

### 3. Report on the Autonomous Bodies Under the Department of Higher Education- Reports

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports tabled its 371st report on the autonomous bodies under the Department of Higher Education

#### Major Highlights of the Report

**Performance of the National Testing Agency (NTA)**- The report critically evaluated the functioning of the National Testing Agency, especially in the context of its growing centrality in India's examination ecosystem. It flagged systemic irregularities and operational lapses in high-stakes national examinations such as

1. NEET-UG
2. UGC-NET
3. CUET
4. JEE (Main)

#### Key issues highlighted

1. Repeated delays in result declarations.
2. Errors in question papers, answer keys, and exam logistics.
3. Over-reliance on outsourced and digital systems, increasing vulnerability to technical failures and malpractice.

The Committee categorically stated that such avoidable errors undermine credibility, meritocracy, and student confidence, and must not recur.

#### Infrastructure and Faculty Gaps in Higher Education Institutions

The report noted chronic underinvestment in academic infrastructure, particularly in-

1. Central Universities.
2. UGC-funded institutions.

#### Key deficiencies identified

1. Large-scale faculty vacancies, leading to high student-teacher ratios.
2. Absence of seed grants for newly recruited faculty, constraining research initiation.
3. Inadequate laboratory, library, and digital infrastructure.

These gaps have directly affected

1. Research output and innovation.
2. Implementation of NEP-mandated reforms such as interdisciplinary programs.

#### Constraints in Implementing Multiple Entry-Multiple Exit (MEME)

While MEME is a core reform under NEP 2020, the report highlighted

1. Administrative unpreparedness.
2. Lack of academic credit portability infrastructure.
3. Poor coordination between institutions.

#### Institutions lack

1. Academic counselors.
2. Digital credit tracking systems.

This has reduced MEME to a formal provision without functional effectiveness.

#### Delays in Online and Distance Education Approvals

The Committee expressed concern over delays in approvals for online and distance education programs. The University Grants Commission has restricted approvals for institutions with lower NAAC grades.

#### Key critique

1. NAAC scores may not accurately reflect digital delivery capability.

2. Blanket restrictions disproportionately affect State universities. Institutions serving rural and disadvantaged populations. The Committee urged reconsideration to balance quality assurance with access and inclusion.

**Concerns Regarding Accreditation and NAAC-** The report raised serious concerns regarding the functioning of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council. Issues highlighted

1. Allegations of irregularities and subjectivity in accreditation processes.
2. Lack of transparency in corrective actions taken.

The Committee demanded

1. Public disclosure of the extent of irregularities uncovered.
2. Clear articulation of remedial and disciplinary measures adopted.

**Need for Structural Reforms in Accreditation -** The Committee strongly endorsed

1. **Basic Accreditation Framework (BAF)**- Minimum compliance-based accreditation for all institutions.
2. **Maturity Based Graded Levels (MBGL)**- Progressive accreditation based on institutional performance and outcomes.

These reforms aim to

1. Reduce discretion.
2. Increase objectivity and predictability.
3. Enable faster institutional coverage.

### Draft UGC Regulations, January 2025

The Committee recommended that the Draft UGC Regulations (January 2025) be referred to the Central Advisory Board of Education.

Rationale- CABE allows federal consultation, involving states and stakeholders.

The Committee emphasised- Regulations must uphold national academic standards. At the same time, they must respect state autonomy in education, a Concurrent List subject.

### Key Recommendations of the Committee

**Reforming Digital Examinations Conducted by NTA-** The Committee recommended Strengthening in-house technical and administrative capacity within NTA. Reducing excessive dependence on private vendors. It called for renewed emphasis on- Pen-and-paper examinations, especially for high-stakes tests. Additional safeguard proposed- Creation of a nationwide blacklist of firms involved in exam paper setting, printing, and logistics that have been found guilty of lapses.

**Remuneration and Service Conditions-** The Committee highlighted deteriorating morale among faculty and researchers.

**Key recommendations-** Extension of the Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) to faculty and non-teaching staff in centrally funded institutions. Increase in Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) amounts to reflect inflation and living costs. Implementation of 7th Pay Commission benefits in ICSSR research institutes.

**Objective-** Retain academic talent. Improve research productivity.

### Filling Vacancies and Leadership Positions

The report called for- Immediate filling of academic and non-academic vacancies. Time-bound implementation of promotions. Appointment of regular leadership (Directors, Chairpersons) in ICSSR institutions. Persistent vacancies were flagged as Undermining institutional autonomy. Weakening governance and accountability.

### Governance and Institutional Autonomy

The Committee stressed the importance of Participatory decision-making in academic bodies. Reduced bureaucratic interference. It warned that excessive centralisation could Erode institutional autonomy. Undermine academic freedom, a core pillar of higher education excellence.

**Accreditation and NEP 2020 Implementation-** The Committee linked accreditation bottlenecks to slow implementation of National Education Policy 2020.

**It recommended-** Faster and streamlined accreditation cycles. Outcome-based evaluation rather than procedural compliance.

**Goal-** Enable institutions to transition smoothly to NEP's multidisciplinary and flexible framework.

**Regulation of Private Coaching Centres-** The Committee flagged the unchecked growth of private coaching centres as Distorting formal education. Encouraging rote learning.

It recommended Regulatory oversight to prevent exploitative practices. Ensuring that competitive examinations. Reinforce **school curricula**. Do not promote parallel, coaching-driven syllabi.

### Broader Significance (UPSC-Relevant)

**Highlights structural weaknesses in-** Examination governance. Higher education regulation.

**Raises key governance themes-** Autonomy vs accountability. Federalism in education. Equity, access, and quality.

**Direct relevance-** to GS II (Education, Governance). GS III (Human Capital). Essay topics on meritocracy and institutional credibility.

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