector, only if we demonstrate professionalism, transparency and care, the very principles that the present Government of Kerala espouses.

Ideally, we should strive to elevate every institution to a level of excellence, but given the history, the availability of resources and the existing variations in standards, it is inevitable that this should be accomplished in stages. I am happy to know that the centre has already agreed, in principle, to establish an IIT in Kerala in the 12th plan. We, as the Council, should advise the Government of Kerala to take the necessary steps to establish an IIT in Kerala as soon as possible. Similarly, the proposed Malayalam University and Open University should be established as soon as possible. We already have institutions of repute in Kerala. I would suggest that we devise a scheme by which a number of these institutions are selected for intensive efforts to turn them into institutions of excellence. We might begin with a rating mechanism for colleges so that improvement can be noted and incentives given to deserving institutions. The selection can be made from the Colleges that volunteer to join the scheme. One element of the scheme will be the linking up of these entities with national and international institutions of excellence. If the Council accepts this scheme, it should be submitted to the Government before the end of the year.

We are required to prepare our programme for the 12th Plan in a matter of days. This requires urgent thinking on what we can accomplish in higher education in the next five years. Nationally, this is a time for introspection and self appraisal to see whether we can usher in an era of high quality teaching and research. We read with consternation recently that a country which attracted knowledge seekers from around the globe to Nalanda and Takshila does not have a single university to find a place in international ranking. Shri. JAK Tareen, the Vice-Chancellor of the Pondicherry University has identified three major differences between Indian universities and well known world class universities, which prevent us from attaining excellence. "First, Indian universities and colleges totally lack in critical mass of students, secondly, the undergraduate programmes are fragmented from the university campuses, and, thirdly, the existing affiliation system of colleges to universities is the bottleneck of their autonomy and freedom to grow with innovations. These issues need to be addressed for our universities to attain global parity, though other issues of faculty, infrastructure, laboratories, library and a conducive ambience are as important," he states. We shall have to meet again shortly to suggest measures to be included in the 12th plan to meet our aspiration to create a knowledge society.

I would emphasise the need for the broadest possible consultations with the

stakeholders on a continuing basis. In this, I would solicit the participation of all members of the Council. I shall begin consultations on a regular basis with groups and individuals from next week and I would urge you also to do so in designated constituencies. We should visit as many institutions as possible within a short time to get new ideas and thoughts. We should increase our interaction with the universities in the rest of India and broad. We do not claim monopoly over wisdom and we hope to gain our insights from the continuous interaction with the academic community.

The message that should go from this first meeting of the Council is that KSHEC will work with the clear purpose of making a difference to higher education in Kerala to enable our youth to meet the challenges of the present and future. We shall do this without fear or favour, affection or ill will and we expect, in turn, the full cooperation, support and goodwill from the entire academic community and the public at large. The doors of the Council will remain open for ideas, suggestions and recommendations and I invite the public to interact freely with me and the members of the Council.

I wish you the very best as we embark on a journey together. I have great pleasure and honour to inaugurate the first meeting of the Executive Council.

Thank you.

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