

A Bhartiya Framework for University Governance: Integrating Autonomy, Accountability, and Excellence in the Era of NEP 2020

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Abstract

The governance of higher education institutions has emerged as a critical determinant of academic quality, institutional effectiveness, and national development in the twenty-first century. Bhartiya universities are expected to fulfill multiple roles as centres of knowledge creation, innovation, skill development, cultural preservation, and societal transformation. In this context, the principles of autonomy, accountability, and excellence constitute the foundational pillars of effective university governance. The implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has further intensified the need for governance reforms by advocating greater institutional autonomy, multidisciplinary education, research excellence, transparency, and stakeholder participation. However, universities in Bharat continue to face significant challenges, including regulatory complexities, bureaucratic interventions, leadership deficits, faculty shortages, inadequate research ecosystems, financial constraints, and concerns regarding quality assurance. This paper critically examines the dynamic relationship between autonomy, accountability, and excellence in the governance of Bhartiya universities. It explores how excessive control may hinder innovation and institutional growth, while insufficient accountability can compromise quality and public trust. Drawing upon Bhartiya educational philosophy, particularly the concepts of *Dharma*, *Swaraj*, and *Lokasangraha*, alongside contemporary governance theories and policy frameworks, the study proposes a Bhartiya model of university governance rooted in ethical leadership, participatory decision-making, institutional responsibility, and social commitment. The paper argues that sustainable excellence in higher education can be achieved only through a balanced governance framework that combines academic freedom with transparency and accountability. Such a model can contribute significantly to the realization of the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047* and position Bhartiya universities as globally respected institutions while preserving their civilizational values and educational heritage.

Keywords: Bhartiya Universities, Higher Education Governance, Autonomy, Accountability, Excellence, NEP 2020, Bhartiya Gyan Parampara, Indian Knowledge Systems, Ethical Leadership, University Governance.

1. Introduction

Universities have historically functioned as centres of intellectual inquiry, knowledge creation, cultural preservation, and social transformation. The foundations of higher education in the Bhartiya tradition can be traced to ancient centres of learning such as Nalanda, Takshashila, Vallabhi, and Vikramashila, which emerged as globally renowned universities and vibrant hubs of intellectual excellence. These institutions embodied the principles of academic freedom, scholarly rigor, ethical leadership, and social responsibility, attracting students and scholars from diverse geographical, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds. Beyond serving as centres of instruction, they functioned as

dynamic ecosystems of research, innovation, philosophical discourse, and societal engagement. Rooted in the Bhartiya worldview, education was regarded as a transformative process aimed at self-realization, character formation, ethical conduct, and the promotion of social welfare. The pursuit of knowledge was intrinsically linked to the cultivation of wisdom and the advancement of humanity. This rich civilizational legacy continues to offer valuable insights for contemporary university governance, particularly in fostering a balanced framework that harmonizes autonomy, accountability, and excellence while responding to the evolving demands of higher education in the twenty-first century.

In the twenty-first century, higher education has emerged as a strategic driver of economic growth, innovation, and global competitiveness. The higher education system of Bharat is now one of the largest in the world. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2022-23, the country has 1,213 universities, 46,624 colleges, and 12,543 standalone institutions. The sector continues to expand in scale and inclusivity, with the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) rising to 29.5 percent for the 18-23 age group. Female participation has shown sustained growth, and research engagement continues to strengthen, reflecting the nation's increasing emphasis on knowledge creation, innovation, and advanced scholarship.

Despite this impressive expansion, concerns regarding governance, quality, employability, research productivity, and international competitiveness continue to persist. The challenge before Bhartiya universities is no longer merely one of access but of achieving excellence through effective governance. As Peter Drucker aptly observed, *“Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.”* In the context of higher education, governance must combine administrative efficiency with visionary leadership capable of fostering innovation, accountability, and academic excellence.

Recognizing the need for transformative reforms, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 identifies governance as a cornerstone of higher education development in Bharat. The policy advocates greater institutional autonomy, multidisciplinary learning, research-intensive universities, stakeholder participation, academic flexibility, and a shift from regulatory oversight to facilitative governance. It also aims to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50 percent by 2035, thereby expanding access, equity, and quality.

However, achieving these objectives requires universities to balance autonomy with accountability and academic freedom with societal responsibility. Effective governance, rooted in the civilizational values of Bharat and informed by global best practices, is therefore essential for fostering excellence, innovation, and sustainable institutional development.

2. Review of Literature

University governance has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent decades. Clark (1998) emphasized the importance of institutional autonomy in fostering entrepreneurial universities capable of responding to changing societal needs. Marginson (2011) argued that successful higher education systems balance state oversight with institutional independence.

Shattock (2010) observed that governance structures significantly influence academic quality, research productivity, and organizational effectiveness. Studies indicate that universities with greater academic and administrative autonomy often demonstrate superior performance in innovation and international rankings.

Within the Bhartiya context, Agarwal (2009) highlighted concerns regarding regulatory complexity, bureaucratic intervention, and governance inefficiencies. Altbach (2015) noted that Indian

universities face challenges in achieving world-class status due to governance limitations, inadequate research infrastructure, and funding constraints.

Recent studies on NEP 2020 emphasize the importance of governance reforms in improving institutional effectiveness. Scholars argue that autonomy must be accompanied by robust accountability mechanisms to ensure quality, transparency, and public trust.

Despite growing literature on governance and higher education reforms, relatively limited attention has been devoted to developing a distinctly Bhartiya framework of university governance rooted in Bhartiya philosophical traditions and educational values. This paper seeks to address that gap.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is anchored in three interdependent pillars **autonomy, accountability, and excellence**, which collectively determine the effectiveness and sustainability of university governance. Contemporary higher education research increasingly recognizes that institutional excellence cannot be achieved through regulation alone; rather, it emerges from a balanced governance ecosystem that combines academic freedom with responsible oversight. As the renowned educator and philosopher John Dewey observed, *“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.”* This perspective underscores the need for governance structures that enable universities to innovate while remaining accountable to society.

3.1 Autonomy

Institutional autonomy refers to the capacity of universities to make independent decisions regarding academic, administrative, financial, and research-related matters. It encompasses curriculum development, faculty recruitment, research priorities, resource mobilization, international collaborations, and strategic planning. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates a gradual transition toward greater institutional autonomy, enabling higher education institutions to become innovative, multidisciplinary, and globally competitive. Autonomy fosters creativity, adaptability, and institutional differentiation, which are essential in a rapidly evolving knowledge economy.

3.2 Accountability

Autonomy must be complemented by accountability to ensure transparency, efficiency, and public trust. Accountability includes academic performance, financial stewardship, ethical conduct, governance practices, and social responsibility. Regulatory frameworks such as NAAC accreditation, NIRF rankings, academic audits, and outcome-based assessment mechanisms serve as instruments of accountability. Effective accountability systems encourage continuous improvement while safeguarding institutional integrity.

3.3 Excellence

Excellence represents the ultimate goal of higher education governance. It is reflected in high-quality teaching, impactful research, innovation, employability outcomes, internationalization, and meaningful societal engagement. The QS World University Rankings 2026 indicate increasing global recognition of several Bhartiya institutions, highlighting the growing importance of governance quality in achieving academic distinction. Excellence is therefore best understood not as an isolated outcome but as the result of a dynamic synergy between autonomy and accountability, supported by visionary leadership and a culture of continuous improvement.

4. Bhartiya Perspective on Governance

The discourse on university governance in Bharat cannot be fully understood without reference to the country's rich intellectual and educational traditions. Bhartiya thought views education not merely as the transmission of knowledge but as a process of character formation, ethical development, and social responsibility. Consequently, governance in educational institutions is conceived as a moral and societal obligation rather than a purely administrative function. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 echoes this philosophy by emphasizing value-based education, ethical leadership, holistic development, and the integration of Bhartiya Gyan Parampara (IKS) into higher education.

Dharma as Ethical Governance

In the Bhartiya philosophical tradition, *Dharma* signifies duty, righteousness, and ethical conduct. Applied to university governance, Dharma requires leaders and institutions to uphold integrity, transparency, fairness, and accountability in all decision-making processes. Governance guided by Dharma prioritizes the welfare of learners, faculty, and society while ensuring responsible stewardship of institutional resources. As stated in the *Mahabharata*, "*Dharmorakshatirakshitah*" (Dharma protects those who protect it), highlighting the enduring relevance of ethical governance.

Swaraj and Institutional Self-Governance

The concept of *Swaraj* extends beyond political freedom to encompass self-discipline, self-regulation, and institutional autonomy. Ancient centres of learning enjoyed substantial academic freedom while remaining accountable to societal needs. In contemporary higher education, Swaraj aligns with the principle of responsible autonomy advocated by NEP 2020, enabling universities to innovate, adapt, and excel while maintaining public trust.

Lokasangraha and Social Responsibility

The Bhagavad Gita introduces the principle of *Lokasangraha*, meaning the welfare and upliftment of society. Universities, therefore, have a responsibility to address social challenges, promote sustainable development, support community engagement, and contribute to nation-building through research and innovation.

Guru-Shishya Parampara

The Guru-Shishya parampara emphasized mentorship, experiential learning, and the holistic development of learners. Modern governance frameworks can draw upon this legacy by fostering academic mentoring, ethical leadership, inclusivity, and learner-centric institutional cultures. Such an approach strengthens not only academic excellence but also the moral and social foundations of higher education.

5. Governance Challenges in Bhartiya Universities

Despite significant expansion and policy reforms, Bhartiya universities continue to face several governance-related challenges that affect their ability to achieve academic excellence, research productivity, and global competitiveness. These challenges highlight the need for a balanced governance framework that promotes institutional autonomy while ensuring accountability and quality.

5.1 Regulatory Complexity and Institutional Autonomy

Higher education institutions in Bharat operate within a multifaceted regulatory framework involving bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC), professional councils, accreditation agencies, and state authorities. While regulation is essential for maintaining standards, excessive procedural requirements and overlapping jurisdictions often limit institutional flexibility and

innovation. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has acknowledged this challenge and proposed a simplified and transparent regulatory architecture to reduce bureaucratic constraints and encourage institutional self-governance.

5.2 Leadership and Administrative Capacity

Institutional effectiveness depends significantly on competent and visionary leadership. However, universities frequently encounter delays in leadership appointments, administrative bottlenecks, and inadequate professional training in higher education management. As Warren Bennis aptly noted, *“Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.”* The absence of strong leadership can adversely affect strategic planning, resource mobilization, and organizational development.

5.3 Faculty Recruitment and Academic Development

Faculty quality remains central to institutional success. According to recent parliamentary and higher education reports, a substantial number of teaching positions remain vacant in several public universities, affecting teaching-learning processes and research output. Furthermore, limited opportunities for continuous professional development and research support constrain academic growth and innovation.

5.4 Research and Innovation Ecosystem

Although Bharat's global research output has increased considerably in recent years, research performance remains uneven across institutions. Key challenges include inadequate funding, limited laboratory infrastructure, weak university-industry collaboration, and insufficient interdisciplinary research initiatives. Strengthening research ecosystems is essential for enhancing innovation and global academic standing.

5.5 Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement

Accreditation and ranking frameworks have encouraged quality consciousness; however, many institutions continue to view accreditation as a compliance exercise rather than a mechanism for continuous improvement. Sustainable excellence requires a culture of evidence-based planning, internal quality assurance, and outcome-oriented governance.

5.6 Financial Sustainability and Digital Transformation

Financial constraints remain a significant concern, particularly for state universities. Rising operational costs, infrastructure requirements, and technological investments necessitate diversified funding models. Simultaneously, the digital transformation of higher education has exposed gaps in digital infrastructure, cybersecurity preparedness, data management, and technological competencies. Addressing these challenges is essential for building resilient, inclusive, and future-ready universities capable of meeting the aspirations of a knowledge-driven Bharat.

6. NEP 2020 and Governance Reform

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 presents a transformative framework for reimagining higher education governance in Bharat by promoting autonomy, accountability, innovation, and institutional excellence. The policy envisions a shift from rigid, control-oriented regulation to a system of facilitative governance that empowers institutions while ensuring quality outcomes. Key reforms include the development of multidisciplinary universities, enhanced academic flexibility through multiple entry-exit options and the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), promotion of research-intensive institutions, and extensive use of technology-enabled governance.

A significant governance reform proposed by NEP 2020 is the creation of a streamlined regulatory structure through the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), aimed at reducing regulatory overlap and improving institutional effectiveness. The policy also emphasizes Institutional Development Plans (IDPs), robust Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs), and greater stakeholder participation in decision-making. As NEP 2020 states, *“the aim is to transform India into a vibrant knowledge society and global knowledge superpower.”* By strengthening governance mechanisms, the policy seeks to create autonomous, accountable, and globally competitive universities aligned with the aspirations of *Viksit Bharat 2047*.

7. A Bhartiya Governance Framework for Universities

To achieve sustainable excellence in higher education, Bhartiya universities require a governance framework that harmonizes global best practices with India's civilizational values and educational philosophy. Such a framework may be built upon five interrelated pillars that promote institutional effectiveness, social responsibility, and academic distinction.

Pillar I: Ethical Leadership

The foundation of university governance should be *Dharma*-based leadership characterized by integrity, transparency, accountability, and service to society. Ethical leaders foster trust, institutional credibility, and a culture of excellence. As Mahatma Gandhi observed, *“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”* Governance rooted in ethical values strengthens both institutional legitimacy and stakeholder confidence.

Pillar II: Responsible Autonomy

Universities should enjoy academic, administrative, and financial autonomy while remaining accountable for measurable outcomes in teaching, research, innovation, and community engagement. Responsible autonomy encourages institutional innovation and responsiveness while ensuring transparency and public trust.

Pillar III: Participatory Governance

Inclusive decision-making enhances institutional effectiveness. Faculty members, students, alumni, industry representatives, and community stakeholders should actively participate in policy formulation, strategic planning, and quality enhancement processes. Such collaboration strengthens institutional ownership and democratic governance.

Pillar IV: Quality and Innovation

In an increasingly knowledge-driven economy, universities must cultivate research excellence, entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystems, and international partnerships. According to the Global Innovation Index 2025, Bharat's emergence as a leading innovation hub highlights the need for research-driven governance, interdisciplinary learning, and stronger academic-industry partnerships. Higher education institutions must foster innovation, entrepreneurship, and knowledge creation to enhance global competitiveness and sustainable national development. Strengthening these dimensions is essential for enhancing global competitiveness and advancing *Viksit Bharat 2047*.

Pillar V: Social Commitment

Universities must remain committed to sustainable development, social inclusion, nation-building, and cultural preservation. Aligning institutional activities with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047* ensures that higher education contributes meaningfully to societal progress. Together, these five pillars provide a

comprehensive Bhartiya framework for creating autonomous, accountable, and globally competitive universities.

8. Policy Recommendations

Strengthening governance in Bhartiya universities requires a strategic and integrated approach that aligns institutional autonomy with accountability and excellence. First, universities should be granted greater academic, administrative, and financial autonomy, accompanied by robust accountability mechanisms to ensure responsible decision-making and measurable outcomes. International evidence suggests that institutions with higher levels of autonomy often demonstrate stronger research performance and innovation capacity.

Second, leadership appointments should be transparent, merit-based, and guided by clearly defined competency frameworks. Continuous leadership development programmes for Vice-Chancellors, Registrars, Deans, and academic administrators should be institutionalized to enhance governance effectiveness.

Third, investment in research and innovation must be significantly increased through competitive funding, industry partnerships, and interdisciplinary research centres. India's growing research output demonstrates the need to strengthen institutional ecosystems that support high-quality scholarship and innovation.

Fourth, Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) should move beyond compliance-oriented functions and adopt data-driven approaches for continuous improvement. Digital governance systems, including enterprise resource planning (ERP), learning management systems, academic analytics, and e-governance platforms, should be expanded to improve efficiency, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making.

Fifth, stronger industry-academia collaboration is essential to enhance employability, innovation, and knowledge transfer. Universities should also integrate Bhartiya Gyan Parampara (IKS), ethical leadership principles, and value-based governance into leadership development programmes, in line with the vision of NEP 2020.

Finally, governance structures should promote meaningful participation of faculty, students, alumni, employers, and community stakeholders. Performance-based accountability frameworks linked to institutional missions, learning outcomes, research productivity, and societal impact should be adopted. As Peter Senge aptly remarked, *"The only sustainable competitive advantage is an organization's ability to learn faster than the competition."* For Bhartiya universities, continuous learning, innovation, and responsible governance will be critical to achieving global excellence and contributing to the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*.

9. Conclusion

The future trajectory of Bhartiya universities will be determined not merely by their expansion in numbers but by the effectiveness of their governance systems in fostering quality, innovation, and societal impact. As Bharat advances toward becoming a knowledge-driven economy and aspires to achieve the vision of *Viksit Bharat 2047*, higher education institutions must evolve into centres of excellence characterized by academic freedom, ethical leadership, research intensity, and social responsibility. In this context, autonomy, accountability, and excellence should not be viewed as competing priorities but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of sustainable institutional development.

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that autonomy empowers universities to innovate, respond to emerging challenges, and pursue academic distinction, while accountability

ensures transparency, responsible stewardship of resources, and public trust. Excellence emerges when these principles operate within a governance culture grounded in integrity, participation, and continuous improvement. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a transformative framework for achieving this balance by promoting multidisciplinary education, institutional autonomy, research-driven learning, digital governance, and stakeholder engagement.

At the same time, Bhartiya universities possess a unique advantage in drawing upon Bharat's rich intellectual heritage. Concepts such as *Dharma* (ethical responsibility), *Swaraj* (self-governance), and *Lokasangraha* (social welfare) offer enduring principles for developing governance models that are both globally relevant and culturally rooted. These values can strengthen institutional resilience, promote inclusive decision-making, and align higher education with national development priorities.

As the philosopher and statesman Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan remarked, "*The end-product of education should be a free creative man, who can battle against historical circumstances and adversities of nature.*" This vision remains highly relevant for contemporary university governance. By integrating autonomy with accountability and excellence with ethical responsibility, Bhartiya universities can emerge as globally respected institutions of learning, research, and innovation. Such a transformation will not only enhance Bharat's standing in the global knowledge ecosystem but also contribute significantly to nation-building, social progress, and the realization of a self-reliant and developed Bharat.

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