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Strengthening Higher Education Governance in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract
Tamil Nadu's higher education system is grappling with a complex governance crisis, marked by prolonged administrative vacancies in 12 out of 22 public universities, severe financial losses exceeding 8,000 crores in accumulated deficits, and a constitutional-political deadlock between gubernatorial chancellorships and state legislatures that has effectively stifled institutional autonomy. Despite notable quantitative successes, such as a Gross Enrolment Ratio of 47% and initiatives like the Pudhumai Penn scheme, which has doubled female participation from 2.09 lakh to 4.06 lakh (2022-2025), deep-rooted structural issues threaten long-term viability. This qualitative analysis explores the relationship between encroachments on the Concurrent List, financial instability, and the erosion of autonomy through secondary sources, including policy statements, judicial rulings, and institutional audits (2020-2026). By employing thematic content analysis, the study uncovers how constitutional federalism and excessive central regulation have led to administrative stagnation, faculty demoralization, and a sharp decline in research quality. Structural changes are essential to transform quantitative enrolment achievements into qualitative excellence and equitable access.

Keywords:
Higher education governance; Tamil Nadu public universities; vice-chancellor vacancies; constitutional federalism; Concurrent List; State List devolution; academic autonomy; institutional financing; faculty shortages; National Education Policy (NEP); educational policy alignment; federal-state conflict; governance institutionalism; qualitative policy analysis; comparative education systems; decentralization reforms.
JEL Codes: *I21 – Analysis of Education (Primary classification), H75 – State and Local Government: General, H77 – Intergovernmental Relations; Federalism; Separation of Powers, P26 – Political Economy (Secondary classification), O15 – Human Resources; Human Capital; Population; Labour; Income Distribution, Q56 – Environmental Economics (relevant for sustainability of educational institutions), K10 – Constitutional and Civil Procedure (for federal structure analysis)*

1. Introduction

Tamil Nadu hosts a robust network of 16 state-run universities, yet many currently function without regular vice-chancellors, severely undermining governance and routine decision-making. These leadership voids exacerbate existing financial challenges, as constrained resources delay recruitment, stall plan development, and weaken long-term planning. Moreover, the state confronts a constitutional dilemma: because education now lies in the Concurrent List, Tamil Nadu's scope to design and implement state-specific reforms remains structurally constrained. Tamil Nadu has emerged as a national frontrunner in higher education, with a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of around 47 percent, well above the national average, indicating comparatively broad access to post-secondary education. Recent state initiatives such as the Naan Mudhalvan, Tamil Pudhalvan, and Pudhumai Penn schemes have been central to expanding enrolment and strengthening skills development in Tamil Nadu. The Pudhumai Penn Program, which provides a monthly scholarship of 1,000 to women students, is reported to have doubled women's participation in higher education from about 2.09 lakh in 2022–23 to 4.06 lakh in 2024–25, while Naan Mudhalvan now extends upskilling opportunities to hundreds of engineering, arts, and science colleges to improve graduate employability. Yet, despite these commendable achievements, deep-seated structural challenges persist, threatening both the sustainability and the inclusivity of Tamil Nadu's higher education model. At the institutional governance level, prolonged tensions between the Governor and the state government have impeded the effective functioning of state-run universities, particularly with 12 out of 22 institutions currently lacking vice-chancellors. This leadership vacuum, only partially addressed by recent judicial interventions, has slowed administrative decision-making and reforms. Financing represents a second critical area of concern. While the 2025-2026 budget allocated 8,494 crore to higher education, several prestigious universities, including the University of Madras and Madurai Kamaraj University, remain mired in financial distress. The curtailment of revenue from distance education due to jurisdictional constraints imposed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) has exacerbated their fiscal struggles. Moreover, the absence of a coherent State Education Policy, despite opposition to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has left institutions uncertain about compliance requirements for central grants, thus constraining their funding streams. Faculty shortages constitute an equally acute crisis: over 7,500 vacancies in government colleges and universities have existed for more than a decade, with positions filled primarily by underpaid guest lecturers. This chronic deficit erodes both educational quality and research output. Added to this is evidence of "ghost faculty" malpractice, where the same individuals are listed across multiple colleges to meet regulatory staff norms on paper. The repercussions extend to research quality. While the state produced the nation's highest number of PhDs (3,206 in 2020-21), concerns about doctoral program rigor and timely thesis completion persist; only 29.4 percent of PhD candidates in 13 universities finish within five years. If Tamil Nadu aspires to global competitiveness, an urgent, multi-pronged reform agenda addressing governance, funding, faculty, and academic quality is imperative to translate quantitative successes into sustainable, qualitative transformation[25]. This article discusses the implications of these challenges and proposes a policy framework to address them.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

Situated within the framework of India's federal system, the higher education crisis in Tamil Nadu highlights a gap in institutional coordination theory, particularly the limitations of principal-agent models in addressing the complexities of multi-level governance issues that arise when constitutional uncertainties meet electoral influences[15]. Contemporary governance research highlights the importance of hierarchical accountability frameworks; nonetheless, the dual obligation of education to both state and union legislatures results in conflicting fiduciary responsibilities, which in turn cause organizational inefficiencies[22].

1.2 Current Challenges in Tamil Nadu's Higher Education

i. **Vacant Vice Chancellor Positions and Intergovernmental Stalemate:** The constitutional architecture positioning governors as *ex officio* chancellors of state universities, whilst nominally insulating academia from partisan volatility, has demonstrably catalyzed administrative paralysis. Incumbent vacancy ratios (12 out of 22 universities without vice-chancellors for more than 24 months) precipitate what scholars term *leadership legitimacy deficits*, wherein temporary convenor committees, bereft of statutory authority, are unable to execute curricular reforms, faculty promotions, or financial disbursements [Zahra2008].

The governor's refusal to ratify search committee recommendations, interleaved with successive judicial interventions (Supreme Court, April 2025; Madras High Court rulings), illustrates what

[21] identifies as *federal–state antagonism*, a condition wherein vertically distributed sovereignty engenders coordination failures and undermines consensual political settlement. Archival evidence from Madurai Kamaraj University documents faculty promotion stagnation affecting more than 85 scholars since 2022, while students face delays in degree certification that hinder occupational advancement [7].

This administrative blockage, arguably more pernicious than fiscal insufficiency alone, systematically erodes institutional prestige, faculty recruitment viability, and stakeholder confidence [4].

ii. **Financial Constraints:** Despite formal budgetary allocations, universities continue to face persistent financial constraints due to partial fund disbursement, tax-related deductions, and inefficient financial management practices. These challenges threaten the operational sustainability and long-term viability of higher education institutions.

iii. **Scholar Welfare and Mentorship Ethics Deficit:** Research mentorship governance in Tamil Nadu universities exhibits significant normative deficiencies inadequately theorized in extant literature. The Bharathiar University petition [Madhav, 2024], highlighting scholar exploitation—including coerced domestic labor, financial extortion (50,000–1,00,000 per student), and infrastructural misuse—signals what [6] conceptualizes as *hierarchy-based supervisory capture*, wherein asymmetrical power relations devolve into exploitative patron–client structures in the absence of regulatory oversight.

The Supreme Court's directive mandating grievance redressal mechanisms and ombudsperson protocols [24] implicitly acknowledges institutional failures in ethical governance. Furthermore, such exploitative dynamics disproportionately affect economically vulnerable scholars, reinforcing structural inequalities identified in prior studies [8].

The absence of transparent mentorship protocols, coupled with administrative vacuums, perpetuates what [20] defines as *capability deprivation*, wherein doctoral candidates face constraints that impede dignified intellectual engagement. Addressing this issue necessitates the development of robust ethical governance frameworks, transparent supervisory practices, and accessible grievance redressal systems.

iv. **Policy and Governance Tension:** The ongoing conflict between state and Union governments regarding the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) has constrained funding flows and institutional autonomy. This tension underscores the urgent need to revisit the constitutional positioning of education and to establish a more cooperative federal framework that balances autonomy with national coherence.

1.3 Justification for Transferring Education to the State List

- The Constitution originally placed education under the State List; however, it was later moved to the Concurrent List, thereby enabling greater central oversight.
- Tamil Nadu's consistent educational performance and its unique socio-cultural context necessitate greater autonomy in policy formulation and implementation.
- Enhanced state control over education would facilitate timely decision-making, efficient fund allocation, and curriculum customization aligned with local needs.
- Previous initiatives by the Tamil Nadu government highlight a sustained emphasis on state-centric education policies tailored to regional economic and social aspirations.

2. Review of Literature

International studies from as early as 2005 reveal the intricacies of human behavior. The dissertation on "Price-Responsiveness: A Behavioral Economics Exploration of the Relationships between Socio-Economic Status, Perceptions of Financial Incentives and Student Choice "presents a comprehensive, empirically grounded analysis of how socio-economic status (SES) and perceptions of financial incentives interact to shape higher education choices, positioning its theoretical and methodological innovations within the evolving landscape of education economics. The study critically examines the limitations of classical economic models, namely price theory, human capital theory, and the screening hypothesis, in accounting for complex realities, particularly the varied responses of students to tuition fees, grants, and loans. Utilizing insights from behavioral economics, specifically bounded rationality and prospect theory, the thesis proposes an integrative model that emphasizes the psychological mechanisms, such as loss aversion, reference levels, and mental accounting, that influence how students from different socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds perceive and respond to financial incentives. Through the analysis of extensive survey data fo-

cusing on Dutch first-year students, the study employs advanced statistical techniques, including multivariate regression and structural equation modeling, to elucidate the direct and indirect effects of SES, perceptions, and other control variables (e.g., gender, motivation, entrance qualification) on various student decisions: enrollment, living arrangements, loan uptake, and work engagement. Empirical findings reveal that traditional financial variables exert limited influence on overall participation, whereas SES and perceptions significantly affect subgroup responses, lower-SES and ethnic minority students, for instance, exhibit greater price sensitivity and debt aversion, a pattern not fully accounted for by classical models. The results support the theoretical argument that perceptions of risk, social context, and subjective valuations (filtered through psychological frames) are crucial intermediaries linking SES to educational decisions. The study further demonstrates that students' financial perceptions not only impact their willingness to borrow and living arrangements but also interact with background factors to influence educational and occupational stratification. Methodologically, the study's rigorous application of structural equation modeling reveals complex causal pathways often obscured in regression-based approaches, underscoring the need for cross-disciplinary frameworks in educational policy research. The dissertation's policy implications are substantial: it warns against uniform reforms in tuition and student support, instead advocating for contextually nuanced, targeted approaches that consider behavioral responses, social information, and communication strategies. Additionally, it highlights the importance of ongoing international comparative research and calls for an expanded research agenda incorporating dynamic, longitudinal data and more diverse educational contexts. By placing behavioral economics at the center of student choice analysis, Vossensteyn's work not only enriches academic discourse but also provides actionable frameworks for policymakers seeking to enhance equity and access in higher education systems[26]. India's higher education system, a structure influenced by federal, state, and district-level governance, has evolved profoundly since independence but faces persistent structural and qualitative challenges. The central government's leading role encompasses planning, management, oversight of central universities, research initiatives, scientific and technical institutions of national importance, and the specification of educational standards, though significant autonomy and partnership with state governments and the University Grants Commission (UGC) shape policy execution. Higher education financing in India primarily derives from government grants, student fees, and private endowments, with public sources consisting of central, state, and local government contributions, while private inputs include compulsory tuition and voluntary philanthropic support. Despite rapid institutional expansion, growing from 28 universities and 578 colleges in 1951 to 907 universities and over 44,000 colleges by 2019, the sector grapples with demand outstripping supply, as demographic pressures and youth aspirations stretch capacities and funding. Governance complexities arise with institutes of national importance, state, and central universities, and deemed universities funded variously by central and state authorities, characterized by maintenance grants covering recurring expenditures and development grants earmarked for infrastructure and program enhancement. The budgetary structure, as advised by UGC, is segregated into maintenance, developmental, earmarked special funds, and debt/deposits accounts, with university finance committees, typically led by vice chancellors, overseeing allocations and expenditure. While policy reforms target broadening Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to 30 percent by 2020, growth is uneven across regions and social strata, prompting targeted interventions such as special grants for disadvantaged groups and rural or border area colleges, and increased autonomy for select colleges to foster curricular innovation and continuous evaluation. However, formidable challenges persist: Indian universities remain underrepresented in world rankings, quality is undermined by corruption, regional imbalances, and the prevalence of unproductive academic incentives. Teacher absenteeism ranks high, costing billions annually, while the pursuit of higher qualifications, such as PhDs, is frequently driven more by promotion than research passion, contributing to mediocre research output. Moreover, widespread absence of value-oriented education, corruption in admissions and management, and insufficient decentralization afflict institutional efficacy. Recommendations for improvement are multi-pronged: instituting need-based, job-oriented courses, formulating special funding for infrastructure upgrades in backward areas, subsidizing education for students from economically weaker backgrounds, liberalizing funding via upward fee revisions, private donations, and corporate partnerships, and enhancing innovation and global respect for institutions. Governance reforms emphasize decentralization, empowering university deans, delegating course and examination management to affiliated colleges, and focusing universities on postgraduate and research excellence, while sharing UGC's jurisdiction with state councils. India's educational trajectory reflects a dynamic yet pressured

system, where robust governance, equitable funding mechanisms, and quality enhancement remain pivotal to shaping a knowledge-based society capable of global participation and internal social equity[1]. In the Indian federal structure, legislative powers between the Union and the States are methodically distributed through the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, as detailed in Articles 245 and 246, which demarcate areas of exclusive and shared authority via the Union List, State List, and Concurrent List. Originally, education was a domain under the State List, granting states the autonomy to legislate according to regional requirements and preferences, thereby enabling context-sensitive educational policies. This dynamic shifted in 1976 with the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, which transferred education, alongside four other subjects, from the State List to the Concurrent List, imparting both the Union and State governments legislative powers on educational matters spanning primary to university levels. The rationale for this realignment was ostensibly to foster national integration and ensure uniformity in educational standards; however, it has also permitted the central government to unilaterally initiate and implement policy decisions within states, often leading to tension over federal autonomy and local contextualization. While the Concurrent List, whose concept derives from the Australian Constitution, facilitates legislative cooperation, it stipulates that in cases of conflict between central and state laws, the central law prevails. Further, Parliament may legislate on State List subjects under conditions such as a Rajya Sabha resolution, during a national emergency, or when a requisite number of states request such intervention. Against this backdrop, the recent call by the Tamil Nadu government to revert education to the State List is rooted in concerns over central encroachment and the erosion of the state's ability to tailor educational frameworks to local socio-cultural and linguistic realities. Stakeholders argue that state-specific educational policies are critical in a diverse country like India, where regional disparities and varied development indices demand flexible, locally anchored interventions, which are constrained by uniform central legislation. Tamil Nadu's position reflects the broader issue of federal balance, contending that true cooperative federalism necessitates devolution of key sectors like education to state control, enabling innovation, responsiveness, and preservation of local identity within the national educational landscape[10]. A recent convocation ceremony at Bharathiar University was marked by a petition from a PhD scholar, A Prakash, to Tamil Nadu Governor RN Ravi, who serves as the university's chancellor. The scholar's petition alleges that certain academic supervisors abuse their mentoring roles, compelling research students to undertake personal household chores, such as babysitting, dishwashing, and managing bank accounts, thereby diverting them from their primary research responsibilities. Prakash further asserts that financial exploitation is prevalent, with scholars incurring personal expenses ranging from 50,000 to 1 lakh for their guides, and being pressed to provide ATM cards and food despite experiencing economic hardship. Additionally, the petition highlights concern regarding the mismanagement of funds designated for research and the improper use of university infrastructure for non-academic events, which hinders recreational opportunities for scholars. While Prakash admitted the convocation was not the optimal venue for raising these urgent issues, he emphasized the need for immediate redress to protect the integrity of academic mentorship and scholar welfare within the institution.[13] Tamil Nadu's higher education sector is currently characterized by a profound state of administrative paralysis, resulting primarily from an extended constitutional and political impasse between the state government and the office of the governor. This situation has left 12 out of the state's 22 public universities without regular vice-chancellors for over two years, causing severe disruptions in university governance, faculty morale, and student prospects (Muralidharan, 2025). The roots of this crisis can be traced to the role of the governor as the ex officio chancellor of state universities, wielding the authority to appoint vice-chancellors. While this arrangement is not unique to Tamil Nadu, the confrontation intensified under Governor R.N. Ravi, who, since his appointment in 2021, has consistently clashed with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government led by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin. Governor Ravi's hesitance, or outright refusal, to act on the recommendations of duly constituted search committees, often citing the need for a central government nominee, has stalled the appointment of vice-chancellors and has been interpreted by the state as an encroachment upon its autonomy. In response, the Tamil Nadu legislative assembly passed a series of ten bills between 2020 and 2023, aiming to transfer powers of university appointment from the governor to the state chief minister, thereby reinforcing "democratic accountability" in the management of state-funded institutions. These moves, however, were met with gubernatorial resistance, as Governor Ravi withheld assent, prompting the state to seek intervention from the Supreme Court of India. The apex court ruled in April 2025 that governors could not indefinitely delay state legislation, effectively greenlighting the bills. Nonetheless, the Madras High Court subsequently stayed imple-

mentation on the grounds that higher education falls under the Concurrent List of the Indian Constitution and hence must comply with University Grants Commission (UGC) regulations and receive presidential assent. The legal stalemate has thus persisted, with the matter now awaiting further judicial review. (Muralidharan, 2025) This constitutional deadlock has direct consequences for the functioning of public universities in Tamil Nadu. In place of regular vice-chancellors, temporary convenor committees with limited statutory powers are now at the helm. Their lack of authority has resulted in widespread administrative delays, notably affecting the clearance of files, faculty promotions, and disbursement of salaries. Reports indicate that at institutions such as Madurai Kamaraj University, faculty promotions have been halted since 2022, affecting at least 85 members, while students are unable to receive timely degree certification, handicapping their academic and professional advancement. At a broader level, this administrative paralysis intertwines with state opposition to the National Education Policy (NEP), seen by Tamil Nadu as an attempt by the central government to undermine state autonomy and impose cultural uniformity on the country's diverse educational landscape. The withholding of centrally allocated funds, such as those under the Samagra Shiksha programme, further exacerbates the state's administrative woes[16]. The protracted legal and political battle over the governance of higher education in Tamil Nadu thus underscores complex questions of federalism, democratic accountability, and institutional autonomy, creating a situation where the immediate victims are faculty and students, their futures stalled in bureaucratic limbo. Tamil Nadu's higher education sector, despite achieving a significant enrolment rate of approximately 2.5 million students across twenty state universities, faces a profound financial and administrative crisis. According to Governor R. N. Ravi (2025), most state-run universities in Tamil Nadu are grappling with severe funding shortages, oftentimes to the extent of being unable to disburse teachers' salaries. Chronic underfunding from the state government has led many institutions to operate with less than half their requisite faculty strength, notably exemplified by the University of Madras with a 66 percent teacher vacancy rate. Consequently, some universities have taken the unprecedented step of filing Income Tax returns as non-state entities, reflecting acute fiscal distress. Structural autonomy, a critical pillar of quality and innovation in higher education, has also been substantially eroded. Governance and academic decisions, previously the remit of university syndicates and academic councils, have increasingly been centralized within the state Secretariat and the Council for Higher Education, curtailing institutional independence in areas such as curriculum development. Administrative posts such as Registrars and Controllers of Examination remain vacant or are held on an ad-hoc basis, with Vice-Chancellors often not being appointed, further consolidating governmental control. The implications of this decline are many: deteriorating academic standards, high rates of graduate unemployment due to poor employability, and a distressingly low proportion of doctoral graduates qualifying for national research eligibility. These institutional weaknesses are compounded by broader social issues, including the growth of illicit drug activity on campuses, discrimination, and security challenges. The contraction of quality education disproportionately affects economically disadvantaged students, exacerbating inequities and foreclosing social and economic mobility[7]. In the absence of a formal State Education Policy (SEP) for higher education, Tamil Nadu's state universities have, somewhat inconspicuously yet substantively, begun to implement significant facets of the National Education Policy (NEP), driven primarily by imperative funding and accreditation requirements imposed by central agencies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). Despite the ruling party's public opposition to several NEP provisions, most notably the multiple entry/exit system and the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), the financial vulnerabilities of state universities have compelled compliance, as illustrated by the registration of 17 out of 22 state universities with ABC by the UGC's stipulated deadline. University officials, acknowledging the monetary and recognition incentives tethered to NEP adherence, have stressed that resisting central pressure would jeopardize essential grants, thereby weakening the already resource-constrained higher education landscape. Administrative instability further compounds the issue, with a notable absence of vice chancellors in 14 state universities at a time when compliance and strategic decisions are critical. In terms of curriculum and institutional changes, universities such as the University of Madras, Madurai Kamaraj, Bharathiar, Bharathidasan, and Manonmaniam Sundaranar have rebranded their Human Resource Development Centers as Malaviya Mission Teacher Training Centers, while Alagappa University and Anna University have incorporated courses on temple arts, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), and Tamil heritage, elements strongly advocated by NEP yet largely contested by the state government. Further, while multi-disciplinary curricula and outcome-based learning are being adopted under the guise of

curriculum revision, these reforms closely mirror NEP mandates. Meanwhile, the University of Madras has momentarily deferred the implementation of dual degree programs, electing to await the release of SEP and thus demonstrating a modicum of institutional autonomy amid policy uncertainty. Critically, annual NAAC reports require universities to document NEP-related implementation, with direct consequences for institutional ratings and rankings, compelling further conformity irrespective of state-level political stances. Veteran educationists and former policymakers have lamented the prolonged delay of SEP for higher education, viewing it as symptomatic of a broader administrative crisis that leaves universities directionless and students disadvantaged. Taken together, the scenario reveals the effectual convergence of central policy imperatives and state-level institutional adaptation in Tamil Nadu's higher education system, occurring against a backdrop of fiscal dependence, administrative inertia, and ongoing debates over the future of regional education policy[11]. The article on "Financial Issues and Students' Stress Among Private University Students in Selangor, Malaysia" investigates the relationship between financial issues and perceived stress among private university students in Selangor, Malaysia, drawing on Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping to explain how financial strain affects psychological well-being and academic functioning. Focusing on students from Lincoln University and UNITAR, the study addresses a notable gap in the Malaysian literature, where most prior research has emphasized public universities despite private students facing higher tuition fees, more limited access to government aid, and greater dependence on family resources, loans, and part-time work. Using a quantitative design, data were collected from 205 students through online questionnaires incorporating the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) to measure general perceptions of stress, unpredictability, and lack of control. Pearson correlation analysis revealed a very strong positive association between financial issues and stress ($r = 0.848$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of financial difficulty are closely linked with increased psychological strain. Multiple regression analysis further demonstrated that financial issues are the only statistically significant predictor of stress ($B = 0.840$, $p < 0.001$), while demographic variables such as gender, age group, and year of study do not significantly explain variations in stress levels ($R^2 = 0.499$; $F(4, 200) = 49.78$, $p < 0.01$). The findings corroborate international evidence that persistent financial hardship contributes to anxiety, depression, reduced academic engagement, and, in severe cases, social withdrawal and suicidal ideation, and they show that stress peaks when financial demands (tuition, living expenses, educational materials) coincide with academic pressures, such as examination periods. Interpreted through the Transactional Model, the results suggest that students' cognitive appraisals of financial demands and their perceived coping resources (e.g., financial literacy, social and institutional support) are central in determining stress outcomes: students who attend financial literacy and budgeting programs or access counselling and emergency aid tend to report comparatively lower stress despite ongoing financial challenges, reflecting more effective problem-focused coping, whereas those lacking such resources are at risk of chronic stress and deteriorating mental health. The study concludes that financial strain is a pervasive and powerful stressor that cuts across demographic categories among private university students, and it advocates institutional responses that prioritize financial support and psychological care, including expanded and better-targeted financial aid, emergency grants, integration of financial literacy into student development programs, and accessible mental health services. The authors recommend that universities and policymakers view financial stress management as a core component of student well-being strategies and call for further research on the long-term effects of financial stress on academic trajectories, career choices, and overall quality of life, particularly within private higher education contexts[3]. This study, conducted within the context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), critically examines the impact of scholarship programs on university students' academic performance, persistence, and graduation outcomes at Universitat Abat Oliba CEU in Spain between 2020 and 2024, using a comprehensive institutional dataset comprising 6,295 student records. At the heart of European educational policy, scholarships are positioned as vital mechanisms for fostering equity and social inclusion by mitigating socioeconomic barriers, thus facilitating greater access, retention, and academic success for diverse student populations. Within Spain, both private and public universities implement various forms of scholarships, including those targeting academic excellence, socioeconomic need, and familial circumstances, covering a significant range (20–100 percent) of tuition costs and contingent upon meeting stringent academic requirements. The research adopts a descriptive-comparative, quantitative design, employing advanced statistical analyses, including regression and discriminant analysis, t-tests, ANOVA, and chi-square tests, to identify nuanced trends across demographic and performance variables, such as cumulative grade point average,

credits registered/completed/passed, success rates, and achievement indicators. Findings reveal that scholarship recipients, who constitute approximately 29 percent of the sample, exhibit markedly higher academic engagement and outcomes, enrolling in and completing more credits annually, achieving higher cumulative GPAs (7.47 vs. 6.87), and demonstrating superior success (95.42 percent) and achievement (94.40 percent) rates compared to their non-scholarship counterparts. These students also maintained the scholarship for the entirety of their academic journey, resulting in a 100 percent graduation rate within the analyzed period, suggesting that scholarships are not only pivotal in ensuring university access but also in sustaining academic momentum to successful completion. The study further disaggregates results, uncovering pronounced gender differences, with female students consistently outperforming their male peers across all major performance indices; this effect is amplified among scholarship recipients, indicating possible benefits from targeted academic support strategies. Program-specific analysis highlights that in fields such as Law and Early Childhood Education, scholarships catalyze exemplary performance, while programs like Criminology reveal greater heterogeneity, implying that scholarship efficacy may be subject to disciplinary contexts. Several mechanisms may underlie the observed differences: rigorous pre-selection processes, financial security, additional academic resources, and heightened motivation or pressure to maintain eligibility may collectively position scholarship recipients for higher academic achievement; conversely, non-scholarship students often confront financial constraints and lack comparable support, potentially necessitating employment that detracts from academic focus. The findings also underscore the underrepresentation of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, reinforcing the need for broader, more inclusive scholarship coverage. The study concludes that, while scholarships decisively promote equity and academic excellence, optimal policy impact requires coupling financial awards with robust academic, social, and psychological support structures, such as mentoring, tutoring, and personalized guidance, particularly in programs and groups exhibiting lower success rates. Ultimately, the research affirms scholarships as transformative levers in promoting social mobility, reducing structural inequalities, and fostering talent development, thereby underlining the imperative for ongoing policy refinement to ensure both access and achievement for all students, irrespective of their socioeconomic origins[4]. Educational aspirations constitute critical determinants of students' life trajectories, yet these aspirations remain unequally distributed across socioeconomic and family contexts, necessitating systematic investigation of the structural and individual factors that shape high school students' intentions to pursue tertiary education. Employing 2022 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) data from ten countries spanning developed and developing contexts including Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Uruguay, Portugal, the United States, Finland, and South Korea, the authors utilize multinomial logit modeling to estimate the effects of individual, family, school, and regional factors on educational aspirations, categorized as basic education, associate degree, or higher education attainment. Grounded theoretically in both Human Capital Theory, which conceptualizes education as an investment yielding productivity and income returns that guide rational educational choices, and the Theory of Social Reproduction articulated by Bourdieu and Passeron, which emphasizes how economic, social, and cultural capital alongside embodied dispositions (habitus) shape trajectories and reproduce inequalities under meritocratic guise, the study advances understanding of how structural constraints and individual expectations interact in shaping educational intentions rather than testing these frameworks as competing hypotheses. The empirical findings reveal that students possessing greater cultural and socioeconomic capital, demonstrating higher academic performance, receiving stronger family and school support, and articulating clearer vocational goals exhibit significantly elevated likelihood of aspiring to higher education, with vocational clarity emerging as the most potent individual predictor, more than doubling the relative probability of university aspiration over basic education completion. Gender disparities manifest substantially, with male students exhibiting nearly half the likelihood of aspiring to higher education compared to female counterparts, while family wealth positively correlates with elevated aspirations, though parental education and perceived family support demonstrate comparatively modest yet significant effects. Within the school domain, grade repetition emerges as one of the strongest negative determinants, reducing higher education aspiration probability by more than 32 percent, while attendance at public schools similarly decreases this likelihood, contrasting with positive effects associated with increased study time at home and enhanced sense of school belonging, though academic performance in mathematics, reading, and science demonstrates relatively small magnitudes of effect despite statistical significance. The comparative analysis reveals substantial cross-national variation reflecting institutional, cultural, and economic differences, with stu-

dents from Latin American countries and Portugal exhibiting higher odds of aspiring to higher education relative to United States students, suggesting that tertiary education is perceived as the primary pathway to social mobility in contexts characterized by pronounced inequality, whereas Finland demonstrates greater appreciation for alternative educational pathways and South Korea displays distinct preferences for associate degree programs, reflecting specific educational system characteristics and cultural dynamics. The Brazilian case proves particularly instructive, revealing pronounced contrasts between subjective optimism, manifested in highest levels of vocational clarity and growth mindset, and structural disadvantages including low family wealth indices exceeded in negativity only by Colombia, low parental educational attainment, minimal perceived family support, high grade repetition rates second only among examined nations, consistently low academic performance across mathematics, reading, and science domains, weak sense of school belonging, and predominance of public school enrollment, suggesting that educational aspirations in high-inequality contexts may reflect aspirational thinking insufficiently grounded in concrete information or institutional support. The study additionally identifies active career information seeking and growth mindset, students' beliefs in their capacity to develop skills through effort and persistence, as positively associated with higher aspirations, though with modest effect sizes relative to vocational clarity, while informational constraints regarding access mechanisms and financial aid emerge as significant barriers, particularly for vulnerable populations. These empirical findings, derived from rigorous multinomial logit estimation validated through Wald tests confirming model suitability and Hausman tests verifying independence of irrelevant alternatives assumptions, underscore critical policy implications regarding the importance of targeted interventions and early-stage programs designed to ensure that social origin does not deterministically circumscribe educational opportunities, suggesting that effective policy responses must address not only financial barriers through scholarships and aid but also informational asymmetries, institutional support structures, and the reproduction of inequality through seemingly neutral meritocratic mechanisms. The study's principal contribution resides in its systematic comparative methodology linking the Brazilian case to diverse national realities using standardized recent data, enabling examination of how socioeconomic, academic, and familial variables interact across contexts characterized by varying levels of development and institutional arrangements, while focusing on intention rather than enrollment facilitates identification of inequalities at earlier educational trajectory stages, enhancing comprehension of relationships between expectations and structural conditions[2]. The editorial in the Hindu argues that the Supreme Court's recent intervention on student suicides exposes a deeper structural crisis in India's higher education, demanding urgent systemic reform rather than piecemeal responses. The article situates the Court's nine directions within the context of the rapid massification of higher education driven by privatisation without a parallel enhancement in academic quality or student support. It stresses that student distress is multidimensional, encompassing financial hardship, social exclusion, experiences of injustice, and academic pressures, and that institutional responses have been largely inadequate. The Court's use of Article 142 is presented as normatively significant because it treats student well-being as integral to the functioning of higher education institutions (HEIs). Seven directives focus on systematic recording, reporting, and disaggregated tracking of suicides in HEIs, while two mandate filling vacancies in Registrar, Vice-Chancellor, and faculty positions, signalling that governance and staffing are central to well-being. The editorial uses the University of Madras as an illustrative case of institutional decline in a State otherwise celebrated for high enrolment and women's education. It notes chronic faculty shortages, absence of new appointments, and a hollowing out of once-distinguished research centres in philosophy, botany, mathematics, and social sciences oriented to Tamil Nadu's development needs. The text highlights how stalled Vice-Chancellor appointments, attributed to a "recalcitrant" Governor and unresolved ambiguities in the Supreme Court's own response to the Presidential reference on gubernatorial powers, have paralysed leadership renewal. It further points to constraints of the UGC's time-consuming recruitment procedures, fiscal commitments, limited pools of qualified faculty, and entrenched corruption and ideological patronage in appointments. The editorial concludes that the Court's four-month timeline is demanding but should be read as a spur to reconstruct a robust public higher education system, rather than as a narrow compliance exercise. Only after such foundational deficits in staffing, governance and student welfare are addressed, it argues, can broader developmental visions such as "Viksit Bharat" acquire substantive credibility[24].

Research Gap: Extant scholarly literature evinces significant lacunae in explicating the nexus of constitutional federalism, fiscal distress, and institutional autonomy erosion within Tamil Nadu's higher education

ecosystem. Pan-Indian treatises (Agarwal Singh, 2023) provide a panoramic analysis of the national financing architectures and NEP implementation challenges, yet systematically elide subnational idiosyncrasies: Governoral interference precipitating vice-chancellor vacancies (12/22 universities vacant for 24+ months), juridical stays invoking Concurrent List imperatives (Madras HC, 2025), and consequent administrative stasis in faculty promotions and remuneration disbursements. Localized investigations, such as the Bharathiar University PhD scholar petition[13]alleging supervisory exploitation and financial coercion, remain anecdotal fragments, devoid of hermeneutic integration into overarching governance dysfunction narratives. International behavioral economic frameworks[26] illuminate psycho-cognitive mechanisms mediating socioeconomic status perceptions and educational choice; however, these models inadequately accommodate Tamil Nadu's caste-stratified social ontology, rural-urban dichotomies, and first-generation learner aspirations, the lacunae particularly acute given the state's unique linguistic and cultural substrate. Absent too are integrated qualitative exegeses synthesizing fiscal hemorrhage trajectories (e.g., UGC-regulated distance education revenue curtailment costing Madras University 50+ crores annually) with narratival deconstructions of incremental autonomy erosion via NEP-mandated compliance mechanisms (ABC registration deadline pressure affecting 17/22 universities). The extant corpus thus lacks rigorous qualitative cartographies of how interconnected governance failures—gubernatorial dysfunction, policy dissonance (NEP vs. state opposition), fiscal coercion toward central mandates, have collectively engendered an institutional dystopia wherein faculty morale deteriorates, research rigor plummets (only 29.4% PhD candidates graduate within five years), and graduate employability collapses. This inquiry remedies these scholarly chasms via qualitative archival hermeneutics, generating abductive theoretical frameworks that illuminate pathways to federalist reformation, devolutionary constitutional amendments, and state-centric policy architectures attuned to regional socio-economic exigencies.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive framework anchored exclusively in secondary sources to interrogate governance predicaments within Tamil Nadu's higher education landscape. Data corpus comprises purposively curated documents spanning policy artifacts, judicial pronouncements, budgetary exegeses, and scholarly commentaries from 2020-2026, including Tamil Nadu Higher Education Department annual reports (e.g., 2025-2026 allocation of 8,494 crore), UGC advisories on faculty deficits (7,500+ vacancies), Supreme Court directives on vice-chancellor appointments (April 2025), and Madras High Court stays invoking Concurrent List imperatives. Archival materials from institutional repositories, such as the University of Madras and Madurai Kamaraj University, financial audits detailing revenue shortfalls from UGC-regulated distance education, which were supplemented by contemporaneous media analyses[16] and think-tank briefs [10] elucidating federal frictions. Analytical rigor was pursued through thematic content analysis, employing an abductive coding schema in NVivo to iteratively derive latent constructs: administrative stasis (12/22 universities sans vice-chancellors), fiscal precarity (e.g., salary disbursement halts), and autonomy erosion amid NEP-SEP dissonances. Triangulation across source types such as official gazettes, oppositional editorials[25], and lit reviews [26,1] mitigated interpretive biases, highlighting power asymmetries between gubernatorial chancellorships and state legislatures. Discourse analysis unpacked rhetorical maneuvers in policy debates, revealing hegemonic centralization and devolution advocacy for State List reinstatement.

4. Analysis

4.1 Analytical Frameworks and Interpretive Lens

This inquiry deploys a triadic hermeneutic lens integrating governance institutionalism[12], fiscal sociology[17], and organizational behavior paradigms [18]. Governance institutionalism facilitates interrogation of how constitutional ambiguities, electoral incentive structures, and bureaucratic norms symbiotically constitute policy paralysis beyond individualist or voluntarist explanations. Fiscal sociology perspectives illuminate how monetary scarcities interact with power asymmetries, revealing that "underfunding" constitutes not merely resource insufficiency but a rationalized mechanism of centralized control [17]. Organizational behavior frameworks illuminate how leadership vacancies disarticulate institutional culture, thereby degrading both formal procedures and informal trust networks essential to functional coordination. Collectively, these frameworks permit polyvocal analysis, distinguishing structure from agency, whilst acknowledging how actors strategically invoke institutional scripts to legitimize distributive conflicts [9].

4.1.1 Proposed Areas for Improvement

1. **Centralized Leadership and Governance:**
    - Expedite the appointment of Vice Chancellors through streamlined processes that re-

spect state autonomy.
- Introduce governance reforms that decentralize administrative functions to reduce the overburdening of existing leaders.

2. **Financial Sustainability:**
   - Ensure consistent, timely funding through direct state budget allocations.
   - Implement transparent financial audits and revenue generation measures such as industry partnerships and research commercialization.
3. **Academic and Administrative Autonomy:**
   - Grant universities the freedom to design curricula reflecting regional industry demands and socio-economic priorities.
   - Promote flexible academic models, including multiple entry-exit points for students.
4. **Research and Innovation Focus:**
   - Develop specialized research hubs aligned with Tamil Nadu's economic strengths, such as agriculture, healthcare, renewable energy, and technology.
   - Encourage collaboration between universities, industry, and government for innovation-led growth.

4.2 Policy Realignment

Advocate for a constitutional amendment or central government approval to move education back to the State List. The recently submitted State Education Policy (SEP) to the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister by the Justice (Retired) D Murugesan Committee lays out an extensive framework for reforming the education sector, rooted in the assertion that education should return to the State List under List II of Schedule 7 of the Indian Constitution. The contention for relocating education from the Concurrent List to the State List stems from the argument that states require greater autonomy to design, implement, and contextualize education based on local linguistic, social, and economic realities. The SEP strongly advocates for Tamil as the medium of instruction at all levels, beginning with Mother–Child Care Centres and continuing through higher education. By foregrounding "Spoken Tamil" alongside "Spoken English," the report emphasizes Tamil cultural identity and seeks to challenge the perceived homogenization fostered by centralized education policy. Structural recommendations span the entire education spectrum: formal schooling begins at age five, stages are defined as 5+3+2+2, and curriculum reforms extend to addressing caste-based inequalities and promoting gender equality. The SEP calls for active learning and conceptual understanding over rote memorization, with an overhaul of assessment practices towards open-book formats and the inclusion of informational resources during examinations. Integrative initiatives ensure that arts, physical education, and career counseling are embedded within school life, while infrastructure upgrades, especially for sanitation in secondary schools, are prioritized for student well-being. The needs of marginalized and minority groups such as children in coastal and hilly regions, refugees, migrants, urban poor, disabled children, and those from minority communities receive particular attention vis-à-vis dropout rates and inclusivity. The SEP further advocates for teacher training sensitive to social diversity, anti-substance abuse education, and proactive measures to cultivate reading habits and career development [19]. The integrative behavioral economics model articulated by Vossensteyn provides a critical analytical framework for examining higher education choices in Tamil Nadu, a region characterized by pronounced socio-economic heterogeneity and rapidly transforming policy environments. Applying this model in the Tamil Nadu context would involve systematically investigating how students from differing socio-economic strata perceive financial incentives, such as tuition fee policies, scholarship offerings, and student loan schemes, and how these perceptions shape their decisions regarding enrollment, retention, and choice of institution or field of study. Given Tamil Nadu's unique social mosaic, marked by disparities in rural-urban access, caste-based stratification, and emerging aspirations among first-generation learners, the model's emphasis on psychological mediators such as loss aversion, reference points, and subjective risk assessments becomes particularly salient. By deploying advanced quantitative techniques like structural equation modeling on large-scale regional datasets, researchers can unravel the various pathways through which background variables and contextually informed perceptions influence educational trajectories. Such analysis can guide policymakers in designing more equitable interventions, attuned to the behavioral responses of distinct sub-groups, thereby enhancing both the effectiveness and fairness of higher education reforms in Tamil Nadu. The model's flexibility also allows for the integration of local factors, such as familial obligations, social mobility narratives, and labor market signals, ensuring that policy prescriptions are empirically grounded and culturally resonant[26].

5. Conclusion

The proposition to transfer university and higher education responsibilities predominantly to the states, accompanied by increased central grants for educational development, particularly in Tamil Nadu, presents a

compelling case rooted in the principles of decentralization, regional autonomy, and tailored policy implementation. Central funding through grants, if structured effectively, can empower states to address their unique educational needs, fostering innovation and inclusivity in higher education. This approach aligns with the broader global trend towards decentralization, where state-level management of higher education allows for more context-specific policies, responsive governance, and greater accountability, ultimately improving quality and access The current centralized framework often results in bureaucratic bottlenecks and a one-size-fits-all policy approach that fails to accommodate regional disparities and local priorities. Decentralization of higher education governance to states can democratize decision-making processes, facilitate regionally relevant curriculum reforms, and promote engagement with local industries, thereby boosting employment and regional development (NITI Aayog, 2025). The Indian constitution, which assigns education to the concurrent list, underscores the importance of state involvement, yet the overregulation by central agencies has stifled innovation and responsiveness at the state level. Enhanced state autonomy should be complemented with targeted central grants instead of overburdened direct control. Grants can be allocated based on performance, infrastructure development, research capacity, and inclusivity initiatives. For example, the success of Tamil Nadu's recent policies, such as the State Education Policy 2025, demonstrates the potential of region-specific reforms rooted in state-controlled decision-making, including curriculum flexibility, research promotion, and nuanced entrance policies that reflect local contexts. Such tailored policies have the potential to overcome structural challenges faced by national policies like the NEP 2020, which often encounter resistance and implementation difficulties at the state level. The case for increased central grants should be predicated on the principles of equitable development, with special provisions for underserved regions, women, marginalized communities, and rural populations. The allocation of funds should incentivize innovative pedagogies, research, and infrastructural upgrades directly aligned with regional economic priorities. The success of India's higher education policy depends on fostering a competitive environment where state universities can thrive independently yet benefit from shared resources, expert guidance, and strategic investments [24] The devolution imperative, however, presupposes normative-institutional preconditions inadequately foregrounded in policy discourse. Tamil Nadu's historical administrative capacity, relative fiscal robustness vis-à-vis lower-resourced states, and demonstrable commitment to equity (evidenced by Pudhumai Penn's efficacy) furnish a comparatively propitious context for State List transference. Yet scalar redistribution alone constitutes an insufficient remedy absent simultaneous governance reconstruction, encompassing transparent appointment procedures, ethical mentorship frameworks, and performance-based accountability mechanisms insulating academic leadership from patronage. The proposed State Education Policy's articulation of these scaffolds (Sekar, 2024) indicates organizational cognition of such prerequisites. Moreover, international comparisons, particularly Québec's educational devolution subsequent to Quiet Revolution reforms[23]and Spain's regional autonomy provisions[5] that suggest that successfully decentralized higher education systems couple constitutional authority with institutional capacity-building and redistributive mechanisms mitigating regional disparities. Absent such a comprehensive reform architecture, State List repositioning risks replicating existing pathologies at diminished fiscal scale. In Tamil Nadu, recent initiatives such as the draft State Education Policy 2024 exemplify the benefits of enhanced state control, emphasizing autonomy in curriculum design, multiple entry-exit systems for students, and strategic research hubs in key sectors like agriculture and renewable energy. The persistent delay in releasing a comprehensive higher education policy underscores the necessity for a proactive, state-led strategy to foster innovation, adapt curricula, and bolster research without being obstructed by overarching national mandates. State-level policies can be more agile, allowing quicker responses to emerging economic and technological trends (Tamil Nadu Higher Education Department, 2019). Implementing a devolved model also promises to elevate regional institutions' visibility and influence, fostering globally competitive universities that are culturally and academically aligned with local needs. Enhanced autonomy, coupled with accountability mechanisms such as independent oversight bodies and performance-based grants, can mitigate concerns of over-regulation while promoting excellence[3]. The successful evolution of public universities in states that have embraced decentralization provides a blueprint for Tamil Nadu and similar regions aiming to leverage regional strengths. In conclusion, shifting higher education governance towards the states, backed by more substantial and performance-based central funding, offers a pathway to a more equitable, responsive, and innovative higher education landscape in India. Tamil Nadu's proactive policies serve as a testament to the potential benefits of this approach, which can be scaled and adapted to

other regions. Empowering states with financial autonomy and decision-making authority will not only align educational strategies with regional needs but also foster a national ecosystem where diverse, high-quality institutions thrive, ultimately contributing to India's broader socio-economic development goals.

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Declaration of AI Use in Manuscript Preparation

In accordance with emerging standards for transparency in academic publishing, the author discloses the following use of artificial intelligence tools in the preparation of this manuscript: The AI tools were employed as analytical and editorial aids only.

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