

6. Centralization in Higher Education- Polity

Extension of timeline for submission of further comments/suggestions on the revised draft "The Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2025" Recent legislative actions by the Union government signal a concerted effort to centralize the governance of autonomous Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Key legislative moves include

Draft Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) Bill, 2025- Seeks to increase government control over the institute.
Indian Institutes of Management (Amendment) Act, 2023- Dilutes the autonomy of premier management institutes.

Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhikshan Bill- Approved by the Union Cabinet to create a single unified **regulator**, replacing bodies like UGC, AICTE, and NCTE. Previously known as the *Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) Bill*, it was renamed to align with the vision of *Viksit Bharat*.

Overview of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India

Significance

Backbone of Knowledge Economy- HEIs drive human capital formation, innovation, and social mobility.

Demographic Dividend- They are crucial for leveraging India's youth population and addressing challenges like quality, equity, and employability under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Transformation and Current Status

Scale- The ecosystem comprises 1,168 Universities, 45,473 Colleges, and 12,002 Standalone Institutions.

Global Visibility- India achieved a 318% increase in representation in global rankings over the last decade, the highest among G20 nations.

Inclusivity (2011-2022)

OBC Enrollment- Grew by 80.9%.

SC Enrollment- Grew by 76.3% (coverage increased from 15% to nearly 26% of the eligible population).

ST Enrollment- Grew by 106.8% (coverage increased from 11% to 21%).

Gender Parity- The Gender Parity Index (GPI) reached 1.01 in 2021-22, signaling gender equality. There are 17 Universities and 4,470 Colleges exclusively for women.

The Shift Towards Centralization

Definition

Centralization in this context refers to the increasing concentration of authority within the Union government regarding governance, funding, admissions, and curriculum, often at the expense of institutional autonomy and state powers.

Historical Evolution- From Coordination to Control

Era	Key Features
Constitutional Foundation (1950s)	UGC Act, 1956- Established for coordination and standards. Legislative power derived from Entry 66 (Union List).
Constitutional Shift (1976)	42nd Amendment- Shifted education to Entry 25 (Concurrent List), enabling shared responsibility but recently interpreted to favor central dominance.
Post-2014 Trends	Acceleration of central control linked to the "3Cs Crisis"- Centralization, Commercialization, and Communal/Ideological influences, eroding equity and cooperative federalism.

Recent Centralizing Legislations & Mechanisms

Indian Institutes of Management (IIM) Act, 2023

Revoked Sovereignty- Autonomy granted earlier has been rolled back.

Government Control- Appointments of Directors and key policy decisions now require approval from the Ministry of Education and the President.

Draft Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) Bill, 2025

Statutory Subordination- Proposes transforming ISI from a society to a statutory body.

Accountability- Clause 17(5) mandates the Board be accountable directly to the Central Government.

Common University Entrance Test (CUET)

Homogeneity Trap– Imposes a single test, sidelining diverse regional curricula and potentially disadvantaging students from State Boards who lack access to coaching.

Visva-Bharati University

Imposition of Conformism– Pressure to strictly adhere to NEP 2020 structures undermines its unique pedagogical vision of localized inquiry.

PARAKH– Centralized Assessment Aims to standardize assessments through NCERT, potentially marginalizing State Boards.

Financial Federalism–Use of financial instruments (Centrally Sponsored Schemes, HEFA loans) to make universities fiscally dependent, constraining autonomy through funding conditionalities.

Historical Context of Indian Higher Education

Ancient Era (Before 10th Century CE)

Philosophy– Holistic education focusing on *Vidya* (knowledge), morality, and skills.

Gurukul System– Oral transmission of knowledge via the *Guru-Shishya* tradition (e.g., Kashi, Ujjain).

Early Universities

Takshashila (6th BCE – 5th CE)– World's first recorded university. Associated with Chanakya, Panini, Charaka.

Nalanda (5th – 12th CE)– First residential university (10,000+ students). Destroyed by Bakhtiyar Khilji.

Vikramshila– Hub for Tantric Buddhism.

Features– Multidisciplinary, global student base, residential campuses with massive libraries (e.g., *Dharmaganja* at Nalanda).

Medieval Era (10th–18th Century CE)

Shift– Decline of ancient universities due to invasions.

New Centers– Rise of Madrasas (Persian/Arabic learning). Establishments in Delhi, Agra, Fatehpur Sikri.

Fusion– Akbar's *Din-i-Ilahi* promoted knowledge exchange; Hindu temples continued informal traditions.

Colonial Period (18th–20th Century)

Policy Shift– Destruction of indigenous systems; imposition of English education (Macaulay's Minute, 1835).

Modern Universities (1857)– Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras Universities established on the University of London model, focusing on administrative roles over research.

Nationalist Response– Rise of institutions like Visva-Bharati (Tagore), BHU (Malaviya), and AMU (Sir Syed Ahmed Khan).

Post-Independence Era (1947–2000s)

Expansion– Focus on building world-class institutions.

IITs– First set up in Kharagpur (1951) based on the Sarkar Committee (1945) report.

IIMs– First established in Calcutta (1961) based on Planning Commission recommendations.

Regulation– UGC Act (1956) enacted to regulate standards. Later followed by NEP 1968, 1986, 1992.

Rationale vs. Concerns of Centralization

Government Rationale

1. **Addressing Governance Deficits**– To curb the proliferation of "teaching shops" and address financial/academic malpractices that occurred under the guise of autonomy.
2. **Accountability**– Ensuring efficient use of public funds through "light but tight" regulation (NEP 2020).
3. **National Alignment**– Harmonizing institutions for global competitiveness and strategic goals like *Atmanirbhar Bharat*.
4. **Modernization**– Updating archaic laws (e.g., ISI Act, 1959) to fit the modern landscape.

Challenges & Concerns

Erosion of Cooperative Federalism– Shift from *Cooperative* to *Coercive* Federalism. States effectively excluded from policymaking despite education being on the Concurrent List. Political resistance from states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

1. Socio-Economic & Regional Disparity

Homogeneity Trap– Standardized tests favor urban/wealthy students with access to coaching.

Neglect of Backward States– Uniform rules fail to address specific needs of states with low GER (e.g.,

Bihar's 14% vs. Tamil Nadu's 50%).

Unequal Impact– State Public Universities (educating 80% of students) face disproportionate constraints compared to "Institutes of National Importance."

Attack on Academic Freedom

Moral Hazard– Replaces academic ethics with bureaucratic compliance.

Conformity over Critique– Reduces Vice-Chancellors to administrative functionaries and threatens the university's role as a space for dissent.

2. Hindrance to R&D– Bureaucratic control stifles innovation. India's GERD is only 0.64% of GDP (Global average ~2.4%).

Brain Drain & Global Standing– Politicization discourages top talent. While visibility in rankings has improved, no Indian institution is in the QS Top 100 due to low scores in academic freedom and research impact.

Legal and Global Perspectives

Legal & Judicial Warnings– TMA Pai Foundation Case (2002)– Supreme Court declared institutional autonomy a Fundamental Right under Article 19(1)(g).

Recent Observations (Oct 2025)– SC cautioned that uniform imposition (like CUET) may violate Article 14 (Equality) and Article 21A (Right to Education).

Parliamentary Scrutiny– Committees have consistently recommended regulatory structures "without excessive centralization."

Global Consensus

OECD/European Models– Governments act as strategic funders (block grants) but do not micromanage inputs.

Autonomy with Accountability– UNESCO 2024 conference reiterated this principle.

Federal Systems (Germany/Canada)– Education authority rests with sub-national governments; the center focuses only on coordination and funding.

Various Committees

Timeline	Committee / Commission	Key Objectives & Major Recommendations
1948–49	Radhakrishnan Commission (<i>University Education Commission</i>)	First commission of independent India. Focus– University education integration with national development. Outcome– Recommended the establishment of the University Grants Commission (UGC) to regulate standards.
1952–53	Mudaliar Commission (<i>Secondary Education Commission</i>)	Focus– Reforming secondary education. Recommendation– Introduction of diversification of courses and emphasis on vocational training at the secondary level.
1964–66	Kothari Commission (<i>Education Commission</i>)	Chair– Dr. D.S. Kothari. Significance– Most comprehensive commission; blueprint for India's education. Key Recommendations– – Standardized structure 10+2+3 pattern. Recommended spending 6% of GDP on education. Introduction of the Three-Language Formula. Led to the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1968.
1986	National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986	Focus– Modernization and IT inclusion. Outcome– Launched Operation Blackboard to improve primary schools and established Navodaya Vidyalayas (pace-setting schools).
1990	Acharya Ramamurti Committee	Focus– Review of NPE 1986.

		Recommendation- Shifted focus towards equity, social justice, and women's education. Criticized the elitism in education.
1992	Janardhana Reddy Committee	Focus- Review of the implementation of NPE 1986. Recommendation- Emphasized quality improvement in higher technical education.
1993	Yash Pal Committee	Report Title- " <i>Learning Without Burden</i> ". Focus- Reducing the academic burden on school children. Recommendation- Reduce the weight of school bags; suppress rote learning; treat competitions/entrance exams as a menace.
2005	National Knowledge Commission (NKC)	Chair- Sam Pitroda. Focus- Building a knowledge economy. Recommendation- Massive expansion of higher education; reform of libraries; focus on e-governance and networking of universities.
2009	Yash Pal Committee <i>(On Higher Education)</i>	Focus- Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education. Recommendation- Suggested scrapping UGC and AICTE to create a single regulator (NCHER). Emphasized multidisciplinary education over fragmentation.
2016	T.S.R. Subramanian Committee	Focus- Evolution of a New Education Policy. Recommendation- Proposed an Indian Education Service (IES); removing the "no-detention policy" beyond Class 5.
2019	Dr. K. Kasturirangan Committee	Focus- Drafting the National Education Policy 2020. Outcome- NEP 2020. Key Reforms- Replaced 10+2 with 5+3+3+4 structure. Focus on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Multiple Entry and Exit points in Higher Education. Vocational education from Class 6.

Way Forward

Constitutional Dialogue- Restore the spirit of the Concurrent List through meaningful consultation with States.

Outcome-Based Accountability- Shift focus from controlling *inputs* (appointments) to evaluating *outcomes* (research, employability), as recommended by the Yash Pal Committee (2009).

Academic Governance- Governing bodies should be led by eminent academicians, not bureaucrats.

Internal Democracy- Empower Academic Councils and faculty bodies as the ultimate authority on academic matters.

Operationalizing Trust- Implement independent governing boards with fixed tenures and social accountability mechanisms rather than command-and-control structures.

Conclusion

While reforms are necessary to modernize Indian education, excessive centralization risks stifling the intellectual dynamism required for a knowledge economy. True reform lies in reclaiming the spirit of Vidya shifting from bureaucratic control to institutional freedom—to transform universities into global hubs of critical inquiry and achieve the ambitious targets of NEP 2020.

Source- <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=2204191®=6&lang=1>