THE VIKSIT BHARAT SHIKSHA ADHISHTHAN BILL (VBSA): A COMPREHENSIVE POLICY REVIEW OF INDIA'S PROPOSED UNIFIED HIGHER EDUCATION REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Dr. Shailendra Kumar Singh

ABSTRACT   Historically, India's higher education framework has been experiencing a period of change propelled by the aspirations of Viksit Bharat and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Indian Higher Education Institutions have encountered rooted issues, including disjointed regulation, inconsistent quality assurance, excessive procedural control, restricted institutional independence and inadequate accountability systems. These factors have hindered systemic advancement. The suggested Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill (VBSA) aims to tackle these issues by creating a legal framework for oversight, regulation, accreditation and quality standards in Indian higher education. This review article thoroughly evaluates the goals, institutional setup, governance model, operational councils, accountability systems, stakeholder input and research-driven viewpoints on changes. After reading the national policy documents, stakeholder responses, and international higher education literature, the paper reflects that while the VBSA Bill has significant potential to enhance rationality, quality, and global competitiveness of Indian higher education, its success will depend on its balanced implementation, respect for federal principles, protection of academic freedom, and a developmental rather than purely punitive regulatory approach.

INTRODUCTION

In any nation, higher education plays an important governance and functional role in national progress by developing human capital, encouraging innovation, and facilitating socio-economic advancement. In India, the growth of education post-independence has been significant in magnitude but inconsistent in quality and administration. The regulatory framework has traditionally featured statutory agencies with intersecting responsibilities, chiefly the University Grants Commission (UGC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), and National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE). Although these organizations were established to guarantee standards and fair development, they have gradually led to division, compliance-focused institutional conduct and uneven quality results (Tilak, 2018; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognised these constraints and suggested a thorough overhaul of higher education governance. At the core of this concept is the establishment of a transparent and responsible regulatory system that distinguishes regulation, accreditation and standard-setting while encouraging institutional independence (Government of India NEP policy, 2020). The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill is an effort to transform this policy vision into a framework. This article examines the Bill as a tool of policy, placing it within the conversation on reforming higher education in India and worldwide.

Objectives Of The VBSA Bill

The primary aim of the VBSA Bill is to create a results-driven and learner-focused governance system for higher education, in India. The VBSA bill is a step towards substituting input-driven regulation with a structured and consolidated institutional framework that prioritises quality, openness and responsibility. Its primary goals involve facilitating phased administrative and financial independence; establishing compulsory accreditation; encouraging Outcome-Based Education (OBE); merging vocational and academic routes; and harmonizing higher education with national development goals and Indian knowledge traditions.

From a policy perspective, these objectives reflect a shift consistent with global trends in higher education governance, where governments increasingly move from direct control towards steering through standards, performance indicators, and quality assurance mechanisms (Fielden, 2008; OECD, 2019). By embedding these principles in legislation, the VBSA Bill aims to ensure durability and uniformity in reform implementation across the diverse Indian higher education landscape.

Institutional Architecture of the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan

The VBSA Bill recommends creating the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan as a statutory body accountable, for policy coordination setting standards overseeing accreditation and ensuring regulatory adherence. This integration aims to minimize redundancy streamline compliance and establish a regulatory framework. Comparative analyses of education reforms indicate that unified regulatory systems can improve overall system coherence as long as functional differentiation and institutional diversity remain intact (World Bank, 2017).

This body is designed to function as the apex institution for higher education governance, replacing multiple legacy regulators with a streamlined and coherent system. However, international experience also cautions that the effectiveness of such apex bodies depends not merely on structural integration but on the clarity of roles, transparency of processes, and insulation from excessive political interference (De Boer, Enders, & Schimank, 2007). The VBSA Bill, therefore, represents both an opportunity for reform and a test of governance capacity.

Governance Structure And Composition

The governance of the Adhishthan is vested in a 12-member Commission comprising senior academic leaders, subject experts, and government representatives, including the Union Higher Education Secretary. The structure will be:

- Heads of the Regulatory Council, Accreditation Council, and Standards Council
- Union Higher Education Secretary
- Two senior professors from state universities
- Five subject experts
- One Member Secretary

The involvement of experts aims to enhance evidence-driven decision-making and scholarly awareness in regulation. Simultaneously, input from stakeholders during consultations on the draft Bill, from state governments, public universities and faculty groups has expressed worries about too much centralisation of power and insufficient state representation.

Research on higher education governance emphasises that effective systems balance central steering with institutional and regional autonomy, especially in federal contexts (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008). The design of appointment processes and decision-making norms will therefore be critical in determining whether the Commission functions as an enabling body or a controlling authority.

Functional Councils and Their Roles
Accreditation Council: Quality Assurance and Transparency

The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Gunvakta Parishad is designed to serve as the pillar of quality assurance in the proposed regulatory structure, for higher education. It will manage an compulsory accreditation system founded on a unified quality framework according to which every higher education institution will be evaluated and graded. The Parishad will authorize, supervise and if required deregister accreditation bodies utilize technology-driven and online assessment methods and guarantee release of accreditation results to improve

transparency and the accountability of institutions.

Stakeholder responses to the draft Bill have generally supported the shift to accreditation acknowledging it as a vital tool for enhancing quality, transparency and public confidence in higher education. However scholarly research warns against accreditation systems that focus heavily on metrics and procedural adherence rather, than meaningful quality improvement (Harvey & Williams 2010). The effectiveness of the Accreditation Council will therefore depend on its ability to adopt a developmental and supportive approach that balances accountability with capacity-building and fosters continuous quality improvement rather than mere regulatory conformity.

Standards Council: Academic Benchmarks and Relevance
The Viksit Bharat Manak Parishad holds the duty of establishing academic standards throughout the higher education sector. Its role involves formulating explicit learning outcomes with Outcome-Based Education (OBE) principles, incorporating vocational education into conventional higher education and harmonising the classifications and titles of certificates, diplomas and degrees to guarantee their equivalence nationally and globally. Furthermore, the Parishad will offer direction on course development and teaching methods, suggest minimum eligibility criteria for faculty and academic personnel, and vigorously encourage knowledge traditions and Indian languages, thus reinforcing cultural foundations along with scholarly excellence.

Together, these initiatives aim to synchronize programs with graduate job readiness, social significance and international quality standards. Input from participants has mostly supported the focus on learning objectives, career integration and standardisation, acknowledging their ability to improve consistency and mobility across the higher education landscape. Nonetheless, there are worries that strict curriculum mandates or inflexible standards might limit institutional creativity, cross-disciplinary education and adaptability to context. Empirical research on OBE frameworks suggests that such models are most effective when institutions retain adequate flexibility in curriculum design and pedagogy (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Balancing the need for common academic standards with academic creativity and institutional diversity will therefore constitute a central challenge for the Standards Council in the effective implementation of its mandate.

Regulatory Council: Compliance, Ethics, and Governance
The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Viniyaman Parishad will serve as the supervisory body tasked with guaranteeing institutional transparency, ethical administration and adherence to regulations within the higher education sector. Its responsibilities encompass monitoring disclosure obligations concerning statements and audit findings, faculty qualifications and hiring procedures, offered programs and academic results, thus enhancing transparency and accountability to the public.

Moreover, the Parishad will handle student complaints, take action against administrative misconduct and implement steps to prevent the commercialisation of higher education. An essential part of its function includes supervising foreign universities functioning in India, guaranteeing that internationalisation occurs under a transparent and responsible regulatory system that protects academic quality and student welfare.

Stakeholder submissions on the draft Bill have broadly supported the introduction of stronger regulatory mechanisms to address unethical practices and improve governance standards. At the same time, concerns have been raised regarding the need for clearly defined, transparent, and time-bound grievance redressal processes, as well as proportionate and consistent enforcement actions. The effectiveness of the Regulatory Council will therefore depend on its ability to balance firm oversight with procedural fairness, predictability, and sensitivity to institutional diversity, thereby reinforcing trust while maintaining regulatory discipline.

Accountability And Penalty Framework
The VBSA Bill introduces a structured and graded penalty mechanism intended to strengthen accountability and deter non-compliance within the higher education system. For an initial violation, institutions may be issued a formal notice seeking corrective action within a specified timeframe. A second violation may attract financial penalties of up to ₹30 lakh, along with additional measures such as the removal of responsible officials, curtailment of institutional autonomy, or suspension of grants. In act of repeated or serious violations, the Bill introduces substantially higher penalties - ranging from fines of ₹75

lakh or more to the suspension of degree-awarding powers, cancellation of affiliation, and, in extreme circumstances, institutional closure. Unauthorised institutions are subject to particularly stringent action, including fines of not less than ₹2 crore and immediate closure.

While this graduated framework enhances deterrence and signals a strong regulatory stance against malpractice, feedback from private and state universities has raised concerns regarding proportionality and the potential adverse impact on emerging or resource-constrained institutions. Regulatory scholarship suggests that compliance is more sustainable when enforcement mechanisms are complemented by guidance, dialogue, and institutional capacity-building rather than relying solely on punitive measures (Black, 2008). The effectiveness of the penalty framework will therefore depend on its judicious and consistent application, ensuring that enforcement reinforces trust, encourages corrective behaviour, and supports long-term quality improvement without stifling innovation or institutional development.

Transition And Replacement Of Existing Regulatory Bodies
The Bill repeals the UGC Act (1956), AICTE Act (1987), and NCTE Act (1993), while providing a transition period of up to two years. Policy analysts have largely endorsed this phased approach as necessary to avoid a regulatory vacuum. However, concerns remain regarding administrative readiness, digital infrastructure, and human resource capacity during the transition phase.

Alignment With The National Education Policy 2020
The VBSA Bill operationalises several core NEP 2020 principles, including the creation of a single regulator, separation of regulation and accreditation, graded autonomy linked to quality outcomes, promotion of multidisciplinary education, and integration of vocational learning. Scholars have emphasised that statutory backing is essential for the long-term sustainability of NEP reforms (Agarwal, 2021).

Stakeholder Feedback And Key Concerns
Both formal and informal comments on the draft Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill obtained from universities, faculty groups, policy research organizations and state governments have persistently pointed out issues that require thorough attention during execution. Although most stakeholders generally agree with the Bill's goal to simplify regulation and enhance quality assurance numerous worries have been expressed about centralisation, the equilibrium of powers academic autonomy and the potential, for excessive standardisation. These issues closely correspond with results from studies in higher education highlighting shared governance, institutional distinction and contextual oversight as essential elements, for successful system-wide reform (Altbach & Salmi 2011).

A key issue involves the concentration of power the significant involvement of the central government in appointments and management supervision which could reduce institutional independence and erode established norms of academic self-management. Strongly connected to this is the concern of participation since the restricted involvement of state universities and state authorities, in decision-making threatens to sideline local concerns and weaken the ideals of cooperative federalism that form the foundation of India's higher education framework.

Stakeholders have additionally warned about the possibility of overextension, highlighting that centralising regulatory authority in one top-tier organisation might result in overly burdensome compliance demands and inflexible bureaucracy. Within this framework, there are worries that accreditation might progressively turn into a compliance formality, where excessive standardisation and evaluation based on metrics could shift focus away from true quality improvement, especially affecting smaller and financially limited institutions.

Concerns regarding freedom have been a significant theme in stakeholder responses with fears that rigid regulations and standardised curriculum structures might limit creativity in course design, cross-disciplinary education and adaptability to local and subject-specific needs. Furthermore, the harshness of administrative sanctions suggested by the Bill has sparked worries about unfair effects on new institutions and public universities, with constrained budgets. Finally, several stakeholders have underscored the importance of implementation capacity, emphasising that the success of the proposed reforms will depend critically on administrative preparedness, robust

digital infrastructure, and the availability of trained regulatory and accreditation personnel. Addressing these concerns through inclusive governance mechanisms and a developmental regulatory approach will be essential to ensure that the Bill strengthens quality and accountability without compromising diversity, autonomy, and innovation within the higher education ecosystem.

Anticipated Outcomes And Long-term Impact
Short- to Medium-Term Impact
During the stage of execution, the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill is anticipated to induce notable organisational and procedural transformations in the higher education sector. Chief among these is the streamlining of frameworks by merging several supervisory bodies into a single system, thus minimising redundancy and regulatory confusion. The enactment of transparent accreditation for all higher education institutions is expected to improve quality control, enable comparability and increase public responsibility.

The Bill is also anticipated to set defined academic and institutional criteria offering institutions better clarity on expectations concerning learning results, governance norms and performance metrics. Improved disclosure mandates and fortified grievance redress systems are expected to enhance openness and responsiveness to the concerns of students and stakeholders. Furthermore, the implementation of a deterrent penalty structure is projected to serve as a robust deterrent against unethical conduct, financial misconduct, and poor academic functioning, thus strengthening regulatory compliance in the near to mid-term.

Long-Term Transformation
In the future, the VBSA Bill may significantly transform India's higher education framework. By connecting autonomy with proven quality and responsibility, the Bill might facilitate the rise of competitive and truly autonomous universities equipped for innovation, cross-disciplinary interaction and global partnerships. Enhancements in standards, curriculum pertinence and conformity to Outcome-Based Education are expected to boost graduate employability and the societal impact of higher education.

The Bill also holds promise for strengthening public trust in higher education through transparent governance, credible accreditation outcomes, and consistent regulatory enforcement. Its emphasis on promoting Indian knowledge systems and Indian languages, alongside support for global engagement and internationalisation, reflects an attempt to balance cultural rootedness with global standards. Collectively, these reforms could contribute to the development of a resilient, inclusive, and innovation-driven higher education ecosystem that supports national development priorities and positions India as a significant global knowledge hub.

CONCLUSION
The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill marks a milestone in the development of India's higher education strategy, turning the transformative goals of the National Education Policy 2020 into an extensive legal structure. Through consolidating oversight, enhancing accreditation processes and revising criteria, the Bill aims to achieve a careful equilibrium between institutional independence and governmental responsibility. However, the realisation of these ambitions will depend on restrained and enabling central intervention, respect for academic freedom, inclusive federal participation, and the adoption of a developmental rather than purely punitive regulatory approach. If implemented with sensitivity, transparency, and foresight, the VBSA Bill has the potential to become a cornerstone in India's journey towards a knowledge-driven, globally respected, and socially responsive higher education system.

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