Revamping India's Higher Education System

This editorial is based on the article **"The hyperpoliticisation of Indian higher education "** which was published in The Hindu on 18/5/2024. It talks about the issue of politicization of Indian higher education and calls for significant reforms.

For Prelims: India's higher education system**,** QS World University Rankings for Asia 2024**,** National Education Policy 2020**,** Institutions of Eminence Scheme**,** National Credit Framework**,** SWAYAM**,** National Institutional Ranking Framework**,** Interim Budget 2024-25**,** India Skills Report 2024.

For Mains: Key Government Initiatives Related to Higher Education, Current Major Challenges in the Indian Higher Education System.

India's higher education system stands as one of the largest in the world, reflecting both its historical legacy and its aspirations for the future. The nation boasts an impressive array of institutions, from the globally recognized Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) **and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs)** to a vast network of universities and colleges. According to the **QS World University Rankings for Asia 2024**, India has the most represented higher education system.

Yet, beneath this expansive structure lie challenges and opportunities that define the current landscape of higher education in India. Despite significantly expanded access, concerns persist regarding **quality, relevance, and the capacity to equip youth** for the demands of the 21st century. Recent reports have also highlighted the concerning trend of increasing **politicization in Indian higher education institutions**, which poses a grave threat to **academic freedom, intellectual discourse, and the overall quality** of education.

What is the Current Status of the Higher Education System in India?

According to the **All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22**, which was released in **January 2024:**

- **Student Enrolment:** The student enrolment in higher education institutes is 4.33 crore as of 2021-22, which is a significant uptick from 4.14 crore in 2020-21 and 3.42 crore in 2014-15
    - The number of women enrolled in higher education is **2.07 crore as of 2021-22** which is a 32% jump from 1.5 crore in 2014-15.
    - The proportion of women enrolled is highest at the postgraduate level (55.4%).
- Gross Enrolment Ratio **(GER) and** Gender Parity Index **(GPI):** The estimated GER for the age group 18-23 years in India is **28.4%.**
    - The GPI, which shows the ratio of female GER to male GER, is **1.01 at the all-India level,** indicating gender parity.
- **Discipline-wise Enrolment:** At the undergraduate level, the Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme has the highest enrolment (34.2%), followed by science (14.8%), commerce (13.3%), and

engineering and technology (11.8%).
- At the postgraduate level, the **social science stream** has the highest enrolment (10.8 lakh students).
- At the PhD level, **engineering** has the highest enrollment, followed by science and social sciences.
- **Primacy of Government Institutions**: **73.7%** of all students attend government universities, **which make up only 58.6% of all universities.**
  - State public universities have the largest share of enrollment (around **31%**) among government-owned universities.

What are the Key Government Initiatives Related to Higher Education?

- **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** The NEP 2020 aims to overhaul the education system, including higher education, with a focus on multidisciplinary learning, skill development, and promoting research and innovation.
  - It proposes increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education to **50% by 2035.**
- **Institutions of Eminence (IoE) Scheme**: The Education Ministry had launched the IoE scheme in 2018 as per which **20 institutions** were to be selected to enjoy complete autonomy.
- **National Credit Framework:** It is designed to integrate training and skill development into the education system, spanning both schools and higher education.
  - Credits earned by students will be stored digitally in the **Academic Bank of Credits,** making them accessible via a linked **Digilocker account.**
- **Revamped Accreditation and Ranking Systems:** The **National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF)** was launched in 2015 to rank higher education institutions across different categories.
  - The **National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)** has been revamped to ensure quality standards among institutions.
- **Digital Initiatives**: SWAYAM **(Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds)** is a platform offering online courses, covering school to postgraduate levels.
  - The **National Digital Library of India** provides access to a vast collection of educational resources.
- **Study in India Program:** Launched in 2018, this program aims to attract more international students to study in India by providing scholarships and facilitating their admission process.
- **Foreign Institutions in India**: The University Grants Commission in 2023 released regulations that pave the way for foreign universities, ranked among the **world's top 500**, to establish branch campuses in India.
- **SHE under INSPIRE:** The Scholarship for Higher Education (SHE), part of the **Innovation in Science Pursuit for Inspired Research (INSPIRE) program** by the Department of Science and Technology (DST), aims to attract students to study basic and natural sciences at **undergraduate and postgraduate levels** and pursue research careers by offering scholarships to deserving candidates.

What are the Current Major Challenges in the Indian Higher Education System?

- **Inequitable Access and Low GER**: Access to higher education remains skewed, with significant disparities based on socio-economic background, gender, and geographical location.
  - Also, India GER has significantly improved (currently 28.4%) but it is still below the global average of **36.7%.**
- **Politicization and Lack of Autonomy:** There have been concerns about the increasing politicization of higher education institutions, with allegations of **political interference in appointments and curriculum decisions.**
  - Many institutions lack autonomy in areas such as **faculty recruitment, curriculum design, and resource allocation,** hampering their ability to innovate and adapt to changing needs.
  - The appointment of **Governors as Chancellors** and certain Vice Chancellors of Universities has sparked significant controversy in recent times.
- **Limited Funding:** The **Interim Budget 2024-25** for Education in India has been reduced by 7%, with the **allocation for the** University Grants Commission **slashed by 61%.**
  - Also, despite the fact that India's R&D sector is growing, as shown by the **Gross**

Expenditure on Research and Development (GERD) rising from ₹6,01,968 million in 2010-11 to ₹12,73,810 million in 2020-21.
- India's R&D investment as a percentage of GDP is still at 0.64%, lagging behind **China (2.4%), Germany (3.1%), South Korea (4.8%), and the United States (3.5%).**

- **Shortage of Faculty and Brain Drain:** India faces a severe shortage of qualified faculty members in higher education institutions.
  - As of 2023, over **30% of teaching positions** were vacant in **45 Central Universities across India.**
  - The brain drain of talented academics to other countries or the private sector due to better opportunities and remuneration is a significant challenge.
- **Inadequate Industry-Academia Collaboration:** There is a lack of effective collaboration between higher education institutions and industries in India, leading to a skill gap among graduates.
  - India has a **60-73% demand-supply gap** in key roles such as ML engineer, data scientist, DevOps engineer, and data architect (**India Skills Report 2024**).
- **Uneven Regional Development of Higher Education:** The development of higher education institutions is uneven across different regions and states in India.
  - For instance, states like **Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra** have a higher concentration of reputed institutions, while several states in the **northeastern and central regions** lag behind in terms of quality and access.

What Measures can be Adopted to Revamp Higher Education System in India?

- **Redefining the Role of Universities:** Shift the focus from rote learning to practical skill development through project-based learning, internships, and industry collaborations from second year.
  - Encouraging universities to work with local communities on social development projects, promoting **social responsibility and civic engagement** among students.
  - Transforming higher educational institutes from **mere Degree Issuers to Skill Generators.**
- **Open Education Resources (OER) Initiatives:** Enhancing the National Digital Library of India and promoting the development and adoption of open educational resources, similar to the **MIT OpenCourseWare initiative**, which provides free access to course materials and lectures.
  - This approach could enhance access to quality educational resources, reduce costs, and foster a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration.
- **Entrepreneurship and Innovation Centers**: Establishing dedicated entrepreneurship and innovation centers within universities, modeled after successful examples like **Stanford University's StartX** and entrepreneurship programs.
  - These centers could provide mentorship, funding opportunities, and a supportive ecosystem for students and faculty to transform their innovative ideas into successful ventures.
  - **HCL TechBee** is a significant step in assisting **Class XII** students who are interested in making careers in Information technology (IT).
- **Transnational Education Partnerships:** Promoting transnational education (TNE) partnerships, where Indian higher education institutions collaborate with reputed international universities to **offer joint degrees, twinning programs, or branch campuses.**
  - This approach could enhance global exposure, facilitate knowledge transfer, and improve the international competitiveness of Indian higher education.
  - Recent **IITM Zanzibar campus** (in Africa) by IIT Madras is a significant step in this direction.
- **Dual Study Programs:** Phase wise implementation dual study programs, similar to **Germany's apprenticeship model**, where students combine theoretical learning at universities with practical training in companies.
  - This approach ensures industry-relevant skills development and enhances employability, while also providing a skilled workforce for companies.
- **Competency-based Credentialing and Blockchain Certificates:** Implementing competency-based credentialing system that recognizes and validates skills and competencies acquired through various learning pathways.
  - Leveraging **blockchain technology** to issue tamper-proof, verifiable digital certificates

and credentials, ensuring transparency and trust in the credentialing process.
- This approach could promote lifelong learning, skill-based education, and recognition of diverse learning experiences.

> **Drishti Mains Question:**
>
> Discuss the challenges and opportunities in India's higher education system, emphasizing the need for reforms to ensure quality, inclusivity, and relevance in the context of global competitiveness.

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)**