

Transforming Higher Education through the Cluster Universities

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Abstract

The concept of a cluster university involves the conversion of several established colleges into a single, autonomous university governed under a unified administrative and academic framework. This model optimizes resources by eliminating duplication of facilities, sharing infrastructure, and pooling academic expertise to enhance the quality of higher education. Constituent colleges, restructured as “schools,” operate entirely under the university’s authority, with centralized governance, recruitment, financial management, and policy-making. Faculty and resources are shared across units to maximize academic reach and promote interdisciplinary collaboration. Degree-awarding powers are granted through state legislation, enabling curriculum autonomy and industry-relevant program development. Human resource management becomes uniform, ensuring parity in service conditions and accountability. Shared access to specialized facilities enriches learning and research environments. Leadership roles, such as the vice-chancellor and registrar, ensure balanced academic and administrative oversight. Centralized financial systems improve transparency and compliance with statutory norms. The cluster university thus emerges as a cohesive academic entity with enhanced operational efficiency and academic excellence.

Keywords: Cluster university, Governance, Constituent Colleges, Policy Framework

Introduction

The establishment of cluster universities represents a strategic reform in higher education, aimed at addressing the challenges of resource fragmentation, administrative inefficiency, and academic isolation among affiliated colleges. Under this model, a select group of well-performing colleges is merged to form a single university, transforming these institutions into constituent units, or “schools,” within a centralized governance structure. This transformation is empowered by state legislation, granting degree-awarding authority and academic autonomy. By consolidating resources, the cluster university eliminates redundancy in infrastructure, promotes collaboration in teaching and research, and ensures uniform quality standards across all units. Academic decisions, recruitment, and financial management are centrally administered, fostering consistency and efficiency. Faculty are shared across schools, expanding student access to specialized expertise and encouraging interdisciplinary learning. Resource-sharing extends to libraries,

laboratories, and technology, enhancing the educational experience. Strong leadership roles ensure effective coordination of academic and administrative functions. Overall, this model positions cluster universities as dynamic, integrated institutions capable of delivering high-quality, responsive higher education.

Cluster Universities in India

Currently, several cluster universities have been established and are operational in India, there is currently no official mechanism to identify them as distinct from regular universities. Presentably, the Cluster University of Jammu, Cluster University of Srinagar, Cluster University of Kurnool, Dr. Homi Bhabha State University (Mumbai), HSNC University (Mumbai), Karmveer Bhaurao Patil University, Satara (Maharashtra), Warana University, Warnanagar (WUW), Maharani Cluster University (Bangalore), and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Cluster University (Mandi), Khallikote Cluster University, Berhampur (Odisha) among others. These institutions, formed by conversion of existing government colleges as well as private aided college under a single umbrella, aim to optimize resources, enhance academic standards, and improve governance.

The Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) has been a transformative initiative in India's higher education landscape. Among its various components, Component 2 of RUSA 2.0 Creation of Universities by Conversion of Colleges into Clusters was one of the strategic plan for the creation of cluster universities in India. Under this component, new public universities were planned to be established during the Plan period, with an average allocation of ₹55 crore per university (RUSA 2.0, 2018). This initiative aimed to create universities by clustering existing affiliated government and government-aided colleges. The selected colleges needed to possess adequate academic, physical, and technical infrastructure to ensure a seamless transition into a unified cluster university model. This approach was intended to optimize the use of available resources, improve governance, and enhance the quality of higher education (NHEM, 2013; RUSA 2.0 2018).

The purpose of this intervention was to bring together 3 to 5 colleges that had the required academic and administrative autonomy but lacked the authority to award degrees. These colleges were to be converted into a university with degree-awarding powers through an Act of the State Legislature (RUSA 2.0 2018). This initiative aimed to empower these institutions by enhancing their status, enabling them to function as full-fledged universities with greater academic and administrative capabilities.

As per the MHRD FAQ 2015, The role of the lead college and administrative control in a cluster university setup is to be determined by the State Council for Higher Education. The council will oversee the transition process to ensure the smooth establishment of the cluster university once the scheme is approved. The transition scheme must comprehensively detail the roles and obligations of the lead college, including its responsibilities in governance, academic management, and resource sharing.

Jakir Mandal (2018) mentioned that, under the RUSA initiative, 35 universities were planned to be created through the conversion of existing colleges into cluster universities. This transformative initiative aims to enhance access, equity, and quality in higher education by pooling resources and fostering collaboration among affiliated colleges. Each cluster university will receive a grant support of ₹55 crore, which will be utilized for infrastructure development, administrative restructuring, academic advancements, and technology integration. The total financial outlay required for this component amounts to ₹1925 crore (35 universities × ₹55 crore each). There are 3 cluster universities are established in Maharashtra under this scheme. However, no university from Maharashtra has received this grant-in-aid from either the state RUSA or the central RUSA office.

According to RUSA 2.0 (2018) Colleges joining the cluster must have the capacity to function as a university when coalesced. The colleges joining the cluster must demonstrate the capacity to function effectively as a university when merged. This includes possessing adequate infrastructure, experienced faculty, and robust governance mechanisms to ensure the seamless integration of resources and operations (Das2021).

Anand (2021) highlighted that the Khallikote Cluster University, established on May 30, 2015, as the first cluster university in Odisha under the RUSA scheme, However, this university did not achieve the intended success envisioned by the initiative. February, 2020, Government of Odisha in exercise of the powers conferred by subsections (1) and (2) and clause (g) of the sub section (3) of section 32 of the Odisha University Act, 1989 (Odisha Act 5, 1989) altered the status of Khallikote University to a Unitary University.

According to the MoE (2018) guidelines, the conversion plan for establishing universities should follow a step-by-step approach, addressing infrastructure expansion, student enrollment, academic schools and departments, administrative structures, academic operations, and research activities. However, the executive directions and implementation guidelines for this scheme are absent from the state government's policy framework. The UGC is expected to play a crucial role in this scheme, yet it has remained largely silent on the implementation of the cluster university model in India. While the UGC has issued policy guidelines for establishing cluster universities, it has not provided any regulations or directives for the actual conversion of colleges into cluster universities or the scheme's implementation.

Idea of Cluster University

The idea of cluster university is nothing but it is a process of conversion of few colleges in to university and after conversion of these colleges in to cluster shall be act as university. The idea of a cluster university is essentially the process of converting a few well-established colleges into a single university. After this conversion, these colleges become constituent units of the new university and function under a unified governance system. The aim is to optimize resources, share infrastructure, and pool academic

expertise to improve the overall quality of higher education. This model eliminates duplication of facilities, encourages collaboration in teaching and research, and enables more efficient administrative control.

The cluster university gains degree-awarding powers through state legislation, marking its transformation into an independent academic institution. This authority allows it to design and implement its own curricula, examinations, and evaluation systems. With such autonomy, the university can introduce innovative programs tailored to emerging academic and industry needs. It can also independently establish research collaborations and partnerships with other institutions. Overall, legislative empowerment enhances its capacity to respond swiftly and effectively to educational challenges.

The concept of cluster universities was originally introduced by the University Grants Commission (UGC). Although several cluster universities have been established and are now fully operational in India, there is currently no official mechanism to identify them as distinct from regular universities. The absence of such classification means that, by merely reading the name of a university, one cannot determine whether it is a cluster university or a traditional standalone university. This lack of differentiation creates ambiguity for students, faculty, policymakers, and even funding agencies. Even, the UGC currently has no provision to classify these universities separately from regular universities. Therefore, the UGC should amend the relevant legislation to introduce a distinct classification for cluster universities. This could include creating a dedicated label or sub-category in the official list of recognized universities, ensuring easy identification. Such a measure would not only enhance transparency but also support more effective policy formulation, targeted funding, and systematic monitoring of their performance as a specialized category of institution.

In the cluster university model, there is no separate existence of the individual colleges that form part of it. All participating colleges become an integral part and parcel of the newly established university. These colleges are officially designated as constituent units of the cluster university, operating entirely under its governance and administrative structure. Their previous independent identity as affiliated colleges comes to an end once they are incorporated into the cluster university. After the transition, each college is restructured and renamed as a “school” of the university, focusing on its respective academic disciplines. The management, faculty, and resources of these schools function as part of the university’s unified system.

In a cluster university, academic decisions, institutional policies, and financial matters are centrally managed by the university authorities to ensure consistency and efficiency. The principals of the former colleges take on the role of heads of schools, functioning under the direct supervision of the vice-chancellor. This hierarchical structure streamlines governance and strengthens accountability across all units. Faculty and staff from the constituent colleges are absorbed into the university’s workforce, creating a unified employment framework. Uniform service conditions are applied, bringing parity in salaries, promotions, and benefits. Coordinated human resource management allows for optimal allocation of teaching and non-teaching staff where they are most needed. This integration fosters collaboration across schools and

eliminates duplication of administrative processes. It also ensures that recruitment, training, and appraisal systems follow a common set of standards.

The centralized approach supports better financial planning and equitable distribution of resources. Overall, this structure enhances operational coherence and academic quality throughout the cluster university. In the cluster university system, the service books of the principal, faculty, and staff are maintained and updated by the university. This centralization ensures uniformity and accuracy in recording service details for all employees. It also facilitates better monitoring of promotions, increments, and other service-related matters. By keeping these records at the university level, discrepancies and administrative delays are minimized. This practice strengthens transparency and standardization in human resource management.

After the conversion of colleges into a cluster university, the recruitment of both teaching and non-teaching staff becomes the sole authority of the cluster university. All appointments, whether for the constituent colleges (now schools) or for the cluster university departments, are made exclusively by the university following its approved recruitment procedures and statutory norms. This ensures uniformity in selection standards, service conditions, and qualifications across all units of the university. In the case of a cluster university that operates under a private management as its parent body, the recruitment process also involves representatives of the parent body. These representatives participate in the selection committees for both teaching and non-teaching positions, ensuring that the interests and policies of the parent management are duly considered. This dual participation helps maintain transparency, uphold merit-based recruitment, and balance institutional autonomy with the vision of the parent body. Such a system ensures that only qualified and competent candidates are appointed, thereby strengthening the academic and administrative framework of the cluster university.

A teacher appointed to a constituent unit is not restricted to serving only the students of that particular college. Instead, the teacher is considered a faculty member of the entire cluster university and can work for the benefit of all its students. This arrangement allows faculty to teach, guide, and mentor learners across any constituent unit or school within the university. It enables the sharing of subject expertise across multiple campuses, ensuring that students from different units have access to the best academic resources available. Such flexibility also promotes interdisciplinary teaching, facilitates joint academic programs, and encourages collaboration among faculty members from various schools. Ultimately, this system enhances the overall quality of education by maximizing the utilization of teaching talent across the cluster university.

Shared access to libraries, laboratories, and technology within a cluster university significantly enriches the teaching and learning environment. Students benefit from a wider range of resources, advanced equipment, and specialized facilities that may not have been available in individual colleges. Teachers gain opportunities to use state-of-the-art tools and collaborate across schools to enhance academic delivery. This resource-sharing approach reduces duplication of infrastructure and ensures optimal utilization. Ultimately,

it fosters innovation, interdisciplinary learning, and improved academic outcomes for the entire university community.

The vice-chancellor serves as the academic head of all units, providing leadership and direction for the university's overall educational, research, and scholarly activities. The vice-chancellor ensures academic excellence, maintains standards, and oversees the implementation of policies across every constituent unit or school of the university. Alongside this, the registrar functions as the chief administrative officer for all constituent units of the cluster university. The registrar is responsible for supervising and coordinating administrative operations, ensuring smooth functioning in compliance with university regulations and state legislation. All non-teaching staff, whether posted in the central university office or in the offices of the constituent colleges (now schools), work under the registrar's authority and guidance. This unified administrative command ensures consistency in procedures, streamlines decision-making, and avoids duplication of work. It also promotes efficiency in managing records, finances, service matters, and day-to-day operations across the entire university system. By clearly defining these leadership roles, the cluster university maintains a strong balance between academic vision and administrative efficiency.

Before the establishment of the cluster university, financial management and financial control of each college were handled independently by the principal of that institution. The principal was the primary authority for budget preparation, expenditure approval, and financial decision-making within the college. However, after the formation of the cluster university, the financial administration system becomes centralized under the control of the university's finance department. The university appoints finance and accounts officers who oversee and regulate all monetary transactions, ensuring compliance with statutory guidelines, budgetary provisions, and audit requirements. While this centralization ensures uniformity, transparency, and better financial discipline, the university may delegate certain limited financial powers to the principals of the constituent units (now schools) for day-to-day operational needs. Such delegated powers may include sanctioning expenditures, approving routine purchases, or authorizing urgent academic-related expenses..

The cluster university and all its constituent colleges should be treated as a single legal and administrative entity, operating under one unified PAN, TAN, GST, and AISHE code. This integration means that all financial transactions, whether academic or administrative, must be conducted exclusively through the official PAN, TAN, and GST of the cluster university. The earlier PAN, TAN, and GST numbers of the individual colleges will no longer be valid for financial operations or statutory compliance once they become constituent units of the university. All mandatory reporting, including income tax returns, GST filings, and other statutory submissions, will be made solely in the name of the cluster university. This centralized approach ensures uniformity in financial management, eliminates duplication in tax compliance, and strengthens accountability. It also simplifies audit processes and facilitates accurate consolidation of financial data for regulatory and funding purposes.

The UGC may update the status of the former affiliated colleges to “constituent colleges” of the newly established cluster university. The UGC recognition under Sections 2(f) and 12(b), already held by these colleges prior to conversion, should be conferred upon the cluster university as a whole. Since the constituent colleges previously enjoyed this status and are now integrated into the university, a separate process for granting UGC 2(f) and 12(b) recognition is unnecessary. The UGC may make the necessary policy amendments to ensure the seamless transfer of this recognition to cluster universities.

Concluding Remarks

The cluster university model offers a comprehensive solution to the limitations of the traditional affiliated college system by integrating institutions into a single, autonomous entity. Through centralized governance, academic autonomy, and efficient resource utilization, it enhances both the quality and reach of higher education. Faculty and facilities are shared across the university, fostering collaboration and innovation while ensuring equitable access to resources for all students. Unified recruitment and service conditions promote fairness, meritocracy, and professional growth among staff. Centralized financial administration improves transparency, compliance, and fiscal discipline. Legislative empowerment enables the development of industry-aligned curricula and research initiatives. By functioning as a single legal, administrative, and academic body, the cluster university streamlines operations and strengthens accountability. However, UGC has to transfer the 2(f) and 12 (b) recognition to the cluster universities to ensure continuity of academic status and funding eligibility. The UGC also should amend the relevant legislation to introduce a distinct classification for cluster universities. This could include creating a dedicated label or sub-category in the official list of recognized universities, ensuring easy identification. Ultimately, the cluster university model not only improves operational coherence but also strengthens the capacity of higher education institutions to respond to evolving academic, economic, and societal demands with agility and vision.

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