



Transforming Higher Education Governance: Academic Leadership and Regulatory Restructuring Under NEP-2020

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Received: 13 Oct., 2025

Revised: 30 Nov., 2025

Accepted: 10 Dec., 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the unique paradigms of academic leadership, distinguishing it from corporate and governmental management models. Academic leaders must navigate a complex ecosystem of teaching, research, and community engagement while balancing the needs of highly diverse stakeholders. The study critically analyzes the transformation of higher education governance in India under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It examines the shift toward graded institutional autonomy, the replacement of traditional university self-governance with independent Boards of Governors (BoG), and the comprehensive restructuring of regulatory frameworks under the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). The paper concludes that proactive, visionary, and stable leadership is paramount to navigating this systemic overhaul and driving institutional excellence.

Keywords: Academic Leadership, NEP-2020, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), Institutional Autonomy, Board of Governors (BoG), Institutional Development Plan (IDP)

How to cite this article: Pandey, P.S. (2025). Transforming Higher Education Governance: Academic Leadership and Regulatory Restructuring Under NEP-2020. *TechnoLearn: An International Journal of Educational Technology*, 14(02): 155-159.

Source of Support: None; **Conflict of Interest:** None



1. Introduction: The Unique Landscape of Academic Leadership

Leadership in academia fundamentally differs from leadership in corporate or government sectors. While private enterprises focus on maximizing shareholder value and government agencies prioritize broad community welfare, educational institutions must maximize value for a highly diverse set of stakeholders: students, faculty, funding agencies, and the wider community.

To thrive in this specialized environment, an effective academic leader must possess the following core attributes:

- ❖ A profound understanding of community building.
- ❖ The ability to empower faculty and nurture their leadership potential.
- ❖ Proficiency in resource and data utilization.
- ❖ A clear, strategic, and actionable vision.
- ❖ Commitment to fostering a collaborative, inclusive learning environment.
- ❖ A deep-seated passion for education and academia.
- ❖ The courage to encourage calculated risk-taking and innovation.
- ❖ The integrity to lead by example.
- ❖ A commitment to institutional stability, ideally maintaining tenure for at least five years.
- ❖ A dedication to lifelong learning.

Literature Review: Defining the Academic Leader

The conceptualization of “leadership” in academia requires specific definitions. Bijur (2000) posits that leadership fundamentally involves expanding human potential and cultivating environments where individuals can discover and hone their own leadership capabilities. Expanding on this, Heifetz and Laurie (1997) delineate three primary functions of a leader: creating conducive environments for goal achievement, providing security, direction, and conflict management, and maintaining a steady, balanced presence.

In the context of higher education, Ramsden (1998) proposed a model highlighting the distinct traits of impactful academic leaders, which include a dual focus on teaching and research, strategic networking, collaborative behavior, open-minded management, recognizing faculty performance, and strong interpersonal skills.

Methodologically, the study of these traits relies heavily on qualitative analysis. Drawing on Kvale’s (1996) five analytical methods (Condensation, Categorization, Narrative Structuring, Interpretation, and ad-hoc generation) and Patton’s (1982) interview data analysis techniques,

researchers employ mixed methods of categorization and interpretation to decode the specific language and structural frameworks that define academic leadership styles.

The Vision of NEP-2020: Autonomy and Indianness

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions an education system that instills a profound sense of “Indianness” in students’ intellect and actions while equipping them with the skills to become responsible global citizens committed to sustainable development.

Recognizing that teachers are the ultimate guides in this process, NEP-2020 mandates the decentralization of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It eliminates rigid boundaries between public and private institutions, demanding accountability and responsibility across the board.

A Shift in University Governance

A critical area of focus in the policy is the restructuring of university administration and the implementation of autonomy. NEP-2020 introduces “faculty autonomy” (the freedom to design curricula within the NEP framework) and “institutional autonomy” (guiding affiliated colleges to become independent teaching or research-intensive universities).

However, the paper notes a significant paradigm shift—and a point of academic concern—regarding traditional university governance. Historically, universities have relied on democratic self-governance models: Boards of Studies and Academic Councils for academic regulation, and Executive Councils (Syndicates) or University Courts (Senates) for administrative oversight. These structures allowed faculty to debate and build consensus on academic issues. NEP-2020 pivots away from this model, favoring a corporate-style governance structure driven by independent Boards of Governors (BoG).

Proposed Arrangements: The Board of Governors (BoG) Model

Over the next 15 years, NEP-2020 will phase in a system of “graded accreditation” and “graded autonomy.”

- ❖ **Establishment of the BoG:** Once an HEI achieves the requisite grading, it will establish an independent BoG comprised of highly qualified individuals.
- ❖ **Absolute Authority:** The BoG will operate free from external interference, holding the power to make all administrative decisions and appointments, including selecting the head of the institution.
- ❖ **Legislative Overhaul:** A new legislative framework will override conflicting historical statutes to clearly define the BoG’s constitution, rules, and responsibilities.

- ❖ **Transparency:** The BoG will be held strictly accountable to stakeholders, requiring the transparent disclosure of all institutional records while operating under guidelines set by the national regulator.

Fostering Academic Leadership in the New Era

Under this new framework, proactive leadership is critical. NEP-2020 outlines specific strategies to cultivate academic leaders:

- ❖ **Merit-Based Appointments:** All institutional heads and leadership roles will be filled by academicians with exemplary academic records and proven administrative prowess.
- ❖ **Early Identification:** Faculty with strong leadership potential will be identified early in their careers and trained for succession.
- ❖ **Overlapping Tenures:** To ensure institutional stability and prevent operational disruptions, leadership transitions will feature overlapping tenures, ensuring no critical position remains vacant.
- ❖ **Navigating Complexity:** Leaders must align deeply with constitutional values and the institution's overarching vision. To ensure fairness, the BoG will utilize an Expert Committee (EEC) to conduct rigorous, merit-based, and capacity-driven leadership selections.

Restructuring the Regulatory Framework: The HECI Umbrella

To execute these systemic changes—which include establishing multidisciplinary universities, promoting local languages, and creating a National Research Foundation (NRF)—NEP-2020 introduces a “Light but Tight” regulatory approach. The entire higher education sector will be governed by a single umbrella organization: the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI).

HECI is divided into four distinct, independent verticals to separate regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standard-setting:

- ❖ **NHERC (National Higher Education Regulatory Council):** The sole regulatory body for all higher education (excluding medical and legal fields), ensuring compliance and accountability.
- ❖ **NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council):** Operating as a “meta-accreditor,” it will evaluate institutions based on basic standards, public disclosures, governance, and educational outcomes.
- ❖ **HEGC (Higher Education Grants Council):** The financial wing responsible for funding HEIs based on transparent criteria and institutional progress. It will also disburse scholarships to increase equity and inclusion.

- ❖ **GEC (General Education Council):** The academic standard-setter responsible for defining expected learning outcomes (“Graduate Attributes”) and drafting the National Higher Education Qualifications Framework (NHEQF) to facilitate credit transfers and equivalency.

Professional Standard-Setting Bodies (PSSB)

Under the GEC, existing professional councils (e.g., ICAR for Agriculture, NCTE for Teacher Education, CoA for Architecture) will be reorganized into PSSBs. Stripped of their former regulatory authority, these bodies will exclusively focus on setting academic, research, and curriculum standards for their respective fields, which HEIs will adopt autonomously.

The Institutional Development Plan (IDP)

To secure public funding (via HEGC) and demonstrate institutional excellence, every HEI must formulate a strategic Institutional Development Plan (IDP). The IDP serves as a roadmap for progress, outlining the institution’s goals, financial integrity, and commitment to local communities. Crucially, this document cannot be created in a vacuum; it requires collaborative input from board members, institutional leaders, faculty, staff, and students.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of NEP-2020 represents a monumental shift in the landscape of Indian higher education. By decentralizing control, empowering independent Boards of Governors, and restructuring the national regulatory framework under HECI, the policy aims to foster a culture of autonomy and excellence. However, the success of this transition heavily depends on the cultivation of visionary academic leaders who can seamlessly bridge the gap between traditional academic values and modern, accountable governance structures.

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