

Between Path Dependency and Policy Disruption: Reforming Indian Universities in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract: The Indian universities undergoing the reform process in the twenty-first century are institutions of a sedimented nature, shaped by the colonial administrative past, post-colonial developmental policies, and new relations of centre-state government. This paper addresses the contemporary reform in Indian Higher Education in the light of the path dependency model, which suggests that some of the factors that constrain and condition the scope of policy innovation in Indian Higher Education are the institutional trajectory. Despite the pressures of reform, which try to transform the structure of the HE system. The policy change, particularly the policy on autonomy, accountability, accreditation, and internationalisation as given in the National Education Policy 2020, is a pointer to the intention of disrupting the existing governance mechanisms and positioning of the Indian universities in the global knowledge hierarchy. But there are differences between the various institutions in the empirical data, so that the effects of reforms are not simply additive and consistent. The study argues that inherited governance structures and fiscal capacities have an important influence on institutional performance, based on the qualitative analysis of policy documents, fiscal capacities, and existing governance arrangements. Across central universities, a relatively greater responsiveness to the mandates of reform is seen, across central universities where there is a direct stream of funds, as well as those directly supervised by the central university. On the other hand, state universities remain dependent on fiscal support, administrative disruptions, and political intrusions at the subnational level. Universities that become de facto universities, with halfway regulatory regimes, exhibit selective and strategic adaptation and not systemic change. The paper argues that there is a need for a bargaining institutional approach to reform in higher education in India, which has to be grounded in the dialectical relationship between continuity and disruption. It claims that not only the design of the normative reform, but also institutional capacity, governance coherence, and regulatory coordination across levels of the federal structure, are crucial to the success of a policy. The paper ends by saying that sustainable change would be possible based on shifting away from episodic reform initiatives to more structurally embedded governance recalibration within Indian higher education.

Keywords: path dependency, higher education governance, institutional reform, university transformation, policy change

1. Introduction

The reform of higher education systems is now a main driver of the present

development discourse, particularly in the emerging economies, where universities are now expected to take a pivotal role in development, in the form of providing

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economic growth, innovation, and social mobility. The need for the reform of Universities in the 21st century has taken a new turn in India, due to Globalisation, the speed of technological change, and the massification of Higher education. The pressures have pushed policymakers to look for reforms that would improve the efficiency of institutions, academic quality, transparency in governance, and world competitiveness. There has been a growing internationalisation of HE, which has made universities globally competitive, and in relation to knowledge economies and transnational academic networks (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2012; Salmi, 2009).

Nonetheless, the history of the Indian higher education reform cannot be sufficiently explained without putting it into its historical and institutional context. There was an institutional and behavioural pattern typical of colonial universities, characterised by limited institutional autonomy, the control of the bureaucracy, and centralisation of control. These features fostered an impression of an institutional type where the universities were extensions of the state, which determined their activities more than the production of knowledge on their own. Although policy interventions to expand access and link the HEIs with the development agenda of the country also reinforced the institutional forms and hierarchy of regulatory control provided by the statutory bodies and the financial flows provided by the state, a very centralised and multi-layered system of governance was maintained. Historically rooted institutional structures can create continuity through path-dependent learning processes and are often resistant to institutional reforms (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). The historical layers have, over time, resulted in a structurally complex higher education system that is defined by overlapping jurisdictions, different institutional forms, and unequal resource allocation. The central

universities, state universities, and deemed universities are governed in unique governance and financial structures, resulting in a wide range of institutional capacity and responsiveness. These implications for the implementation of reform agendas are important, particularly reform agendas aimed at strengthening the autonomy and institutional accountability.

The NEP 2020 is one of the important initiatives to reform the governance system of higher education in India on its turn. The major pillars of reform in the policy are: multi-disciplinary education, institutional autonomy, regulatory framework through accreditation, and internationalisation (Government of India, 2020). It aims to change the system whereby excessive bureaucratic control is the order of the day to a more flexible and result-oriented model of governance. However, the early signs of implementation are that the outcomes of reform are uneven across institutional types and that they allude to fundamental structural barriers.

These dynamics will be discussed in an analytical framework of path dependency, in which historically made choices, which subsequently turn into mechanisms of self-reinforcement, have a great effect on the development of institutions. Once institutionalised, such institutional arrangements are likely to bring future policy choices into a set of institutional straightjackets, even when there are reform initiatives that are oriented towards structural change (Pierson, 2000). This is helpful in the Indian higher education context, where policy changes often impact institutions differently and have unintended impacts across institutions.

In this paper, the author explores the role of inherited governance structures in intervening in the effectiveness of reform measures. It also explores how much can be achieved

with current reform initiatives to overcome structural constraints that are embedded in the higher education system. Thus the paper would be a part of a larger debate on institutional change and reform of governance and the political economy of higher education in India.

2. Methodology

This research design involves a qualitative and interpretive research design to explore the Indian university reform through the lens of path dependency and the institutional change analytical framework. The decision to adopt a qualitative approach is informed by the fact that higher education reform is not necessarily a technical policy exercise or a process that is embedded historically and mediated by institutions. In line with this, the research is concerned with how policy textual materials, regulatory frameworks, and scholarly interpretations are to be interpreted, instead of how to measure the quantifiable outcomes.

The study is principally founded on secondary materials as well as official policy reports, governmental reports, regulatory frameworks, and peer-reviewed scholarly literature on governance of higher education in India. The main empirical data to be analysed are key documents that include the National Education Policy 2020, guidelines by the University Grants Commission, and reports on the implementation of the policies (Government of India, 2020). These papers are analysed in order to discover the mentioned objectives, institutional presuppositions, and governmental machinery underlying the modern reform efforts. Moreover, the literature on Indian higher education offers critical perspectives on institutional patterns of structural constraints and long-term institutional patterns (Tilak, 2018).

The framework of the analysis is built based on the institutional theory and the notion of path dependency, which can be said to impact the further development of the policy analysis and add constraints to the possible trajectories of further reform. This view can be complemented with the insights of institutional economics and political science, in particular, the work about institutional persistence and incremental change (North, 1990; Pierson, 2000). These theoretical orientations allow an organised explanation of the impacts of inherited systems of governance on the implementation of reforms in the Indian higher education scenario.

It takes a comparative institutional approach to analyse the differences between central universities, state universities, and deemed universities. These types are seen as analytically distinct types of institutions, all embedded in various governance, funding, and control regimes. Central universities are operated under direct central government control and comparatively stable fiscal support, in comparison to state universities, which are governed by the comparatively steady administrative and fiscal systems at the state level. In contrast, deemed universities operate under hybrid regulatory frameworks that impose regulatory compliance requirements, as well as grant autonomy. This comparative structure enables the systematic investigation of the impact of institutional variation on the responsiveness of reform and the capacity to implement it.

It is based on three dimensions that are closely related to each other: the structure of the institution, the mechanisms of governance, and the adaptability of policies. The institutional structure is the formal organisation and governing structure of universities. The governance mechanisms encompass funding trends, administrative control, and regulatory control. Policy adaptability can be defined as the ability of

institutions to effectively respond to reform agendas like the augmentation of autonomy, reforms in accreditation, and internationalisation programs.

Thematic interpretation is the method used to analyse the data, which is aimed at detecting common trends, institutional limitations, and gaps in the implementation of the policies. This is done through systematic coding of policy texts and secondary literature to extract themes associated with continuity of governance, institutional inertia, and the outcomes of reforms.

Although the lack of primary field data makes it difficult to carry out empirical generalisation, the triangulation of various sources of authority and secondary data is useful in improving the reliability and analytical strength of the study. The interpretive design is specifically helpful in studying complex institutional phenomena in which the historical context and policy discussion are central to the shaping of the outcomes.

3. Results

3.1 Central Universities

This analysis shows that central universities in India exhibit relatively greater levels of responsiveness and flexibility to modern higher education reforms. This relational institutional power is mainly ascribed to their stable or well-established funding structures, direct administrative control by the central government, and their comparatively uniform regulatory frameworks. These attributes allow central universities to be more aligned with national-level policy directives, especially those stated under the National Education Policy 2020, which prioritises institutional autonomy, multidisciplinary education, reforms in accreditation, as well as internationalisation (Government of India, 2020).

Governance-wise, central universities enjoy more transparent administrative authority chains of control and homogeneous regulatory demands. This minimises the possibility of ambiguity in the interpretation of the policies, and it would be easier to have more coordinated efforts to implement the reform measures. The initiatives that are related to curriculum restructuring, the framework of outcomes-based education, and the mechanism of quality assurance are more likely to be implemented more systematically in central universities than in other institutional categories.

Moreover, central universities can be more likely to participate in international academic cooperation because they tend to have a comparatively better institutional reputation and can be supported by means of central funding. These involve being part of international research networks, faculty exchange programmes, and joint academic projects. These are in alignment with the reform agenda of increasing global competitiveness and increasing the visibility of India in international higher education rankings. Globally competitive university systems tend to be under strong institutional funding and governance coherence (Salmi, 2009; Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

However, even though central universities are more adaptive, there is still no limitation on the implementation of reforms in these institutions. Decision-making processes may be slowed down by bureaucratic procedures, centralisation of the administration of the institution, and dependency of the decision process on government approvals. However, these limitations are somewhat less drastic than those in state universities, enabling central universities to have a steadier course of reform conformity.

Overall, central universities are a relatively stable institutional type in which reform

initiatives have a higher likelihood of being operationalised in a more systematic and lasting way, representing the combined impacts of resource sufficiency and governance soundness.

3.2 State Universities

Conversely, state universities have had serious structural limitations that restrict their ability to successfully bring about higher education reforms. These are inherent constraints in the fiscal dependency, administrative fragmentation, and politically mediated governmental structures. Consequently, reforms in state universities are quite uneven, selective, and frequently delayed. Previous studies on Indian higher education have similarly identified chronic underfunding and governance fragmentation as major structural constraints affecting state universities (Agarwal, 2009; Tilak, 2015; Varghese, 2015).

One of the challenges that state universities are facing is the fact that they have been largely dependent on state government funding. This financial dependency predisposes to fluctuations in state-level budgetary priorities and political commitments. In most instances, higher education finds itself competing with other development sectors for the limited available financial resources and hence incurs chronic underinvestment in academic facilities, faculty staffing, and research and development. This institutional constraint greatly limits the ability of state universities to make reforms that would demand a large institutional investment (Tilak, 2018).

Besides the financial limitations, administrative inefficiencies also make it difficult to carry out the reforms. State universities typically have multifaceted bureaucratic systems with multiple levels of approval by state education departments, university administrations, and other regulatory bodies.

The complexity of control systems causes delays in decision-making and decreases institutional adaptability in adapting to changes in policies.

State-level political influence is also a key factor in influencing the outcome of governance. Regional politics often affect appointments, grants, and the removal of funding, and administrative decision-making, which can compromise institutional autonomy. This politicisation of forms of governance contributes to instability in leadership and discontinuity in policy implementation.

Due to all these factors, the state universities tend to take the reform measures in a disjointed manner. Though some elements of the policy, like a curriculum update or a plan to improve research, might be executed, larger-scale structural changes, such as a governance restructure or a plan to enhance research, are limited in scope. This is indicative of a tendency to partially comply as opposed to outright institutional change.

State universities, therefore, demonstrate how structural constraints inherent in fiscal federalism and governance architecture can go a long way in constraining the transformative potential of national reform agendas.

3.3 Deemed Universities

Universities of this type form a special category in the Indian system of higher education, with a hybrid system of governance that combines institutional autonomy with regulatory oversight. This bi-structure allows it to have a higher degree of operational flexibility than state universities while remaining in compliance with national regulatory structures.

It is revealed that the tendency of the deemed universities selectively and

strategically adopts reform initiatives. In contrast to central universities, where reforms are more systematically implemented, deemed universities often focus on reforms that are more aligned with institutional goals, such as building a good reputation, increasing student enrolment, and becoming more competitive in the market. This was a selective adoption on their part as they are being positioned in a competitive higher education marketplace. The increasing marketisation of higher education has encouraged institutions to adopt selective reform strategies aimed at improving institutional competitiveness and reputation (Kapur & Mehta, 2017; Deem et al., 2008).

The fact that they have relative freedom of academic and administrative decision-making is one of the main benefits of deemed universities. This enables them to launch new academic programmes, revamp curricula more quickly, and react to the new demands of education more nimbly. In certain instances, this flexibility allows adoption of novel teaching practices, industry partnerships, and skill-based programmes at a faster rate, to keep up with the needs of the labour market (Altbach, 2015).

But with this flexibility, there are some limitations as well. The regulatory oversight or scrutiny, especially regarding the accreditation standards as well as the quality assurance mechanisms, can be constraining to institutional autonomy. There are also institutional differences in the capacity of institutions to reform, with the result that some institutions will have high levels of innovation, whilst some will be largely compliant but not transformative.

The other tell-tale characteristic of deemed universities is that they are prone to undertaking symbolic as opposed to structural reform. Although compliance with policy is usually obtained, larger institutional changes in the culture of governance,

research focus, and academic standards might be limited. This is part of a larger trend of strategic adjustment, in which reforms are added in a manner that optimally positions organisations, but does not fundamentally transform organisational structures.

To conclude, deemed universities lie in the middle ground of the higher education reforms scene. Their hybrid form of government allows them to selectively be responsive to policy projects, but the success of their reforms is determined by strategic institutional factors other than conducting wholesale systemic transformation.

The results show that there is a great disparity in the responsiveness of reform across the three categories of universities brought about by the differences in the governance structure, fiscal capacity, and institutional autonomy. Central universities are characterised by rather high adaptability because these universities are constantly financed and have coherent systems of governance. State universities have structural and fiscal limitations that deter the successful execution of changes to produce imbalanced and disjointed results. The selective adaptation in deemed universities is based on the institutional strategy and competitive positioning.

These differences highlight the main thesis that higher education reform in India is not an unmediated process but is mediated by well-established institutional structures. The results, therefore, support the applicability of path dependency in the explanation of the various reform outcomes in the different institutional types.

4. Discussion

The results of the current study highlight the fact that the process of higher education reform in India is not a uniform and linear

one of policy implementation, but one that is mediated structurally and conditioned historically. The difference in the results of reform across central, state, and deemed universities indicates that modern-day policy initiatives interrelate with highly institutionalised legacies to produce differentiated pathways of change. Here, the Indian higher education system, in terms of the institutional consequences that similar reform actions generate, is a useful lens through which the analytical framework of path dependency can be applied in explaining why similar reform measures have different institutional effects across the Indian higher education system. Institutional inertia can also be manifested in deeply rooted administrative norms and governance routines that can stand up to sudden structural change (North, 1991; Pierson, 2004; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

On a larger theoretical plane, the research strengthens the thesis that the development of institutions is informed by historically accumulated decisions that form self-reinforcing mechanisms over time. After such mechanisms have been established, they tend to organise incentives, restrict policy options, and limit the extent of transformative change. The colonial administrative legacies, post-independence expansion policies, and post-regulatory layering have resulted in the complex governance architecture that is still evident in contemporary reform dynamics in the case of Indian universities. These institutional legacies are not just historical legacies but dynamic constraints that condition the way reforms are interpreted, negotiated, and enforced. Regulatory fragmentation and overlapping institutional mandates continue to complicate governance reform within Indian higher education (Varghese & Malik, 2016; University Grants Commission, 2022).

This can be explained in relation to the institutional stability and availability of

resources in the relatively higher adaptability of central universities. They are characterised by direct central government funding, comparatively uniform regulatory oversight, and better-defined governance structures, all of which provide favourable conditions in which policy implementation can take place. Consequently, reforms in the areas of improvement of autonomy, restructuring of the curriculum, accreditation frameworks, and internationalisation are better assimilated into their institutional systems. Nonetheless, despite the frequent implementation of reforms in such institutions, the mediation of the reforms' implementation by the bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical systems of decision-making indicates that stability does not always correlate with full institutional flexibility.

Contrastingly, state universities disclose the most important structural constraints in the process of reform. The reliance on the fiscal allocations of states places them in a very unstable and politically impacted funding environment. This financial dependency constrains their ability to invest in infrastructure, faculty development, and research capacity- major elements of modern reform agendas. In addition, the administrative fragmentation and multi-layered approval procedures also contribute to dragging down the policy implementation process. The political forces compound these structural constraints as they tend to influence governance decisions, such as the appointment of leaders and the allocation of resources. This has led to partial, selective, or delayed implementation of reform initiatives in state universities, not due to policy opposition, but as an institutional incapacity.

In contrast, the so-called deemed universities lie somewhere in between, as they have more operational freedom but are still regulated. Their behaviour in terms of the reform is thus determined by strategic

institutional consideration as opposed to uniform obedience. The reforms that are adopted in these institutions are normally selective, with the institutions prioritising those reforms that will boost the institutional reputation, competitiveness in the market, and student demand. This partial adaptation is indicative of the rising marketisation of higher education, whereby institutional strategies are more aligned in terms of competitive positioning as opposed to being purely directed towards objectives of public policy. Although such flexibility makes it possible to adjust to the changing educational needs more quickly, it also creates some concerns about the lack of proper balance in the quality standards and the overall absence of structural transformations.

The variation in achievements that can be detected in these institutional classes displays the key conflict between the policy formulations and the institutional capabilities. Even though national reform frameworks like the National Education Policy 2020 focus on the principles of autonomy, accountability, and internationalisation, their implementation is mediated through pre-existing institutional structures that differ considerably across the higher education system. This policy-institutional incongruity is a factor contributing to the unequal reform success and helps to support systemic inequalities between institutions (Knight, 2012; Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Theoretically, the fact that such disparities persist can be attributed to the concept of institutional inertia. Institutional change, as North (1990) suggests, is generally not a revolutionary change, but a gradual change that is influenced by path-dependent processes that restrict the possibility of an abrupt change. Formal and informal rules that are worked out over time within institutions organise behaviour and limit possibilities of reform. These limitations are manifested in

the Indian context in the unwillingness of the regulatory structure to become simplified, in the overlapping jurisdictional authority, and in the fragmented governance arrangements.

The issue of complexity in regulation is a key issue in the Indian higher education system. Various regulatory authorities, duplication of mandates, and changing policy frameworks bring about confusion in the governance structures. This complexity can commonly cause delays in implementation, inconsistent interpretation of policies, and failure of coordination across the institutional levels. Consequently, even well-crafted reforms find it difficult to implement the reforms uniformly throughout the system. The combination of centralised policy formulation and decentralised implementation further contributes towards these challenges, especially in state universities where there is already constrained administrative capacity.

The institutional inertia is also reflected in the continuation of the traditional academic culture and administrative traditions. The resistance to structural change common in universities is usually the result of long-established organisational norms, legacy systems, and the behaviour of the administration that is risk-averse. These aspects support a gradual, over-transformative trend of change where reforms are gradually adapted to fit the context rather than adopted in the intended form. This supports the thesis that policy-based reform in the face of no accompanying institutional restructuring is not likely to bring about big systemic change.

The analysis also underlines the significance of the alignment of reform objectives with institutional capacities. The problem with policy initiatives that presume that all institutions are ready is that it does not consider the differences between governance

structures, availability of resources, and efficiency of the administration. This incongruity adds to the inequitable results and constrains the transformative nature of reform agendas. Consequently, to successfully reform higher education, the more subtle concept of institutional diversity and structural circumstances in which policies are executed should be considered.

The study also proposes that governance reform should not be limited to policymaking, but it should also entail structural reconfiguration of institutional relationships within the federal system. Increasing the level of coordination between central and state governments, rationalising regulatory frameworks, and ensuring institutional autonomy are important in addressing systemic inefficiencies. In the absence of these structural changes, reform efforts will only be seen to have been implemented in a very basic manner or half-baked.

In general, the discussion shows that the process of higher education reform in India can be best discussed as a negotiated process influenced by the interplay between past legacies and the present policy interventions. Path dependency is a concept that gives a very strong explanatory tool for why reforms lead to differentiated results and why institutional change is not sweeping in its efforts despite ambitious policy agendas (Pierson, 2000).

5. Conclusion

The higher education reform process in India is a process of negotiation between continuity in institutions and the driving of change through policy-making. In spite of the intent of modern reforms in the education system to modernise the university by enhancing its autonomy, accountability, multidisciplinary education, and globalisation, the outcomes are still greatly affected by the historical governance systems and

administration (Beteille, 2010). In this respect, the reform of higher education in India is not a rejection of the past but a process of gradual change in its institutional structures that have continued to have an impact on policy implementation.

This paper has demonstrated that the reform impact on the different types of universities is uneven, or that there is a variation in the design of the reform in terms of their governance, fiscal capacity, and administrative autonomy. The variations highlight how the path-dependent institutional trajectories continue to drive the options and limitations of policy change. It is therefore likely that reforms will result in an adjustment of the system as opposed to a complete overhaul of the system.

The research has led to several implications, the most salient being the need to make the policy's goals more consistent with the institutional capabilities. Reform policies that suppose that all universities are equally ready to implement reforms are bound to face implementation gaps and structural resistance. A strengthening of governance systems, rationalisation of the regulatory framework, and more effective intergovernmental coordination, in this regard, is essential to the success of the reforms. It is also important to recognise the need to improve institutional autonomy, particularly in state universities, where fiscal and administrative constraints persist and hinder responsiveness to national policy measures.

In addition, the paper highlights that policy innovation in and of itself will not succeed in bringing about sustainable change in the field of higher education. It necessitates correlative institutional restructuring that deals with the entrenched administrative inefficiencies and regulatory fragmentation. If such structural alignment is not achieved, then the chances of a successful reform are

unlikely to be high, and the changes will be superficial instead of having deep penetration into the system.

Lastly, how the system is able to balance between innovation and the continuity of institutions will shape the future of higher education in India. The reformation strategy, which recognises the constraints in the past and provides for adaptive governance, is the main pathway to efficient and equitable higher education. The university still plays the roles of a knowledge producer and a social institution with wider intellectual and democratic functions (Barnett, 2000; Newman, 1996). One way in which this is not a question of deinstitutionalisation but one of progressive re-institutionalisation, and which is consistent with the new demand from the academic, social and economic spheres, which Beteille (2010) calls for.

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