Reimagining our Higher Education Landscape

What is the issue?

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- Poor quality, increasing privatisation and politicisation have been chronic problems that our education system faces.
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- There currently seems to be some positive churn, but much remains to be done to usher in significant progress.
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What is the current state of affairs?

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- Since independence, it has been a challenge to build a quality higher education infrastructure with limited funds.
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- While excellence is possible, as the IITs and IIMs show, it is limited to a tiny segment of a system that enrols 35 million students.
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- Internationalisation is central to academic success in the 21st century — and India has been notably weak.
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- India has shown academic innovations over the years, but on a limited scale and never in the comprehensive universities.
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- In recent times, things seem to be changing, at least at the top levels of our higher education eco-system.
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What are the new changes?

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- **NIRF -** “National Institutional Ranking Framework”, implemented in 2016, is India’s first government-supported ranking of colleges and universities.
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- It demands the participating institutions to submit data on critical areas and also makes a distinction between universities and colleges.
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- NIRF may in the future guide government financial support for higher education and also aid in education related policy making.
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- **IoE project -** Institutions of Eminence (IoE) project seeks to identify 10 public and 10 private institutions as IoE, to enable their further development.
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- It has been proposed that the identified IoE will be provided enhanced autonomy and financial support (funds only for public institutes).
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- **Graded Autonomy programme (GAP) -** This is an initiative that plans to give participating institutions considerable freedom in certain domains.
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- The vision is to promote “Academic, financial and administrative innovations” in these institutions by liberalising them (if they fulfil certain conditions).
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- Given the often stifling bureaucracy of higher education, GAP will be a significant stimulus for innovation in both public and private institutions.
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How is our system opening up to foreign collaborations?

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- Traditionally, colleges and universities have been restricted from international collaboration, which is proving to be an obstacle to excellence.
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- **People -** Emphasis on attracting international students has been poor and only 47,000 foreigners study in India, in comparison to China’s 4 lakhs.
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- The new “Study in India initiative” seeks to attract international students mainly from a group of African and Asian countries.
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- It seeks to improve India’s share of “global student mobility” from the current 1% to 2% in the near future.
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- The Graded Autonomy programme makes it easier to hire international faculty, which was very difficult to do earlier.
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- **Degree -** India is moving towards signing a pact on mutual recognition of academic qualifications with 30 countries.
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- Recently, a government-to-government MoU was signed between India and France to mutually recognise academic qualifications.
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What are the challenges?

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- Upgrading 20 or more Indian universities to world-class quality is big task and will take time and way more consistent funding than currently estimated.
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- Further, autonomy will need to be greatly increased, which might be difficult as freedom from bureaucratic shackles of the government is not easy to attain.
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- Innovative ideas from within top universities are another vital factor needed for ushering in progress, but there has been little evidence of this till now.
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- Ensuring that universities have imaginative leaders within their ranks and deriving ideas from foreign models are other aspects that need attention.
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What is the way ahead?

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- The national ranking initiative needs to be extended throughout the

higher education system and requires simplification for enhancing its ambit.
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- The “Study in India initiative” and proposals relating to relationships between Indian and foreign institutions are useful beginnings.
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- But more thinking must go into these ideas, and the focus on attracting students needs to be broadened beyond just Asia and Africa.
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- Innovation in course design is vital to attract students as students and post-docs from western countries might prefer taking up shorter-duration course.
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- Significantly, unlike China, India has the advantage of using English as the main language of higher education, an advantage that needs to be capitalised.
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Source: The Hindu

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