**Concept note**

**Higher Education Commission of India (HECI)**

**Background**

India’s higher education system is one of the largest in the world. Managing such a large organizationhas a lot of inherent challenges especially when it has multiple collaborators with diverse objectives. In order to facilitate the task of regulation, a lot of regulatory bodies (UGC, AICTE, MCI, RCI, etc.) were established over time as and when the need arose. Further, the role of these regulatory bodies also kept on modifyingaccording to the requirements of the times and it adapted from being a mere regulatory body to giving grants, undertaking inspections, granting permission for collaboration or setting up of an institution, creation of a department, offering a new course, etc. This resulted in erosion of autonomy of the institutions where decision making was highly centralized, outdated and rigid. This has been fatal for the academic environment. Instead of developing an effective regulatory system, it has transformed into a scrutinizing agency which ironically though, could not weed out unfair practices carried out by institutionswhich led to deterioration ofhigher education.

Various Commissions and National Education Policies have suggested minimization and rationalization of regulations in higher education. However, the piecemeal approach to improve the system could not bring the desired results. According to NEP 2020 ‘The mechanistic and disempowering nature of the regulatory system has been rife with very basic problems, such as heavy concentrations of power within a few bodies, conflicts of interests among these bodies, and a resulting lack of accountability’. That is why the need of the hour is a complete overhaul of the regulatory system in order to ‘re-energize’ the higher education in India.

**NEP 2020 and Transformation of Regulatory System**

In order to eradicate systemic flaws, NEP 2020 has suggested various policy measures. It emphasizes on a common regulatory apparatus for the entire higher education sector in order to eliminate isolation and disjunction. It wants regulating agencies to facilitate rather than solely regulate andrestricts their functions to few select matters only. The NEP 2020 has suggested that the functions of regulation, provision of education, funding, accreditation and academic standard setting must be performed by independent, distinct and empowered bodies. This is essential to create checksand balances in the system, minimize conflict of interests and eliminate the concentration of power. It is also toensure that the four institutional structures carrying out these four essential functions work independently yet in synergy towards common goals. Following are the four structureswhich have been suggested as four independent verticals by NEP 2020 within one umbrella institution, called the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI):

1. ***NHERC*:**The first vertical of HECI will be the National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC). It will function as the common, single point regulator for the higher education sector including teacher education, excluding medical and legal education, thus eliminating the duplication and disjunction of regulatory efforts by the multiple regulatory agencies that exist at the present time. It will require a relook and repealing of existing Acts and restructuring of various existing regulatory bodies to enable this single point regulation. NHERC will be set up to regulate in a ‘light but tight’ and facilitative manner, meaning that a few important matters particularly financial probity, good governance, and the entire online and offline public self-disclosure of all finances, audits, procedures, infrastructure, faculty/staff, courses, and educational outcomes will be very effectively regulated. This information will have to be accurate and made available andupdated regularly by all higher education institutions on a public website maintained by NHERC and on the institutions’ websites. Any complaints or grievances from stakeholders and others arising out of the information placed in public domain shall be adjudicated by NHERC. Feedback from randomly selected students including differently-abled students at each HEI will be solicited online to ensure valuable input at regular intervals.

1. ***NAC:***The primary mechanism to enable such regulation will be accreditation. The second vertical of HECI will, therefore, be a ‘meta-accrediting body’, called the National Accreditation Council (NAC). Accreditation of institutions will be based primarily on basic norms, public self-disclosure, good governance, and outcomes, and it will be carried out by an independent ecosystem of accrediting institutions supervised and overseen by NAC. In the short term, a robust system of graded accreditation shall be established, which will specify phased benchmarks for all HEIs to achieve set levels of quality, self-governance, and autonomy. In turn, all HEIs will aim, through their Institutional Development Plans (IDPs), to attain the highest level of accreditation over the next 15 years, and thereby eventually aim to function as self-governing degree-granting institutions/clusters. In the long run, accreditation will become a binary process, as per the extant global practice.
2. ***HEGC:***The third vertical of HECI will be the Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC), which will carry out funding and financing of higher education based on transparent criteria, including the IDPs prepared by the institutions and the progress made on their implementation. HEGC will be entrusted with the disbursement of scholarships and developmental funds for launching new focus areas and expanding quality programme offerings at HEIs across disciplines and fields.
3. ***GEC:***The fourth vertical of HECI will be the General Education Council (GEC), which will frame expected learning outcomes for higher education programmes, also referred to as ‘graduate attributes’.A National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF) will be formulated by the GEC and it shall be in sync with the National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) to ease the integration of vocational education into higher education. Higher education qualifications leading to a degree/diploma/certificate shall be described by the NHEQF in terms of such learning outcomes. The GEC will be mandated to identify specific skills that students must acquire during their academic programmes, with the aim of preparing well-rounded learners with 21st century skills.

It is believed that such system of architecture will ensure the principle of functional separation by eliminating conflicts of interests between different roles. It will also aim to empower HEIs, while ensuring that the few key essential matters are given due attention.However, this type of transformation will require existing structures and institutions to reinvent themselves and undergo an evolution of sorts. The separation of functions would mean that each vertical within HECI would take on a new, single role which is relevant, meaningful, and important in the new regulatory scheme.

NEP 2020 suggests functioning of all the independent verticals of HECI based on transparent public disclosure, and use of technology to reduce human interface to ensure efficiency and transparency in their work. Strict compliance measures with stringent action, including penalties for false disclosure of mandated information, will be ensured so that Higher Education Institutions conform to the basic minimum norms and standards. HECI itself will be resolving disputes among the four verticals. Each vertical in HECI will be an independent body consisting of persons having high expertise in the relevant areas along with integrity, commitment, and a demonstrated track record of public service.

**Focus areas of Discussion Paper**

The combined efforts of University of Delhi, as one of the oldest and the largest public university in terms of number of students and teaching /non-teaching employees, and O.P. Jindal Global University, as one of the newest private university which has been awarded institution of eminence with world class law courses, will be very helpful for framing statutes for the proposed HECI in letter and spirit of NEP 2020. The vast experience of members of University of Delhi in dealing with a large organization for a long period with one of the most transparent system in admission may be extremely useful to develop a new transparent HECI. Similarly, O.P. Jindal Global University, despite being a new entrant in the field of education has reached a lot of milestones within a remarkably short span of time. It may help HECI to likewise develop in a short time period for better and faster implementation of the ethos of NEP 2020. The following will be the focus areas of the committee:

* **Organizational structure:** The committee will study the proposed organizationalstructure of HECI. In order to imbibe the best modalities in it, the committee will also study the models of the best institutions not only existing within the country, but also across the world.This will be very convenient to members of both the institutions as they have both national and international exposure.
* **Statutes:**The role and functions of all the four verticals of HECI will also be examinedto suggest measures to avoid/minimize conflict of roles/domain and clash/overlapping of functions, where two separate bodies might be executing the same task. The legal framework shall be clearly defined to avoid any breach of contract. The committee will also suggest measures to keep regulations effective without affecting the functioning of the organization.
* **Synchronization:** Coordination between the activities of different departments of the new organization, both at the state and national level to ensure better performance. Discussion paper may suggest measures for the same.
* **Technology:**The committee could identify areas to use technology (without surveillance) for faceless regulation and accreditation; funding and learning outcomes. It may help in increasing efficiency with impartiality. It can also suggest use of technology to address all kinds of grievances including sexual harassment complaints arising in any of the organizations.
* **Stakeholders’ survey:** A survey of the perceptions, problems, experiences and expectations of different stakeholders i.e. administrators, teachers, employees, parents, students, government, regulators, financers etc. could be undertaken to make HECI more inclusive.
* **Incentives and penalties:** Finding ways to motivate/incentivize committed employees and discourageunethical practices through penalties.