Reforms in the Higher Education Sector

What is the issue?

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- Government has ushered in multiple reforms in the higher education sector.
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- While these are positives, a comprehensive overhaul of UGC and other regulatory structures is long overdue.
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What are the political developments in the Ed-sector?

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- PM Modi’s vision to create 20 institutions of eminence and Union HRD ministries push for reforms have set the stage for overhauling the landscape.
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- The HRD Ministry first saw the passage of the Indian Institutes of Management (IIM) Bill, 2017, which will extend greater autonomy to the IIMs.
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- This was followed by reforms in the rules for granting autonomy and changes to the University Grants Commission’s (UGC) mandate.
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- Also, “Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan” (RUSA) was continued in order to improve the quality of higher educational institutions in the state.
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- In this backdrop, it would now be appropriate to usher in major institutional reforms to overhaul the regulatory framework in the sector.
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- Such an Act will further reforms adopted until now, and pave the way for the emergence of high-quality higher educational institutions.
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What structures could possibly replace the current UGC?

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- **Broad View -** Currently, there are 3 regulatory agencies in the higher education sector under the Union HRD ministry – UGC, AICTE and CoA.
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- A new Act should hence consider establishing a 'Higher Education Regulatory Commission' (HERA) to subsume all the 3 regulators.
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- States do play an important role in higher education and an advisory council consisting of representatives of all states needs to be established by the union.
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- In addition, leading educationists from diverse fields should also be roped in as members to the advisory council that advices HERC on all matters.
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- **Autonomy -** UGC has regulations under which it divides universities into three categories (I, II and III), with varying levels of autonomy.
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- The proposed act could consider merging Category I and Category II universities into one group – with autonomy to write their own curriculum.
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- In addition, they could also be granted the authority to oversee the curriculums of their respective affiliated colleges (not part of Category I).
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- For some independent courses that those non-autonomous colleges wish to start, HERC could be empowered to vet them with an appropriate expert body.
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- Also, HERC should be empowered to formulate guidelines for establishing institutions, reviewing compliance and call for closures if needed.
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- **Substructures -** If these suggestions are adopted, UGC will be relieved of the multiple regulatory responsibilities that will get divested to the HERC.
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- The two other major tasks of disbursement of funds and accreditation could then be vested with separate finance and accreditation boards respectively.
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- Both these boards should have full autonomy in discharging their functions once the broad policy is formulated at the level of the HERC.
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- **Accreditation -** HERC in cooperation with accreditation board should have

the responsibility to draw up standards and a grading system for institutions.
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- Multiple accreditation boards need to be established under HERC guidelines and mapping institutions with the boards should be random.
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- Direct financial dealing of institutions with accreditation boards also needs to be eliminated to ensure robust inspections and certifications.
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- **Financial Aspects -** HERC in cooperation with the finance board should develop guidelines for funding institutions.
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- HERC should also formulate policies for tuition fees and teacher salaries and explicitly provisions to raise funds should also be framed.
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- The HERC should have a secretariat to support its activities and also maintain a separate grievance remedy office.
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- **Foreign Institutions -** The proposed act should also provide for a clear path for the entry of foreign institutions into the Indian landscape.
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- As India has a large young population, foreign institutions will have an incentive to enter the country – which will in turn benefit our Ed-landscape.
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- **Research Integration** - There is a divide between teaching and research institutions and it is neither benefitting students nor benefitting researchers.
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- Hence, the act must also chart a path to integrate teaching and research to enable state-of-the-art labs to actively engage university scholars.
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Source: The Hindu

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