

Q1. Regulatory compliance cannot be a substitute for academic quality.” (300 Words)

Introduction

India's higher education system has moved from elite access towards mass participation, making quality assurance central to human-capital formation. NEP 2020 accordingly envisages regulation that is “light but tight”, with greater emphasis on transparency, outcomes and institutional autonomy.

Regulatory compliance cannot substitute academic quality

1. **Inputs do not guarantee learning:** Meeting prescribed norms for infrastructure, faculty or processes establishes minimum capacity but does not necessarily demonstrate what students actually learn.

Eg: NEP 2020 calls for moving away from excessive input-based regulation towards governance based on outcomes and transparent disclosure.

2. **Compliance burden:** Excessive documentation and procedural requirements can divert faculty and institutional resources from teaching, mentoring and academic innovation.

Eg: NEP 2020 recognises over-regulation and bureaucratic structures among problems constraining innovation and institutional autonomy in higher education.

Limitations of input- and compliance-oriented regulation

1. **Uniformity over diversity:** Standardised input requirements may inadequately recognise differences in institutional missions, disciplines, pedagogy and local requirements.

Eg: NEP 2020 advocates differentiated institutional development while progressively moving higher education institutions towards greater multidisciplinary character.

2. **Weak accountability for employability:** Compliance with institutional norms may coexist with deficiencies in problem-solving, practical skills and workplace readiness among graduates.

Eg: The Economic Survey 2024-25 highlighted the need to align education and skilling more closely with evolving industry requirements and employment opportunities.

3. **Quality reduced to measurable proxies:** Accreditation can become document-centric when institutional incentives

prioritise demonstrable processes rather than continuous improvement in actual learning.

Eg: The National Board of Accreditation (NBA) follows an outcome-based accreditation approach for programmes, illustrating the shift towards demonstrated educational outcomes.

Outcome-based regulation can improve accountability

1. **Learning-centred accountability:** Regulation should assess whether students acquire defined knowledge, competencies and higher-order skills rather than merely whether prescribed resources exist.

Eg: NBA's outcome-based accreditation evaluates programmes through programme outcomes and attainment processes rather than relying solely on infrastructure inputs.

2. **Transparent public disclosure:** Comparable information on academic outcomes can enable students, parents and regulators to assess institutional performance more meaningfully.

Eg: NEP 2020 envisages transparent public self-disclosure by higher education institutions as an important component of its proposed regulatory architecture.

3. **Greater autonomy with responsibility:** High-performing institutions can receive greater academic flexibility while remaining answerable for clearly defined educational outcomes.

Eg: NEP 2020's "light but tight" approach seeks to combine institutional autonomy with effective regulation of essential academic and governance standards.

4. **Continuous quality improvement:** Periodic measurement of outcomes can identify learning gaps and encourage institutions to reform curricula, pedagogy and assessment accordingly.

Eg: Outcome-based accreditation encourages institutions to define, measure and periodically review programme outcomes, creating feedback for academic improvement.

Conclusion

India needs to move from a culture of proving compliance to a culture of demonstrating learning, without abandoning essential minimum standards. Regulation that combines autonomy, transparent outcomes and credible accreditation can make higher education both innovative and accountable.