

# News

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## Why India's NLUs need to become INIs: National in name, provincial in structure



***The conversion of NLUs into INIs would represent a dedication to guaranteeing that state borders and socioeconomic standing no longer dictate the development of legal education in India.***

Many people consider India's National Law Universities' (NLUs) nearly four-decade history as a revolution in legal pedagogy. By generating top-tier corporate lawyers and a growing presence in the litigating Bar, these institutions have effectively changed the face of legal practice since the founding of the first NLU in 1986.

The 'IITs of Law,' as they were called, were supposed to be centers of excellence that would draw the best students to a field that was once thought of as temporary. But underlying the renown and stellar placement rates is a systemic issue that threatens to erode these organizations from the inside out.

A contradiction in their basic identity is the root of the issue. The 'National' designation and a national mandate were intended for these colleges, but state legislation gave them birth. State governments now see them as self-funding organizations, whereas the federal government sees them as state subjects due to this provincial foundation.

***We want these institutions to be top-tier centers of excellence, but we let them suffer under the financial and administrative frameworks of nearby state colleges. The NLU model runs the risk of gradually deteriorating into mediocrity unless there is a significant change in the way these universities are run and supported.***

The background of a broken promise

The change in legal education in India was a planned reaction to a crisis, not an accident. The 14th Law Commission Report, which continues to be one of the harshest criticisms of legal education in India, served as a major impetus. The Commission famously cautioned that a constitutional democracy's ability to function was threatened by the law colleges' subpar and part-time status at the time. The 'best brains' were not being drawn to the legal profession, it was remarked, because the educational system was theoretical, unresponsive, and unconnected to the reality of the courtroom.

***This was intended to be fixed by Prof. NR Madhava Menon's groundbreaking work in developing the five-year integrated law degree. The 'Menon Model' was successful in drawing gifted individuals right out of high school by combining the fields of law and social sciences and implementing clinical legal education. However, other states replicated the model due to NLSIU Bengaluru's success, but the replication was structural rather than substantive.***

Rather from being fostered as federal assets, these later colleges were tied to the political and economic interests of state governments because they were established by State Acts. The colleges found themselves in a legal conundrum as the "National" prefix evolved from a legal standing to a marketing name.

***The economics of exclusion: A vicious cycle***

***The financial architecture of the NLU system is one of its biggest difficulties. NLUs do not receive large, ongoing block funds from the Union government like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), or All-India Institutes of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) do. Rather, they use a risky self-sustaining business model.***

The majority of state governments only provide the original land and a one-time construction subsidy. After the gates open, student tuition covers nearly all of the ongoing costs, which range from campus upkeep and electricity bills to faculty salaries and library subscriptions.

A sharp and unsustainable inflationary curve has resulted from this. At a prestigious NLU, a five-year degree currently costs between ₹15 lakh and ₹25 lakh. This financial burden extends beyond the years of education and even to the beginning of a career. The CLAT Consortium is compelled to impose excessive application and counseling fees since there is a lack of central funding to maintain the testing infrastructure. These expenses serve as a gatekeeper, essentially keeping gifted individuals from middle-class and lower-class backgrounds from even trying the test. As a result, the pursuit of law at the highest level becomes a privilege exclusive to the economic elite, thereby privatizing what ought to be a public function. The 'National' law university fails to fulfill its constitutional mandate to democratize legal education when it becomes costly for the typical Indian citizen.

***The degradation of national identity due to domicile quotas***

***The rapid development of domicile reservations further dilutes these universities' national character. States have pushed these limits far further under the NLU system, even if organizations like the National Institutes of Technology (NITs) still have a 50% state quota. Due to the combined impact of several vertical and horizontal reservation categories, domicile-based seats currently make up almost 70% of seats in states like Maharashtra.***

The fact that the universities receive public funding directly contributes to this trend. Local politicians perceive NLUs as state assets rather than national ones in an effort to maximize benefits for their own voters. However, the fundamental spirit of a "National" university is lost when over three-fourths of its admissions are limited to a single state. Diverse viewpoints are essential to the success of legal education. The development of a comprehensive grasp of the law is based on the peer-to-peer learning that takes place in a pan-India classroom, where a student from Tamil Nadu debates a student from Punjab. By substituting regional homogeneity for this variety, these institutions lose the national identity they were sworn to

preserve and become merely fancy-named provincial colleges.

Governance and infrastructure: The tipping point

***Recent crises on several campuses have been the result of the NLU model's structural faults. These instances of student "indiscipline" are not unique; rather, they are clear signs of inadequate funding, careless administration, and a lack of centralized supervision. Students at MNLU Mumbai were compelled to demonstrate against dangerous living circumstances in late 2024 and early 2025. Students' safety was seriously threatened by unsanitary facilities, defective wiring in dorms, and regular electrical short circuits, according to reports from the ground.***

Similar protests calling for fundamental academic and placement reforms have been started by students at NLU Odisha and NLU Assam. These demonstrations are an expression of a system that has reached its breaking point. Lack of funding prevents universities from investing in the research infrastructure essential for contemporary legal scholarship, maintaining secure campuses, and hiring the requisite number of permanent faculty. Due to their reliance on state-level bureaucracy, many of the more recent NLUs have administrative instability, which is typified by frequent leadership changes and a lack of long-term vision.

***The INI Bill is the legislative necessity.***

The current state-university system has shown itself unable to maintain the quality and rigor of legal education in the twenty-first century. Parliament's intervention through a central law is the only practical way to resolve the issue. This Private Member Bill, which aims to designate NLUs as Institutes of National Importance (INI), is the most notable attempt to address this in the legislature.

***A Central National Law Universities Act that grants NLUs INI status is a structural requirement that would deal with the crisis's root cause. First of all, it would guarantee central support, which would provide the economy the stability it needs to reduce tuition and do away with the excessive entrance fees for the CLAT exam. Furthermore, it would result in improved research capacities. By gaining access to federal research grants, NLUs would be able to transform from teaching institutions into centers for legal innovation and the development of legal education.***

Thirdly, by establishing a central governing body, it would standardize faculty appointments and academic excellence nationwide. Lastly, by putting in place a fair national policy that safeguards regional interests without compromising the national merit pool, it would

rationalize reservations.

***In conclusion***

***The National Law Universities were founded with the revolutionary goal of creating the defenders of our constitutional principles. However, they will continue to falter under the pressure of regional politics and economic turmoil as long as they have a provincial structure but a national name. The disjointed architecture of 2026 cannot deliver on the promises of 1986. Parliament must offer a single, comprehensive framework rather than relying on band-aid solutions.***

In addition to being an administrative improvement, turning NLUs into Institutes of National Importance is a pledge to guarantee that state borders and socioeconomic standing no longer dictate the development of legal education in India. The 'National' in NLU needs to come true.

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