

# The educational landscape, its disconcerting shift

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**E**ducation has historically been regarded as the cornerstone of societal advancement – a realm where critical thinking, free inquiry, and the pursuit of knowledge could flourish. At its best, higher education had always cultivated intellectual independence, nurtured dissent, and inspired progress across disciplines and societies. The boundaries of human understanding were continually pushed through unfettered dialogue and academic exploration.

Yet, in recent decades, the educational landscape, especially within universities, has undergone a profound and disconcerting shift. Institutions once celebrated for fostering independent thought now appear increasingly constrained by bureaucratic controls, external mandates, and ideological gatekeeping. Rather than serving as laboratories of innovation and resistance, the Canadian thinker, H.A. Giroux, sees universities becoming engines of conformity, prioritising managerial efficiency and market alignment over academic freedom and intellectual integrity. Indoctrination, intimidation and intolerance become the central ingredients of education.

## From independence to centralisation

A particularly disquieting development in this decline is the unyielding centralisation of academic curricula. In the past, universities enjoyed considerable autonomy to craft syllabi tailored to their students' needs, faculty expertise, and the shifting contours of intellectual inquiry. Today, however, this independence is steadily eroding. Centralised agencies – be they governmental bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) or frameworks such as the National Education Policy (NEP) – increasingly dictate the structure and content of academic programmes. These prescriptions are often influenced not by academic merit or pedagogical philosophy, but by economic agendas or partisan leanings.

The UGC, originally intended to coordinate academic standards, has mutated into an instrument of control. It dictates appointments, interferes in administration, and shapes curricula, often with scant regard for academic judgement, thereby becoming the long arm of a state increasingly intolerant of independent or critical thinking. Let us be clear: this is not about standards – it is about submission. Under the guise of regulation, the UGC has eroded the autonomy of Indian universities to the point of extinction. The promise of self-governance has been replaced with bureaucratic tutelage. An institution that is stripped of autonomy in faculty selection, research direction, and protection of dissent ceases to be a university in any meaningful sense.

The consequences of this centralisation are

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far-reaching. It undercuts not only academic autonomy but also produces compliant drones, regiments intellectual discourse, and marginalises alternative perspectives. When syllabi are standardised across regions and institutions, the intellectual ecosystem becomes monolithic – devoid of diversity, nuance, or radical innovation. This intellectual flattening not only stifles creativity but also discourages the interrogation of dominant narratives and received assumptions.

## Pressures on the academic climate

Historically, campuses have played a vital role in catalysing social change – whether in anti-colonial movements, civil rights struggles, or pro-democracy uprisings. By exerting control over what is taught and how it is taught, policymakers and administrators ensure that universities remain compliant rather than confrontational. Suppressing critical perspectives ensures that higher education does not produce citizens who question authority or imagine alternatives to the status quo. Take, for instance, a research scholar who gives a reference to Noam Chomsky's views on the decline of democracy or talks about nationalism and human rights. There is every chance that the student and his supervisor will be reprimanded by the state, a preposterous intervention indeed.

Take, for instance, the resurgence of reactionary politics that has led to increasing interference in academic affairs. Scholars whose work critiques systemic injustice, discriminatory politics, corporate exploitation, or nationalist rhetoric often find themselves marginalised, defunded, or even expelled or deported. Entire disciplines, especially in the social sciences and humanities, are being defunded or dismissed as politically awkward.

Such pressures have had an unsettling effect on academic life. Teachers, wary of professional reprisals, begin to engage in self-censorship. Controversial research topics are sidestepped not out of disinterest, but out of fear. Students, too, internalise this climate of caution, refraining from engaging critically with contentious issues, apprehensive about academic penalties, peer backlash, or threats to their future careers. The outcome is a smothering intellectual climate where fear of dissent trumps inquiry, and conformity is mistaken for collective wisdom, resulting in the decline of public intellectuals.

This erosion of academic freedom is compounded by the increasing corporatisation of higher education. Universities are no longer viewed as public institutions dedicated to knowledge and social advancement. Instead, they are treated as businesses, expected to generate profit, attract investment, and enhance their brand image. The logic of the market now governs the priorities of educational institutions,

reshaping both what is taught and why it is taught. The corporate corruption of higher education and the wrecking of the university is indeed apparent.

Consequently, disciplines that promise immediate financial returns – such as technology, business, and engineering – receive substantial funding and institutional support. Meanwhile, fields that emphasise critical thought, ethical reflection and historical understanding – such as philosophy, literature, and the arts – are sidelined as unproductive or irrelevant. The value of education is thus reduced to its marketability, and knowledge becomes a commodity to be consumed rather than a pursuit to be cherished.

It is often seen that faculty members are not immune to these pressures. Academic faculty are increasingly subject to performative pressures, evaluated through metrics such as publication counts and student satisfaction ratings. The proliferation of global university rankings exacerbates this issue, prioritising conformity to western norms and standardised metrics over indigenous intellectual traditions and context-specific inquiry. This regime incentivises strategic branding and replication of external models, rather than genuine academic innovation.

## Academic governance as a concern

This shift has also altered the structure and the ethos of academic governance. University leadership, it is now proposed, can comprise administrators drawn from corporate backgrounds rather than only academic. These individuals will, understandably, bring with them a managerial mindset that privileges efficiency, quantifiable outputs, and brand visibility over scholarly rigour and pedagogical richness. Furthermore, the appointment of Vice Chancellors from non-academic fields compromises the collegial culture of universities, disconnecting decision-making from teaching and research realities.

Visibly, the prevailing trend of appointing academics lacking intellectual engagement with literature and social issues raises concerns about ideological biases influencing leadership selections. To address this, universities should prioritise appointments grounded in the intellectual ethos of liberal arts and sciences, ensuring that selection procedures are rigorous and objective.

The crisis of education has, therefore, at its core, a crisis of imagination. The university must at all costs be preserved as a sanctuary of intellectual freedom, where merit is not the casualty. Failure to do so imperils not only education but also the very idea of democracy. By reclaiming the university's essence, we restore the transformative potential of knowledge, rather than reducing it to mere transaction.