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Comparative Analysis of Higher Education Regulatory Models: Pre-NEP and Post-Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Era

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ABSTRACT

Higher education systems worldwide are undergoing regulatory restructuring to enhance quality, autonomy, and accountability. In India, this transformation is articulated through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the proposed Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025, which seeks to replace a fragmented, compliance-driven regulatory framework with a unified, outcome-oriented governance model. For decades, higher education governance in India has been characterized by a fragmented regulatory architecture involving multiple statutory bodies, such as the University Grants Commission (UGC), the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE). While these bodies played a critical role in expansion and standardization, the system increasingly faced criticism for regulatory overlap, excessive compliance burden, limited institutional autonomy, and inadequate focus on learning outcomes and research quality. This paper presents a comparative policy analysis of India's higher education regulatory architecture in the pre-NEP era and the post-VBSA framework. Drawing on qualitative analysis of policy documents, regulatory frameworks, and international governance models, the study examines shifts in regulatory philosophy, accreditation mechanisms, institutional autonomy, transparency, and digital integration. The findings indicate a shift in paradigm from control-based regulation to

trust-based, performance-linked governance, aligning with global quality assurance practices. While the VBSA framework promises enhanced efficiency, continuous quality improvement, and global competitiveness, the paper highlights key implementation challenges related to digital readiness, institutional capacity, and equity across diverse higher education institutions. The study contributes to comparative higher education literature by situating India's regulatory reforms within broader global governance trends and offers policy insights relevant to large, complex higher education systems beyond India.

1. Introduction

Higher education is a cornerstone of national development, enabling economic growth, innovation, social mobility, and democratic participation. In India, the higher education system is among the largest globally, encompassing more than a thousand universities and tens of thousands of colleges catering to a diverse student population (AISHE, 2023). Despite rapid quantitative expansion, persistent concerns regarding quality, governance efficiency, institutional autonomy, and global competitiveness have shaped policy debates for decades (Altbach, 2016; Agarwal, 2019).

Before the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, India's higher education regulatory framework was widely perceived as fragmented and compliance-oriented. Multiple regulators with overlapping jurisdictions imposed procedural requirements that constrained institutional innovation and delayed decision-making (Tilak, 2015; Singh, 2018). Accreditation mechanisms, though present, were episodic and insufficiently integrated into continuous quality improvement processes.

NEP 2020 marked a turning point by proposing a comprehensive restructuring of higher education governance, emphasizing flexibility, interdisciplinary, quality assurance, and learner-centric education (Government of India, 2020). The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025, translates this vision into a concrete regulatory architecture designed to promote transparency, autonomy, and excellence. This paper critically compares the pre-NEP regulatory model with the post-VBSA framework to assess the extent and implications of regulatory transformation in Indian higher education.

2. Objectives of the Study:

The study aims to:

- Examine the structure and functioning of India's higher education regulatory framework prior to NEP 2020.
- Analyze the regulatory architecture proposed under NEP 2020 and the VBSA Bill, 2025.
- Compare pre-NEP and post-VBSA regulatory models across governance, quality assurance, accreditation, autonomy, and transparency dimensions.
- Assess the implications of VBSA for higher education institutions and stakeholders.
- Identify implementation challenges and policy considerations relevant to India's diverse higher education landscape.

3. Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach based on secondary data. Sources include policy documents (NEP 2020, VBSA Bill drafts), regulatory guidelines, government reports, academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and international comparative studies. A comparative policy analysis framework is employed to examine structural and functional changes across two regulatory eras. The analysis focuses on five dimensions: regulatory architecture, quality assurance, accreditation, institutional autonomy, and transparency.

4. Pre-NEP Regulatory Framework in Indian Higher Education

4.1 Fragmented Regulatory Architecture

Before NEP 2020, Higher education governance in India was defined by:

• UGC (University Grant Commission), whose function is Coordination, funding, and standards for universities.

• AICTE (All India Council for Technical Education) functions are the Regulation of technical and professional education programs.

• NCTE (National Council for Teacher Education) functions are the Standards & regulation of teacher education.

- Professional Councils: Regulatory authority in specific domains such as medicine (Medical Council of India), law (Bar Council of India), pharmacy (Pharmacy Council of India), etc. (Singh, 2018).

This multi-agency structure leads to jurisdictional overlaps, duplication of approvals, and compliance burdens. Institutions offering multidisciplinary programs often had to seek multiple regulatory clearances, inhibiting innovation and flexibility (Agarwal, 2019).

4.2 Input-Based Compliance Orientation Regulation

The pre-NEP model was largely input-driven, emphasizing compliance with infrastructural norms, faculty qualifications, and procedural clearances. Regulatory inspections focused on physical parameters rather than learning outcomes, research quality, or student success metrics (Tilak, 2015). This compliance orientation was criticized for its rigidity and limited encouragement of academic innovation.

4.3 Accreditation and Quality Assurance

Accreditation was conducted by NAAC and NBA. However, coverage remained limited, and accreditation cycles were episodic rather than continuous. Quality assurance was perceived as an external compliance exercise rather than an internal culture of improvement (Altbach& Salmi, 2011).

4.4 Limited Institutional Autonomy

Although autonomy was granted to select institutions, most colleges and universities operated under strict regulatory control. Academic and administrative decision-making remained centralized, limiting responsiveness to local and global needs (Srivastava, 2019).

5. Post-NEP Regulatory Vision and the VBSA Framework

5.1 NEP 2020 and Regulatory Reform

NEP 2020 proposed replacing fragmented regulation with a single, overarching regulatory system emphasizing transparency, autonomy, and accountability. The policy advocated outcome-based regulation, technology-enabled governance, and global benchmarking (Government of India, 2020).

5.2 Genesis and Objectives of VBSA

The VBSA Bill, 2025, is the legislative response to NEP's regulatory vision. It aims to transform the regulatory ecosystem into a transparent, efficient, and quality-oriented framework that supports

institutional innovation and global engagement (Ministry of Education, 2025). The VBSA framework attempts to:

a. Eliminate overlaps and duplication in regulatory functions.
b. Separate standard setting, regulation, and accreditation into independent bodies.
c. Integrate technology deeply into approvals, monitoring, and reporting.
d. Encourage context-specific autonomy based on performance outcomes.
e. Enhance accountability and stakeholder engagement through public disclosure and data dashboards.

The model reflects global trends toward flexible regulation and quality assurance seen in jurisdictions such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and Singapore (Salmi & Saroyan, 2007; Chowdhury, 2022).

5.3 Structure of the VBSA Model

VBSA introduces three independent councils:

5.3.1 Viksit Bharat Shiksha Manak Parishad (Standards Council):

This defines minimum academic, research, and institutional standards. This council develops outcomes-based indicators for learning, research impact, and graduate success. It consults with industry and global experts for benchmarking. The separation of standards allows institutions to focus on quality improvement and performance benchmarking rather than procedural compliance (Gupta, 2023).

5.3.2 Viksit Bharat Shiksha Viniyaman Parishad (Regulatory Council):

The Regulatory Council acts as the primary regulatory authority. They grant institutional and program approvals based on transparent criteria. This council coordinates with state authorities and professional councils to avoid duplication. This council reflects a shift toward facilitative regulation, emphasizing risk-based assessment and digital monitoring (OECD, 2021).

5.3.3 Viksit Bharat Shiksha Gunvatta Parishad (Accreditation Council):

The Accreditation Council is responsible for the ranking of institutions and programs. They promote continuous quality improvement frameworks. The accreditations are based on performance indicators like graduate employability, research output, innovation ecosystems, and internationalization. Unlike

episodic accreditation, this council envisions an ongoing, continuous quality enhancement ecosystem (Patnaik, 2024).

5.4 Digital Integration

The VBSA framework heavily integrates technology like online regulatory clearance portals, Dashboards tracking quality metrics, Blockchain-based certification repositories, and AI-based analytics for monitoring compliance and outcomes. This digital emphasis is expected to reduce bureaucratic delays and improve transparency (World Bank, 2020).

6. Comparative Analysis: Pre-NEP vs Post-VBSA Regulatory Models

6.1 Key Differences

Table 1: Detailed Comparison of Higher Education Regulatory Models in India

Dimension	Pre-NEP Regulatory Era	Post-Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Era
Regulatory philosophy	Control-oriented and compliance-based regulation emphasizing approvals and inspections (Agarwal, 2009; Tilak, 2015)	Facilitative, outcome-based, and trust-driven regulation emphasizing institutional responsibility (Government of India [GoI], 2020)
Number of regulatory bodies	Multiple regulators including UGC, AICTE, NCTE, and professional councils, leading to regulatory overlap (UGC, 2018)	Unified regulatory umbrella with three functionally distinct councils to reduce fragmentation (GoI, 2020)
Nature of regulation	Input-focused emphasis on infrastructure norms, faculty strength, and procedural compliance (Tilak, 2015)	Output- and outcome-focused emphasis on learning outcomes, research productivity, and societal impact (GoI, 2020; OECD, 2021)
Standard setting	Dispersed standard-setting authority across multiple regulators (Agarwal, 2009)	Centralized standard setting under the Shiksha Manak Parishad to ensure coherence

		and consistency (GoI, 2020)
Accreditation approach	Periodic and episodic accreditation through NAAC and NBA at fixed intervals (NAAC, 2017)	Continuous, performance-linked accreditation ecosystem supported by digital monitoring (GoI, 2020)
Institutional autonomy	Limited, selective, and conditional autonomy granted to a small number of institutions (UGC, 2018)	Graded autonomy linked to accreditation scores and demonstrated institutional performance (GoI, 2020)
Transparency mechanisms	Manual, document-heavy, and discretionary regulatory processes (Tilak, 2015)	Technology-enabled, data-driven, and publicly accessible dashboards to enhance transparency (GoI, 2020)
Innovation and interdisciplinarity	Constrained by rigid disciplinary boundaries and prescriptive norms (Agarwal, 2009)	Actively encouraged through flexible curricular structures and interdisciplinary frameworks (GoI, 2020)
Digital integration	Minimal digital adoption; predominantly paper-based governance systems (UGC, 2018)	End-to-end digital regulation, monitoring, accreditation, and reporting (GoI, 2020)
Stakeholder orientation	Regulator-centric governance prioritizing administrative control (Tilak, 2015)	Student- and institution-centric governance focusing on learner outcomes and institutional growth (GoI, 2020)
Global alignment	Limited alignment with global quality assurance and benchmarking practices (OECD, 2019)	Benchmarking with global best practices and international QA standards (OECD, 2021)
Accountability mechanism	Inspection-based compliance and episodic review mechanisms (Agarwal, 2009)	Performance metrics, data analytics, and continuous monitoring frameworks (GoI, 2020)
Equity	Uniform regulatory norms with limited	Differentiated expectations

considerations	recognition of institutional diversity (Tilak, 2015)	based on institutional context, mission, and regional diversity (GoI, 2020)
Decision-making speed	Slow approval processes and procedural delays due to bureaucratic layering (UGC, 2018)	Faster, automated, and time-bound decision-making enabled through digital platforms (GoI, 2020)
Research and innovation focus	Secondary to teaching-centric and compliance-driven norms (Agarwal, 2009)	Core regulatory priority aligned with national innovation and development goals (GoI, 2020; NITI Aayog, 2021)

6.2 Analytical Interpretation

The **pre-NEP regulatory model** emphasized **control and uniformity,** often at the cost of innovation and institutional diversity. Compliance with rigid norms became an end in itself, reducing incentives for quality improvement (Tilak, 2015; Agarwal, 2019). In contrast, the **VBSA framework represents a philosophical shift** toward **trust-based governance**, where regulation serves as an enabler rather than a barrier. By separating standard setting, regulation, and accreditation, VBSA minimizes conflicts of interest and aligns India's regulatory system with international best practices (Salmi & Saroyan, 2007; OECD, 2021).

However, while VBSA promises efficiency and transparency, it also introduces new challenges such as data readiness, digital capacity, and the risk of performance metrics disadvantaging resource-poor institutions (World Bank, 2020; Patnaik, 2024). Thus, the difference between the two eras is not merely structural but **epistemological**, redefining how quality, accountability, and excellence are conceptualized in Indian higher education.

7. Implications for Higher Education Institutions

The implementation of the **Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA)** framework marks a paradigm shift in the governance and functioning of higher education institutions (HEIs) in India. By moving towards a unified, outcome-based, and trust-driven regulatory architecture, VBSA creates both

significant opportunities and **complex challenges** for universities and colleges across diverse institutional contexts.

7.1. Expansion of Interdisciplinary and Flexible Academic Programs

One of the most prominent implications of VBSA is the **institutional encouragement of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary education**. The flexible academic structures envisioned under VBSA enable HEIs to transcend rigid disciplinary silos and design innovative programs that integrate humanities, social sciences, sciences, technology, and vocational education. Such curricular flexibility enhances graduate employability, promotes holistic learning, and aligns academic offerings with evolving societal and industry needs. Institutions are thus incentivized to restructure departments, promote credit mobility, and collaborate across faculties.

7.2. Strengthening Research, Innovation, and Global Engagement

VBSA places **research, innovation, and knowledge creation at the core of regulatory priorities,** thereby transforming the traditional teaching-centric orientation of many Indian HEIs. Institutions are encouraged to strengthen research ecosystems through interdisciplinary research centers, industry partnerships, and international collaborations. The emphasis on outcome-based evaluation enhances incentives for quality publications, patents, start-ups, and socially relevant research. Furthermore, alignment with global quality assurance standards under VBSA facilitates international student mobility, joint degree programs, and global academic partnerships, enhancing the global visibility of Indian HEIs.

7.3. Institutionalization of Internal Quality Assurance Systems

Under the VBSA framework, quality assurance shifts from external, episodic inspections to **continuous, performance-linked evaluation.** This transition necessitates the establishment of robust **Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs)** capable of monitoring learning outcomes, research productivity, governance efficiency, and student support services. Institutions must adopt evidence-based decision-making and regularly analyze institutional data to ensure compliance with accreditation benchmarks. As a result, quality assurance becomes an embedded institutional culture rather than a periodic compliance exercise.

7.4. Digital Transformation and Data-Driven Governance

VBSA significantly accelerates the **digital transformation of higher education governance.** HEIs are expected to leverage digital platforms for academic delivery, regulatory reporting, accreditation, student analytics, and institutional performance monitoring. End-to-end digital integration enhances transparency, reduces administrative delays, and enables real-time assessment of institutional outcomes. However, successful digital adoption requires investments in ICT infrastructure, cybersecurity, faculty training, and data management systems.

7.5. Challenges of Infrastructure and Faculty Preparedness

Despite its transformative potential, VBSA implementation may **exacerbate existing institutional disparities**, particularly for **rural, state-funded, and resource-constrained institutions**. Many such HEIs face limitations in physical infrastructure, digital connectivity, research facilities, and faculty capacity. Faculty preparedness for interdisciplinary teaching, outcome-based education, and digital pedagogy remains uneven, affecting institutional performance under outcome-oriented regulatory metrics. Without targeted capacity-building initiatives, these institutions may struggle to compete with well-resourced central and private universities.

7.6. Need for Differentiated and Context-Sensitive Implementation

The success of VBSA depends on the adoption of **differentiated regulatory expectations** that focus on institutional diversity. A uniform application of performance metrics may unintentionally disadvantage institutions serving marginalized, rural, or first-generation learners. Therefore, phased implementation, financial support mechanisms, faculty development programs, and region-specific policy interventions are essential to ensure equitable outcomes and prevent the widening of institutional inequalities.

7.7. Strategic Institutional Reorientation

Overall, VBSA compels HEIs to undergo a **strategic reorientation—**from compliance-driven entities to autonomous, accountable, and innovation-focused institutions. Leadership capacity, governance reforms, and long-term strategic planning become critical factors of institutional success. HEIs that proactively adapt to VBSA's regulatory philosophy are likely to emerge as globally competitive knowledge institutions, while those unable to adapt risk marginalization within the evolving higher education ecosystem.

8. Challenges and Policy Considerations

Despite its promise, implementing VBSA poses challenges:

a. Digital Divide- Institutions in rural areas may struggle with technology readiness.
b. Training Regulators and Institutions - Continuous capacity building is necessary for Training regulators and faculties of the institutes.
c. Balancing Autonomy with Accountability- A Strong public oversight is required to prevent regulatory capture, which will help in balancing autonomy with accountability.
d. Ensuring Equity- Performance metrics should not disadvantage historically under-resourced institutions but should provide them equal opportunities and help them to rise as a leading institution.

9. Conclusion

The transition from the pre-NEP regulatory model to the VBSA framework represents a fundamental shift in India's higher education governance. By emphasizing autonomy, transparency, and quality, VBSA has the potential to transform Indian higher education into a globally competitive and student-centric system. Realizing this vision, however, will require sustained policy commitment, institutional capacity building, and equitable implementation.

The comparative analysis reveals that the VBSA era represents a significant shift in regulatory philosophy from rigid compliance to flexible, quality-oriented governance. The proposed architecture promises to streamline regulatory functions, foster institutional autonomy, improve accreditation quality, and integrate digital platforms. However, achieving the transformative potential of VBSA requires careful implementation, capacity building, stakeholder engagement, and equitable consideration. If successfully operationalized, India's higher education regulatory landscape could become more transparent, globally competitive, and responsive to evolving societal needs.

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