



## 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.*

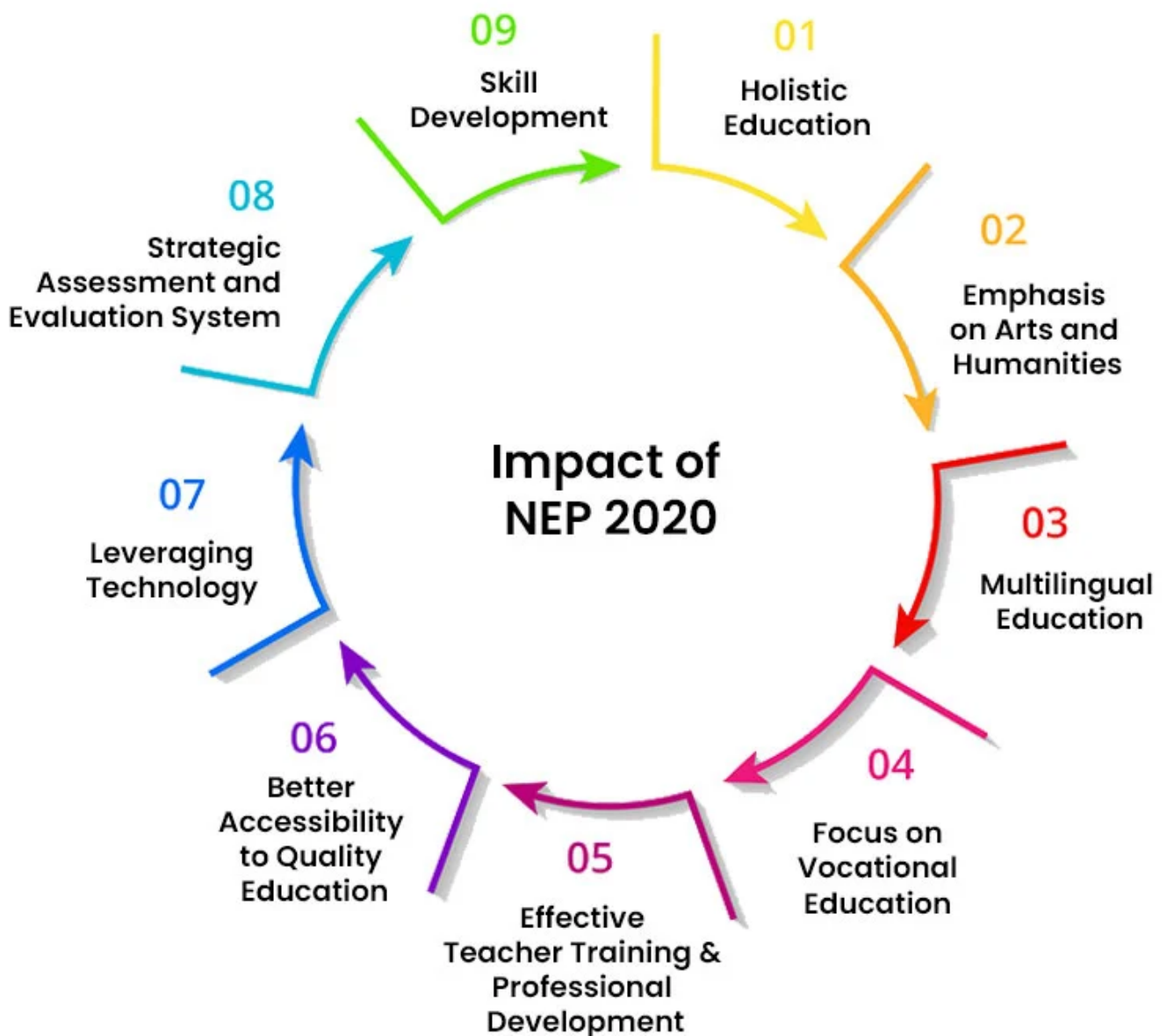
**For Prelims:** [Vice-Chancellor appointments](#), [India's higher education sector](#), [National Education Policy 2020](#), [Gross Enrolment Ratio \(GER\) in higher education](#), [National Research Foundation](#), [Study in India program](#), [PM eVidya](#), [Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National 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 **40<sup>th</sup> 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 Uchchar 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)