



## ISSUES IN ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN UNIVERSITIES – GS II MAINS

Q. Examine the factors and methods through which the Indian government is limiting academic freedom in universities and suggest potential solutions or measures to address this issue. (15 marks, 250 words)

**News:** *Limiting Academic Freedom in Universities – The fading role of universities in society*

### What's in the news?

- India's academic freedom is low, with a score of 0.38 out of 1, as reported by the V-Dem Institute.

### Key takeaways:

- India's score (0.38) is lower than Pakistan's (0.43) score.
- In independent India, this level of restriction was previously seen only during the Emergency period in the 1970s.

### Limitations of Academic Freedom in Universities:

#### 1. Government Directives:

- Universities are being instructed to support government campaigns like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and to install selfie points featuring the Prime Minister.

#### 2. Restricting Academic Discussions:

- Instances like the cancellation of a discussion on the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) illustrate the curtailing of academic freedom.

#### 3. Penalties for Protests:

- Jawaharlal Nehru University's decision, although later withdrawn, to fine students for protesting shows an attempt to suppress campus dissent.

#### 4. Academic Resignations:

- Two scholars at Ashoka University resigned after a politically sensitive publication, highlighting the impact on academic freedom.

#### 5. Erosion of Institutional Autonomy:

- The gradual erosion of institutional autonomy is evident in the political influence over the appointment of university leaders and the increased control by bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC).

#### 6. Use of Laws to Limit Freedom:

- Academic freedom is further restricted by the application of laws like sedition and defamation against scholars and academics.



## Constitutional and Legal Rights to Protect Academic Freedom:

### 1. Right to Free Speech:

- In India, academic freedom is indirectly protected as part of the broader right to free speech under the constitution.

### 2. Restrictive Laws:

- The freedom of expression in academia is often challenged by laws such as sedition (Section 124A) and laws against hurting religious sentiments (Section 295A).

### 3. Misuse of Legal Tools:

- Defamation lawsuits are increasingly used as a tool to suppress academic freedom and intimidate scholars.

### 4. Absence of Explicit Protection:

- Unlike countries like New Zealand, which have specific legal provisions for academic freedom, India does not have explicit mention of academic freedom in its constitution.

## WAY FORWARD:

### 1. Include Academic Freedom Clauses:

- Contracts with faculty should incorporate clauses protecting academic freedom, ensuring they aren't penalized for their views or research.

### 2. Global Support:

- International institutions could aid by considering 'Academic Freedom' as a criterion in university rankings.

### 3. Follow Successful Models:

- Adopting models like New Zealand's Education Act, which explicitly defines and protects academic freedom, can be beneficial.

### 4. Consultative Approach:

- Political parties, faculty bodies and student associations should collaborate to enhance academic autonomy and freedom.

### 5. System-Wide Protections:

- Universities need to establish broad protections against restrictions on academic freedom and expression.