

One Regulator to Rule Them All?

Rethinking India's Higher Education Overhaul

In a nation where higher education constitutes a vast landscape of over 40 million students, more than 1,100 universities, and approximately 43,000 colleges, regulation transcends mere administrative procedure; it forms the essential framework that upholds the pillars of quality, equity, and innovation. However, for decades, India's regulatory landscape for education has been fraught with fragmentation, redundancy, and inefficiency. Three principal bodies—the University Grants Commission (UGC), the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)—have governed higher education in isolated silos, often resulting in overlapping jurisdictions that hinder institutional autonomy and responsiveness. This disjointed approach not only complicates governance but also stifles the potential for transformative educational practices across the sector.

Five years following the launch of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the Indian government is poised to undertake a significant transformation in the higher education landscape by dismantling outdated regulatory frameworks. The government plans to establish a singular, unified authority: the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). As India prepares for this pivotal regulatory overhaul, a pressing question emerges: Will the HECI genuinely catalyse the transformation our education system desperately requires, or will it merely emerge as a new name to perpetuate the existing challenges?

Currently, India's higher education is regulated by three separate bodies—the UGC, AICTE, and NCTE—whose overlapping mandates for funding, oversight, and training often lead to duplication, confusion, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Over the decades, however, the distinctions between various academic disciplines—ranging from liberal arts to STEM, as well as teacher training—have increasingly blurred, rendering this tripartite regulatory model increasingly obsolete. Thus, this current system fails to align with the NEP's vision of multidisciplinary education and institutional autonomy and is often perceived as overly rigid, duplicative, and painfully slow. For example, a university that offers a diverse array of programs—including engineering, teacher education, and humanities—faces the daunting task of navigating compliance with three separate regulatory bodies. This fragmented oversight often results in conflicting requirements, prolonged approval processes, and inefficiencies in governance, ultimately hindering the institution's ability to innovate and adapt in a rapidly evolving educational environment.

The HECI is envisioned as a "light but tight" regulatory body—streamlined in its approach against micromanagement while maintaining a firm grip on both academic and financial accountability. Its operational framework is structured around four distinct

verticals, each with its specific mandate - National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC) – to handle regulation and compliance; National Accreditation Council (NAC) – to oversee quality assurance and institutional accreditation; Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) – to manage funding and financial disbursement and General Education Council (GEC) – to set academic standards, including National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF). By consolidating regulatory oversight under a unified framework, the government aims to streamline governance and establish a coherent, agile system that effectively responds to the fast-paced developments in India's educational and employment landscapes.

While the intention behind the proposal is commendable, it has sparked a wave of concerns within both academic and policy-making circles. The prospect of consolidating power within a single super-regulator, the HECI, raises significant apprehension. Despite the notion that HECI will be functionally divided into various segments, the overarching consolidation of authority could foster a dangerous degree of over-centralization. This is particularly alarming in a federal system where education is considered a concurrent subject, implying shared responsibilities between the central and state governments. States like Karnataka have withdrawn from NEP implementation in 2023, citing concerns over the policy's infringement of federal principles, its promotion of privatization, and its failure to accommodate regional and linguistic diversity—raising an alarm over the erosion of state control and institutional autonomy.

Additionally, the proposal suffers from a lack of clarity concerning HECI's legislative framework and operational structure, resulting in a stagnation of momentum. The draft HECI Bill has been in circulation since 2018, with renewed references appearing in 2022, the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) Bill, 2025, is expected to be tabled soon. Meanwhile, existing regulatory bodies continue to operate, leaving universities caught in a perplexing transitional limbo. They find themselves navigating outdated mandates while simultaneously attempting to adapt to new reforms such as the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and the introduction of four-year undergraduate degrees—some of which the UGC is already piloting.

While the HECI promises a shift towards institutional autonomy, the truth is that genuine autonomy hinges on an institutions' capacity. A considerable number of public universities—particularly those located in rural and tier-2 cities—are grappling with significant challenges, including faculty shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and outdated curricula. Regulation alone cannot resolve what are fundamentally issues of resource allocation and governance. There is also an alarming absence of a comprehensive roadmap outlining how HECI will engage with professional councils

such as the Bar Council of India, the National Medical Commission, and the Council of Architecture, each of which operates within its regulatory framework. The lack of this crucial clarity raises the specter of ongoing regulatory conflicts, which could merely rebrand themselves under a different guise.

India's higher education sector stands on the cusp of a transformative evolution that promises to reshape the nation's academic landscapes. The shift towards interdisciplinary universities, the implementation of credit-based systems, and the adoption of blended learning models necessitate a regulatory framework that is not only adaptive but also transparent and responsive to the dynamic needs of students and institutions. The HECI could serve as the cornerstone for this change—but its success hinges on a foundation built through extensive consultation, collaboration, and clear constitutional guidelines. To embark on this journey, the government must engage in a comprehensive and inclusive legislative process that actively involves diverse stakeholders, including academic institutions, state governments, and representatives from civil society. These groups should not be relegated to the role of passive observers; their insights and experiences are invaluable in shaping a robust educational framework. Moreover, the rollout of these changes must be executed in a phased manner, complete with institutional handholding and capacity-building initiatives. This careful approach is crucial to mitigate potential disruptions that could arise from sudden shifts in policy and practice. The newly established regulator must clearly define its role. Rather than merely acting as a bureaucratic gatekeeper that issues licenses, HECI should position itself as a facilitator of quality and innovation within the higher education system—championing initiatives that encourage institutional excellence and scholarly creativity. Also, to safeguard against the misuse of its authority, HECI must be anchored by strong internal checks and be committed to public accountability. This will ensure that its operations remain transparent and that it serves the interests of all stakeholders, preventing any drift towards opacity or arbitrary decision-making.

Reform Is Inevitable, but Design Is Everything—the concept of a singular regulatory body overseeing higher education may appear to streamline processes. Yet, actual efficiency must not come at the expense of federal flexibility or academic freedom. HECI can succeed where its predecessors have struggled—but only if it listens more than it dictates, enables more than it controls, and builds trust where there has long been fatigue. India requires a regulatory framework that functions not as a constraint, but as a guiding principle—one that bolsters its educational institutions as they strive to advance without falling off track. If HECI becomes that, it will truly be the regulatory reform NEP promised. If not, we risk merely renaming the very rigidity we sought to reform.