



## India's Universities: A Rough Ride

*This editorial is based on “[The Multiple Crises in Indian Universities](#)” which was published in *The Hindu* on 09/05/2022. It talks about the key challenges that India's universities have to face and suggests steps that can be taken to alleviate their problems.*

**For Prelims:** Institutions of Eminence (IoE) Scheme, IMPRINT Initiative, National Education Policy, 2020, UGC, World University Rankings 2022, QS World University Rankings 2022, National Research Foundation, HEFA

**For Mains:** Challenges in higher education and HEIs in India, Initiatives launched for HEIs.

Education has long been touted to play a key role in [reducing socio-economic inequalities](#). Multiple studies, both in India and abroad, have reaffirmed the belief that **higher education leads to better financial outcomes**.

Following this, the Government of India launched several initiatives for the upliftment of Indian universities, such as the [Institutions of Eminence \(IoE\) Scheme](#) (for setting up/ upgrading 20 Institutions as world-class teaching and research institutions), the [IMPRINT](#) initiative (for developing a roadmap for research to solve major engineering and technology challenges) and the [National Education Policy, 2020](#).

Despite such efforts, India's once-great institutions of learning are beset by multiple crises – a **financial crunch** at the university level, a **deficit in research opportunities** for faculty, **poor infrastructure** and learning outcomes for students.

### Where do Indian Universities Stand at the Global Level?

- The **Times Higher Education (THE)** in September 2021 released its [World University Rankings 2022](#) edition which found that overall, **India is home to 35 of the world's top 1,000 universities**, its second-highest total ever in the rankings.
  - Out of those 35, **Indian Institute of Science (IISc)** was the top performer followed by **IIT Ropar** and **JSS Academy of Higher Education and Research**.
- Earlier in July 2021, the [QS World University Rankings 2022](#) showed that overall, there were **22 Indian institutions in the top 1,000** list compared to 21 in the 2021 Rankings, with the **IITs in Guwahati, Kanpur, Kharagpur and Madras** making major strides in rankings.

### What are the Causes of the Sufferings of India's Universities?

- **Poor Governance Structure:** Management of Indian education faces challenges of **over-centralization, bureaucratic structures** and **lack of accountability**, transparency, and professionalism.

- The Ministry of Education is insisting higher education institutions to **increase their intake capacity by 25%**, while the Ministry of Finance has sought to ban **the creation of new teaching posts**.
- Also, the **spending on higher education**, as a percentage of government expenditure, has **stagnated at 1.3-1.5% since 2012**.
- **Poor Infrastructure:** Poor infrastructure is another challenge to the higher education system of India, particularly the institutes run by the public sector suffer from poor physical facilities and infrastructure.
  - Most Indian universities and colleges have **overcrowded classrooms, poor ventilation and sanitation, and unsatisfactory hostel accommodation**.
- **Poor Teaching Capacity:** The QS World University Rankings 2022 revealed that although Indian universities have improved their performance on academic reputation metric and research impact, they **continue to struggle on the teaching capacity metric**.
  - **No Indian university** ranks among the top 250 for **faculty-student ratio**.
  - Poor performance on teaching capacity is not because of any drop in hiring, but rather **an increased student intake mandated by the government** to implement reservations for [economically weaker sections](#).
- **Inadequate Research Grants:** There are **insufficient resources and facilities**, as well as **limited numbers of quality faculty** to advise students. Most of the research **scholars are without fellowships** or not getting their fellowships on time which directly or indirectly affects their research.
  - Moreover, grants under the UGC's minor and major research project schemes have declined from ₹42.7 crore in FY 2016-17 to ₹38 lakh in FY 2020-21.
    - India has over 1,040 universities, but **just 2.7% offer PhD programmes**, given paltry funding and poor infrastructure.
  - The [National Research Foundation \(NRF\)](#), to improve research infrastructure in universities, has **not yet been approved**.
- **Fall in Academic Standards:** Academic standards and processes are not being maintained. **Examination paper leaks** have become common.
  - Candidates have anecdotally highlighted examination centre operators **charging a hefty amount from candidates to help them pass**.

## How Big is the Financing Problem of Universities?

- Investments in university infrastructure have shrunk. At the central level, **student financial aid was cut to ₹2,078 crore in FY 2022-23** from ₹2,482 crore in FY 2021-22; **allocations for research and innovation were down by 8%**, reaching ₹218 crore.
- The [Higher Education Financing Agency \(HEFA\)](#), which provides funding for all infrastructure loans to institutions, saw its budget reduced from ₹2,000 crore in FY 20-21 to ₹1 crore in FY 21-22. Instead, **universities have been forced to take loans**, but **have few avenues** to tap into.
- [The University Grants Commission \(UGC\)](#) was allocated ₹4,900 crore in FY 2022-23 versus ₹4,693 in FY 2021-22, but **stifled cash flow has led to delays in salary payments** for deemed/central universities.
  - Faculty members have faced salary delays for months, with **salaries coming in weeks later**.
- **Most universities are running on a deficit** — Madras University saw an accumulated deficit of over ₹100 crore, forcing it to seek a ₹88 crore grant from the State government.
  - Twelve colleges of Delhi University have seen a financial shortfall, with allocations by the state reduced by nearly half.
  - This has led to **cuts in discretionary spending** - many colleges in Delhi are **unable to afford subscriptions to basic databases and journals**.

## What Measures can be Taken?

- **Better Funding:** There is an urgent need to increased funding, along with **establishing dedicated funding streams** for infrastructure grants/loans and financial aid.
  - **Universities can also be freed up to utilise other revenue streams** such as start-up royalties and advertising.
- **Establishment of NRF:** The establishment of the NRF is expected to **connect the academia**

with ministries and industries and fund research that is relevant to local needs.

- **Funding for research needs to rise significantly**, with institutions like the **NRF supplementing (and not replacing) existing schemes** (including those from the Ministry of Science).
  - Funding should also be allocated to **enable course-based research experiences** for undergraduates.
- Moreover, NRF shall **pose well-defined problems to the researchers**, so that they can find solutions in a goal-oriented and time bound manner.
- **Sustaining Quality Education:** It is disheartening to find that higher education institutions have failed to protect the sanctity of their examinations.
  - Improving this will require a **decentralised approach, with universities allowed to take decisions on academic programmes**, promotions, cohort size, etc.
- **Scaling up existing HEIs:** With the goal of increasing the gross enrollment ratio (GER) from the current 27% to 50% by 2035, India needs to not only open new Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and universities but also **scale-up existing HEIs**.
  - This massive expansion will not only require **additional financial resources** but also calls for **a new governance model**.
  - Also, our institutions need to **become multi-disciplinary in their scope and offerings and collaborate among themselves**.
- **Ensuring Quality Education:** Aligning the cost of education with the quality of the product is the first step in this direction.
  - **Assessing the quality of education through an employability lens** will ensure that we are **addressing the 'unemployable graduates' problem**.
  - Students prioritise employability when selecting universities; with the rapid changes in technology, future jobs are not yet defined. Therefore, **programmes need to be designed with continuous feedback from the industry**.
    - An **employability scorecard** can go a long way in helping students make an informed decision; it can also be used for continued accreditation of universities.

## Conclusion

The NEP 2020 has sought to foster critical thinking and problem solving, along with social, ethical and emotional capacities and dispositions. Enabling this will require an **encouraging ecosystem, with greater funding, autonomy and tolerance of universities** (and activities by students/faculty). Without this, talented Indian citizens will continue to escape abroad, while **policymakers lament [India's brain drain](#)**.

### ***Drishti Mains Question***

Discuss the key challenges faced by the Universities in India and suggest measures that can be taken to help India regain its position of 'a home to the world-class universities' that it once had.

## **UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)**

### **Q. What is the aim of the programme 'Unnat Bharat Abhiyan'? (2017)**

- (a) Achieving 100% literacy by promoting collaboration between voluntary organisations and government's education system and local communities.
- (b) Connecting institutions of higher education with local communities to address development challenges through appropriate technologies.
- (c) Strengthening India's scientific research institutions in order to make India a scientific and technological power.
- (d) Developing human capital by allocating special funds for health care and education of rural and urban

poor, and organising skill development programmes and vocational training for them.

**Ans: (b)**

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