

CENTRE TARGETS FIVE AREAS FOR REFORMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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The identified areas are expected to catalyse a reduction in compliance burden in the sector

NEW DELHI : The Union government and the education regulator have identified five key areas of focus in the next phase of reforms in the higher education sector. These areas, education finance, administration, accounting system, a central higher education data repository, and internal autonomy, will act as catalysts to reduce compliance burden in the sector and instil self-discipline.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) and the education ministry believe that there is a need to streamline the compliance system, reduce unwanted interference, and involve institutions to find solutions to these five key areas of concern.

UGC wrote to all universities and colleges, asking them to brainstorm and share feedback to aid the government in its reform initiative. The regulator has already held meetings with stakeholders, including vice chancellors. "Based on the observations made by the participants, certain areas have been identified for streamlining and reduction of compliance burden," the regulator said in the letter.

"Higher education institutions (HEIs) should initiate new reforms for simplification of methods in administration and finance," said the letter, a copy of which was reviewed by *Mint*.

India has a massive higher education sector with nearly 51,000 colleges, institutions, and universities catering to almost 38 million students.

The education ministry, which has traditionally been criticised for overregulation, is embarking on a process to ease the traditional burden and move on a path of reform.

The move is in sync with the new National Education Policy (NEP) and some reforms such as the autonomy of the Indian Institutes of Management effected in the past few years.

The fresh move comes almost five months after the ministry met stakeholders, including universities, academicians, regulators, industry chambers, and private education players, to address core areas of concern to ease compliance.

There are several compliances and issues that both institutions and students would like to reduce to make it easier to function. In a changing environment, the higher education administration needs to evolve and take stakeholders along instead of creating roadblocks, said a vice chancellor requesting anonymity.

"The financial reform will push universities to raise money from the market through collaborations, industry projects, and sponsored projects. The move looks like a push to reduce government spending on state-run institutions, but it may be counter-productive if done in haste," a professor at Delhi University said, requesting anonymity.

The education regulator further said in its letter that a "centralised repository... for pooling of data regarding HEIs", "streamlined automated system for accounting reforms in HEIs", and

“autonomy within the institutions” are other areas of focus.

UGC has also underlined that there is a growing thrust on accessibility to internet facilities in rural areas, an issue that was exposed during the pandemic as schools and colleges closed their campuses to curb the spread of the virus. The move severely hurt education delivery, more so outside cities.

Access to digital infrastructure will be key to implementing next-generation reforms, at least in education delivery as the Centre pushes for technology adoption in the education sector in a big way, implementation of the hybrid model of education, establishment of an academic bank of credit and even the creation of an online university like system in the near future.

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