



Future of Indian Higher Education System

This editorial is based on “[How Not To Run Unis](#)” which was published in Times of India on 14/01/2025. The article brings into picture the controversy surrounding UGC's draft guidelines on Vice-Chancellor appointments, raising concerns over state autonomy and broader challenges in India's higher education. Achieving NEP 2020's vision requires urgent reforms in governance, funding, and academic quality.

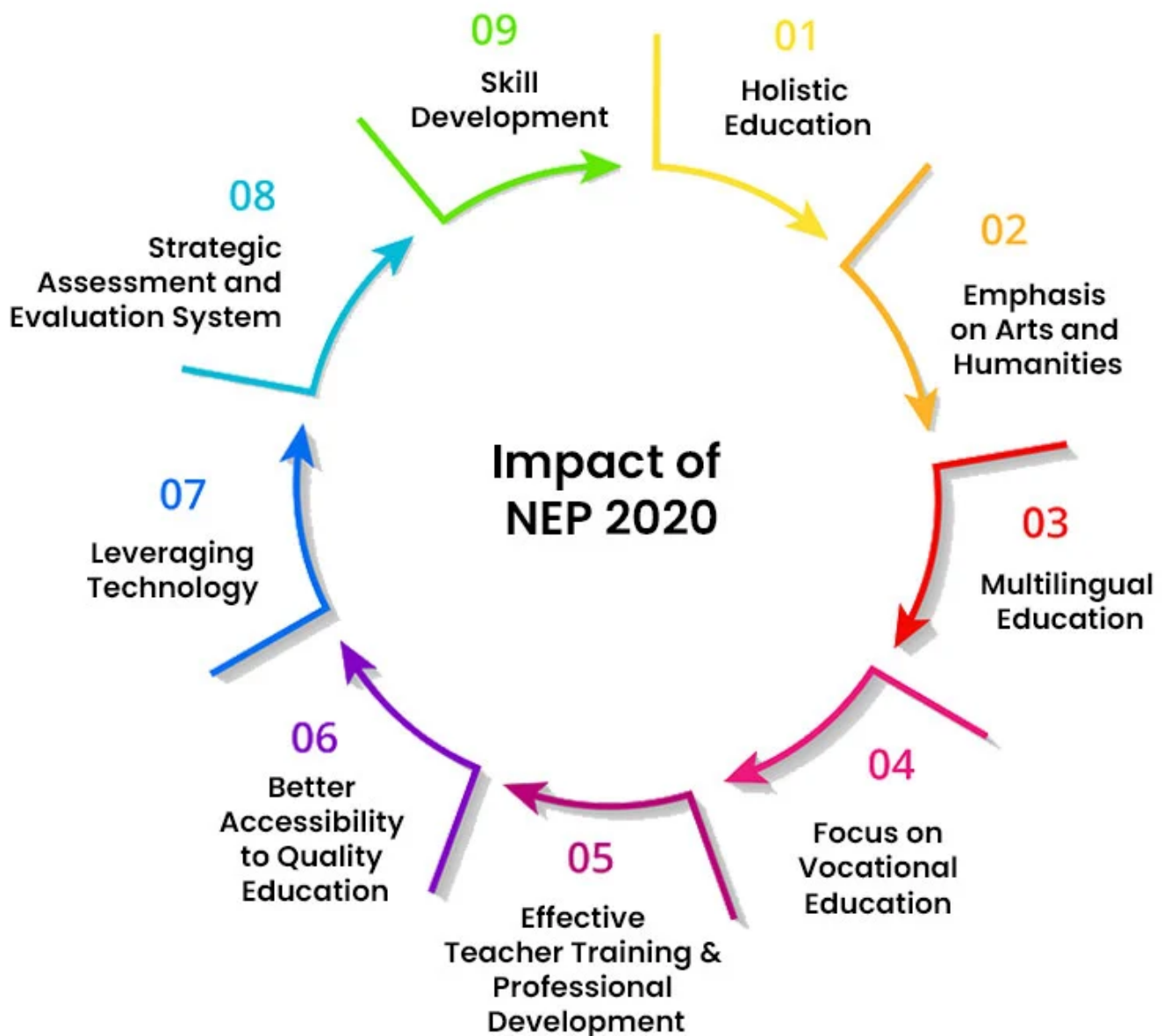
For Prelims: [Vice-Chancellor appointments](#), [India's higher education sector](#), [National Education Policy 2020](#), [Gross Enrolment Ratio \(GER\) in higher education](#), [National Research Foundation](#), [Study in India program](#), [PM eVidya](#), [Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Teaching](#), [Global Innovation Index 2023](#), [Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission](#), [Atal Innovation Mission](#), [National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme](#), [Eklavya Model Residential Schools](#), [National Action Plan on Climate Change](#).

For Mains: Key Reforms Taken in the Indian Higher Education System, Key Issues Associated with India's Higher Education System.

The recent controversy over **UGC's draft guidelines on [Vice-Chancellor appointments](#)** has reignited the broader debate about reforms needed in [India's higher education sector](#). While the proposed centralization of VC appointments has drawn criticism for potentially undermining state autonomy, it merely **scratches the surface of the deep-rooted challenges facing Indian universities**. The [National Education Policy 2020](#) envisions greater institutional autonomy and academic excellence, but achieving these goals requires addressing a complex web of issues - **from governance structures and funding mechanisms to academic quality and research output**. As India aims to position itself as a global knowledge hub, the time is ripe for a comprehensive examination of the reforms needed to **revitalize our higher education landscape**.

What are Key Reforms Taken in the Indian Higher Education System?

- **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** NEP 2020 is the cornerstone reform **introduced in higher education**, focusing on flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, and global standards.
 - It introduces the **5+3+3+4 structure**, multiple entry-exit options in degree programs to foster flexibility and lifelong learning.
 - The policy aims to increase the [Gross Enrolment Ratio \(GER\) in higher education to 50% by 2035](#) and emphasizes vocational education, research, and innovation.
 - It replaces the **rigid discipline-based system with an interdisciplinary and student-centric approach**.



- **Academic Bank of Credits:** The ABC system allows students to **store and transfer academic credits earned** from different higher education institutions, providing flexibility in completing degree programs.
 - This promotes multiple entry-exit options and ensures that students' academic progress is not disrupted due to institutional changes
- **National Research Foundation (NRF):** NRF, proposed under NEP 2020, aims to improve the research ecosystem by funding interdisciplinary research and promoting academia-industry collaboration.
 - It focuses on fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, addressing societal challenges, and increasing India's global research output.
- **Emphasis on Digital Learning and EdTech:** The government has prioritized digitalization of education, especially during the **Covid-19 pandemic**.
 - Initiatives like **SWAYAM, DIKSHA, and PM eVidya** offer Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and digital resources to improve access to quality education.
- **Internationalization of Higher Education:** India is opening its education system to global institutions, **allowing top 100 universities worldwide to establish campuses in India**.
 - The **Study in India program** has been launched to attract foreign students, while Indian universities are encouraged to set up offshore campuses to enhance India's global

education footprint.

- For instance, The **Zanzibar campus of IIT Madras** leverages the wide expertise of IIT Madras faculty in interdisciplinary education,
- **Atal Tinkering Labs and Start-Up Ecosystem:** Initiatives like **Atal Tinkering Labs under the [Atal Innovation Mission \(AIM\)](#)** encourage innovation and entrepreneurship among students.
 - These labs, equipped with **modern tools like 3D printers and robotics kits**, foster creativity and problem-solving from a young age.
- **Improving Faculty Quality and Recruitment:** The **[Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Teaching \(PMMNMTT\)](#)** focuses on faculty development, teacher training, and pedagogy reforms.
- **PM SHRI Schools for Rising India:** Though focused on school education, **[PM SHRI schools](#) aim to act as role models for implementing NEP 2020 principles**, which will ripple into higher education.
 - These schools emphasize multidisciplinary learning, digitalization, and joyful learning experiences, preparing students for higher education challenges.
- **Flexible Degree Programs and Lifelong Learning:** Universities now offer **4-year multidisciplinary undergraduate programs** with multiple exit options to cater to diverse learner needs.
 - Lifelong learning initiatives through **MOOCs, digital libraries, and continuing education programs** ensure upskilling opportunities for working professionals.

What are the Key Issues Associated with India's Higher Education System?

- **Poor Research Ecosystem:** India's higher education system lags in fostering a **robust research culture**, with inadequate focus on interdisciplinary and industry-oriented research.
 - This is compounded by **limited funding, infrastructure constraints, and the absence of incentives for innovation**, especially in Tier-2 and Tier-3 institutions.
 - Despite the establishment of initiatives like the National Research Foundation under NEP 2020, **India's research spending is only 0.7% of GDP, far behind the global average of 1.8%**.
 - India ranked **40th in the [Global Innovation Index 2023](#)**, trailing countries like Malaysia and Thailand.
- **Faculty Shortage and Quality Gaps:** India suffers from an acute shortage of qualified faculty, undermining the quality of education across institutions.
 - Even premier institutions like IITs and IIMs face **40% and 31% faculty vacancies**, respectively, while **most Tier-2 and Tier-3 colleges** struggle to attract skilled educators due to poor pay and lack of professional growth.
 - The **teacher-student ratio in higher education is 1:26**, far below the ideal **1:10** prescribed by global standards.
 - Despite programs like the **[Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Teaching](#)**, recruitment and professional development initiatives have been inadequate.
- **Low Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education:** India's GER in higher education remains low at **27.3% (AISHE 2023)**.
 - This highlights inequitable access to higher education, particularly for marginalized groups and rural populations.
 - Although initiatives like the NEP 2020 target a **50% GER by 2035**, challenges such as affordability, infrastructure gaps, and gender disparity persist.
- **Inadequate Industry-Academia Linkage:** There is a severe disconnect between **academia and industry**, with institutions failing to align curriculum with market demands, resulting in low employability of graduates.
 - India's employability rate stood at **54.81% in 2024** highlighting a lack of skill-oriented training.
 - Despite schemes like the **["Professor of Practice" initiative](#)**, most colleges fail to integrate **work-related learning opportunities**.
- **Governance Challenges and Over-Centralization:** India's higher education governance faces challenges of excessive centralization, lack of autonomy, and bureaucratic inefficiencies.
 - Overlapping mandates of regulatory bodies like **UGC and AICTE, combined with limited**

- **institutional independence**, stifle innovation and hinder effective decision-making.
- The recent controversy over UGC's draft guidelines on Vice-Chancellor appointments highlights this issue.
 - Critics argue that the proposed **centralization of VC appointments undermines state autonomy and federal principles**, reflecting the need for governance reforms to balance accountability with institutional freedom.
- **Digital Divide and Uneven Digitalization:** While digital education gained momentum **post-Covid-19**, its adoption has been uneven due to inadequate infrastructure in rural areas and smaller towns.
 - A 2022 report stated that **only about 34% of schools** in India have internet facilities till date and more than **50% do not have functional computers**.
 - Government initiatives like **PM eVidya and SWAYAM** aim to enhance access, but their outreach is limited.
 - Additionally, lack of teacher training on digital tools further restricts the potential of edtech solutions.
- **Funding Constraints and Rising Privatization:** Public spending on higher education remains low at **4.1% and 4.6% of its GDP**.
 - Due to insufficient state support, private institutions now dominate the education sector, with **78.6% of colleges in India being privately managed**.
 - This over-reliance on privatization raises concerns about affordability and quality. For instance, private colleges often charge **exorbitant fees, creating accessibility barriers for economically weaker sections**, while many lack NAAC accreditation or quality assurance mechanisms.
- **Focus on Quantity Over Quality:** India's higher education expansion has prioritized increasing the number of institutions over maintaining quality.
 - With over **56,000 colleges and 1,113 universities**, many lack proper accreditation and competent faculty.
 - India has a total of 1,113 universities and 43,796 colleges, but **only 37.6% of universities and 20.7% of colleges** are accredited by NAAC, while the rest operate below quality benchmarks.
 - This mass proliferation **has diluted academic standards**, with graduates from such institutions often deemed unemployable.
- **Limited Internationalization:** India has yet to emerge as a preferred higher education destination globally, with only **46,000 foreign students** studying in Indian institutions as of 2021-22.
 - Despite favorable policies like the **"Study in India" program and NEP 2020's push** for international branch campuses, issues like outdated pedagogy, low global rankings, and poor infrastructure deter foreign students.
 - The **University of Delhi** is India's **only institution ranked in the top 200 of the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2024**, reflecting India's limited global competitiveness.
- **Lack of Innovation in Curriculum:** The higher education curriculum in India remains outdated, rigid, and disconnected from 21st-century skills and interdisciplinary approaches.
 - Western institutions have successfully adopted the multi-entry and exit system, **but Indian institutions face challenges**, as noted by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education.
 - Moreover, the majority of universities lack updated syllabi for emerging fields like **AI, robotics, and data science**, leaving graduates ill-equipped for modern job markets.
 - This failure to modernize is evident in the **Global Employability University Ranking and Survey (GEURS) 2025**, only 10 Indian institutions, including IIT Delhi and IISc Bengaluru, rank among the top 250 universities globally for graduate employability.

What Measures can be Adopted to Revitalise India's Higher Education System?

- **Enhancing Research and Innovation:** To foster a research-driven ecosystem, institutions must focus on quality over quantity by encouraging interdisciplinary research and innovation.
 - Establishing **Research and Innovation Clusters** that connect academia, industry, and government can enhance outcomes in key sectors like **AI, green energy, and**

healthcare.

- The **National Research Foundation (NRF)**, proposed under NEP 2020, should work in tandem with [Atal Innovation Mission \(AIM\)](#) to promote startups and incubators within campuses.
- **Strengthening Industry-Academia Linkages:** Higher education institutions should actively collaborate with industries to co-develop market-oriented curricula, focusing on emerging areas like robotics, blockchain, and data science.
 - Measures such as establishing **Centers of Excellence (CoEs)**, appointing "**Professors of Practice**," and offering internships integrated into degree programs can bridge the skill gap.
 - Linking [PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana \(PMKVY\)](#) with universities can ensure graduates are industry-ready with practical and job-relevant skills.
- **Improving Faculty Recruitment and Training:** Addressing faculty shortages and enhancing their quality is key to revitalizing higher education.
 - Recruitment processes should focus on merit-based selection and the removal of bureaucratic delays, while capacity-building programs should focus on continuous professional development.
 - The **Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Teaching (PMMNMTT)** should be linked with initiatives like **SWAYAM**, enabling teachers to upskill using Massive **Open Online Courses**.
 - Faculty exchange programs with international universities can further enhance teaching quality and foster global exposure.
- **Promoting Digital and Hybrid Learning:** Universities need to embrace digital transformation by adopting **hybrid models of education that integrate online and offline learning**.
 - This includes creating virtual labs, investing in edtech tools, and encouraging the use of platforms like [DIKSHA](#) and [SWAYAM](#) for content dissemination.
 - To bridge the digital divide, the **government must collaborate with tech firms to provide affordable devices** and reliable internet in rural and underprivileged areas.
- **Boosting Internationalization of Education:** To attract foreign students and faculty, India must reform visa policies, improve infrastructure, and create a global-friendly academic environment.
 - Indian universities should establish more overseas campuses learning from IITs and forge partnerships with top global universities to increase international credibility.
 - Simplifying procedures for **joint PhDs and dual degrees with international institutions** can further promote global academic collaboration.
- **Reforming Governance and Autonomy:** Granting greater academic and financial autonomy to higher education institutions can enable innovation and flexibility in decision-making.
 - Replacing the current regulatory multiplicity with a single, empowered body like the **Higher Education Commission of India (HECI)**, as proposed by NEP 2020, can streamline operations and reduce bureaucratic delays.
 - Institutions should also **adopt transparent governance models** by involving stakeholders, including students, faculty, and industry representatives, in decision-making processes.
 - Performance-based funding can further encourage accountability and institutional reforms.
- **Promoting Vocational Education and Skill Integration:** Higher education institutions should embed vocational education into mainstream curricula, as envisioned in NEP 2020.
 - Collaborations between universities, industries, and initiatives like the [National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme \(NAPS\)](#) can provide hands-on training in real-world settings.
 - Encouraging **interdisciplinary degrees that combine core academics with practical skills**, such as engineering with AI or humanities with digital marketing, can create holistic graduates.
 - Integrating **skill-based certifications with university degrees** can make education both academically enriching and employment-oriented.
- **Fostering Inclusivity and Accessibility:** Higher education reforms must prioritize the inclusion of marginalized and underrepresented groups, ensuring equity in access and opportunities.
 - Initiatives like [Eklavya Model Residential Schools](#) and **scholarships for SC/ST and economically weaker students** should be expanded to cover higher education expenses.
 - Universities must **improve physical infrastructure**, such as ramps and braille libraries,

to accommodate students with disabilities.

- NEP 2020's focus on **providing education in regional languages** must be implemented to ensure inclusivity while bridging linguistic barriers.
- **Modernizing the Curriculum:** Universities should move away from rigid and outdated curricula by introducing interdisciplinary and flexible learning models.
 - Multiple entry-exit options, credit transfer systems under the **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)**, and project-based learning should become standard practices.
 - Institutions must incorporate emerging fields like **climate science, AI, biotechnology**, and sustainability into their core programs.
 - Periodic curriculum reviews in collaboration with industries and international academic bodies can ensure that higher education remains relevant and future-ready.
- **Encouraging Public-Private Partnerships:** To address resource constraints, public and private entities should collaborate to improve infrastructure, research funding, and innovation ecosystems.
 - For example, partnerships under [Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan \(RUSA\)](#) can help scale quality improvements in public universities.
 - Private entities can be **incentivized to invest in incubation centers**, skill development programs, and scholarships for students in rural or economically weaker areas.
 - Collaborative ventures can also modernize campuses by providing smart classrooms and updated lab facilities..
- **Focusing on Regional Equity:** Ensuring equitable access to higher education across regions requires targeted investments in underserved areas, particularly in states like **Bihar, Odisha, and northeastern regions**.
 - Establishing specialized universities, such as central universities in Ladakh or the Northeast, can address regional disparities in quality education.
 - Linking **regional colleges with national institutions like IITs and NITs** through mentoring programs can improve standards and create a more balanced education ecosystem.
 - Building rural digital infrastructure and promoting community colleges can make higher education accessible for all.
- **Integration of Micro-Credentials into Mainstream Education:** Incorporating micro-credentials—short, skill-focused certifications—into degree programs can offer students **flexibility** and help them acquire industry-specific skills quickly.
 - For example, pairing traditional degrees with certifications in AI, blockchain, or sustainable practices can enhance employability.
 - These **modular certifications would allow students to customize their education**, aligning it with career aspirations.
- **Creation of Green Campuses as Learning Laboratories:** Institutions should transform into sustainability hubs by adopting green infrastructure and renewable energy solutions.
 - **Green campuses can serve as living laboratories for students** to learn and implement sustainable practices in real-time.
 - For instance, colleges could mandate student-led renewable energy or water management projects, aligned with the [National Action Plan on Climate Change \(NAPCC\)](#).
 - These campuses could also partner with private green tech companies to pilot cutting-edge innovations in real-world settings.
- **Leveraging Cultural Education for Global Soft Power:** Indian universities should establish specialized programs focusing on India's cultural heritage, including yoga, Ayurveda, philosophy, and performing arts.
 - By integrating these programs with global courses, such as sustainable development or mental wellness, India can leverage its rich cultural resources to enhance soft power.
 - Linking such courses with **Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)** cells can attract foreign students while preserving India's traditions.
- **Start-Up Universities Focusing Solely on Entrepreneurship:** India should create universities exclusively focused on nurturing entrepreneurship.
 - These institutions can provide incubation support, access to venture capital, and dedicated courses in business innovation.
 - Linking such universities with regional startup ecosystems can encourage students to build scalable startups.
 - For instance, **Gujarat's iCreate initiative can be replicated nationally**.

Conclusion:

Achieving the goals of NEP 2020 requires a comprehensive approach to governance, funding, research, and academic quality. Reforming the sector must focus on fostering **institutional autonomy, addressing faculty shortages, and improving industry-academia linkages**. Only with a systemic overhaul can India realize its aspirations of becoming a global knowledge hub. The time for decisive action is now.

Drishti Mains Question:

Analyze the key challenges facing India's higher education system. How can the National Education Policy 2020 address these issues to transform India into a global knowledge hub?

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Which of the following provisions of the Constitution does India have a bearing on Education? (2012)

1. Directive Principles of State Policy
2. Rural and Urban Local Bodies
3. Fifth Schedule
4. Sixth Schedule
5. Seventh Schedule

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 3, 4 and 5 only
- (c) 1, 2 and 5 only
- (d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Ans- (d)

Mains

Q1. How have digital initiatives in India contributed to the functioning of the education system in the country? Elaborate on your answer. (2020)

Q2. Discuss the main objectives of Population Education and point out the measures to achieve them in India in detail. (2021)