



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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