Dismantling Higher Education System

What is the issue?

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- Recently, the Cabinet Secretary gave directions to the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) to transfer four schemes related to polytechnics to the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) has more serious implications.
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- This must be seen in conjunction with the earlier decision to transfer architecture institutions from the MHRD to the Ministry of Urban Development (MUD).
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- These happenings could very well be the beginning of the process of dismantling of the higher education system.
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What’s wrong with the move?

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- A university, as the very name suggests, stands for a universe of knowledge wherein all disciplines are seen as **intrinsically linked.**
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- Human experience shows that all path-breaking **innovations take place on the fringes of disciplines.**
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- By erecting walls around disciplines, we are going further away from the idea of a university as the world sees and respects it.
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- Even from the narrow point of **view of world ranking of universities,** this is a bad idea as all the major systems lay enormous stress on research and interdisciplinary studies.
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- This could not only **seriously affect the learning-teaching process** in our institutions of higher learning but also lower the stature of the country as a

serious player in the knowledge economy.
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How the UGC’s powers has gone down?

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- The Constitution envisions that the coordination and maintenance of standards in institutions of higher education or research and scientific and technical institutions rests with the Government of India.
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- To achieve this end, the University Grants Commission (UGC) was created in 1956.
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- In order to be able to confer a degree, whether it is in medicine, engineering, management, it is mandatory to be part of the university system, which is regulated under the UGC Act.
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- However, over a period of time, several professional education regulators came into being, curiously through government legislation.
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- These have encroached upon the apex regulator’s space. Today there are **more than 13 de facto “regulators” in the area of higher education,** often issuing contradictory instructions and causing confusion amongst the institutions and students alike.
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What is the need for single over-arching body?

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- Take the case of architecture. It is not a stand-alone discipline but leans on the knowledge of art, science, technology, social sciences and pedagogy and therefore is best anchored within the education system.
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- **The Kothari Commission (1964-66)** stressed that “all higher education should be regarded as an integrated whole, that professional education cannot be completely divorced from general education, and that it is essential to bring together all higher education”.
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- The same sentiment was repeated by the **National Education Policy**

(1986) which states that “in the interest of greater co-ordination and developing inter-disciplinary research, a national body covering higher education in general will be set up”.
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- Later, the National Knowledge Commission and **the Yashpal Committee (2008)** also recommended the creation of a single over-arching body.
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- With the above vision in mind, the MHRD worked towards the creation of a **National Commission for Higher Education and Research (NCHER),** which unfortunately could not fructify as there was stiff resistance from the professional-education regulators.
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What is the way forward?

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- Till now, the better polytechnics had an opportunity to grow and evolve into engineering colleges for which there was a specific scheme in the MHRD.
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- The Government’s decision means that 3,500 polytechnics in the country have cut their umbilical cord with the higher education system.
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- Instead of boxing these institutions into narrower spaces we need to provide them with opportunities to grow.
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- Another trend that has adversely affected higher education and the idea of a university is the mushrooming of **single subject universities.**
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- Ex. Scores of private engineering and dental collages have become universities through the deemed university or state government route.
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- Both the **UGC and AICTE require serious overhauling.**
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Source: The Indian Express

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