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# A ROLE OF MEDIATION IN RESOLVING STUDENT AND ACADEMIC GRIEVANCES FOR GOOD ACADEMIC GOVERNANCE

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Anjali Chamediya, LLM, Maharashtra National Law University, Nagpur

## ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions in India function as vibrant yet complex ecosystems where disputes between students and administration are inevitable due to diverse academic, administrative, financial, and equity-related issues. Despite the existence of formal grievance redressal mechanisms under the University Grants Commission (Redressal of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2023 and the policy framework of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, these systems frequently suffer from perceived bias, procedural delays, lack of confidentiality, weak enforcement, and an adversarial approach. Such shortcomings often erode student trust and lead to unnecessary escalation of disputes to overburdened courts. This doctrinal study examines the nature and types of student-administration disputes in Indian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and critically analyses the limitations of existing internal grievance redressal mechanisms. It explores mediation as a structured, voluntary, confidential, and relationship-preserving Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanism under the Mediation Act, 2023 and Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908. Drawing insights from international best practices in universities such as Emory University, University of Georgia (USA), and University of Melbourne (Australia), the study highlights mediation's potential to deliver faster, fairer, and more harmonious outcomes. The research establishes that the integration of mediation into institutional grievance processes can significantly reduce resolution timelines, minimise litigation, restore trust, and promote campus harmony. It concludes by offering practical, multi-pronged suggestions for institutionalising mediation through dedicated campus mediation centres, capacity building, policy integration, and cultural transformation in Indian HEIs.

**Keywords:** Student Grievance, Higher Education System, Mediation, Dispute Resolution, Student-Administration Dispute

## I. INTRODUCTION

Universities serve as microcosms within society, bringing together diverse groups of people including students, faculty, and management who contribute to education and research. University environments are intrinsically diverse as well as complex.<sup>1</sup> These conditions can often result in more conflicts and disputes. India, in particular, has the world's third-largest higher education system, and with the continued expansion of higher education institutions, the scale of student-related grievances has also grown significantly.

The inherent diversity spanning cultural, social, economic, regional, ideological, and linguistic backgrounds in higher education institutions (HEIs) fosters innovation, critical thinking, and intellectual growth. However, it simultaneously heightens the potential for misunderstandings, grievances, and conflicts between students and the administration. In Indian HEIs, student-administration disputes commonly arise over issues such as academic evaluation and grading, fee structures, hostel allocations, scholarship delays, administrative delays, and matters related to equity, inclusion, and campus facilities.

Student grievance management and redressal systems are essential for maintaining a fair and inclusive academic environment. These systems tackle various issues, such as academic disputes like grading errors, administrative concerns such as fee disputes, and interpersonal conflicts including harassment. Handling grievances effectively builds trust among students, faculty, and administration while ensuring accountability within the institution.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional resolution of such disputes through litigation is often protracted, adversarial, expensive, and damaging to long-term relationships within the campus community. It frequently exacerbates tensions rather than resolving them constructively. In recent years, the landscape of student-administration disputes in Indian higher education has become more complex and visible. Factors such as massive growth in student enrolment, the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 with its strong emphasis on equity and inclusion, increased awareness of student rights, and post-pandemic shifts in campus dynamics have contributed to a higher incidence of grievances.

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<sup>1</sup>Milem, Jeffrey F., Mitchell J. Chang, and Anthony Lising Antonio. *Making diversity work on campus: A research-based perspective*. Washington, DC: Association American Colleges and Universities, 2005

<sup>2</sup>Prof. Arti Burghate et al., *Student Grievance Management and Redressal System*, 7 *Int'l Rsch. J. Modernization Engineering Tech. & Sci.* 2510 (2025)

This concern has also become more urgent in light of the student mental-health crisis. NCRB-based reporting for 2022 recorded 13,044 student suicides in India, showing that student distress is not merely an individual issue but also an institutional governance concern.<sup>3</sup> In *Amit Kumar v. Union of India* (2025), the Supreme Court specifically linked student suicides in higher educational institutions with broader structural causes such as the manner of expansion of HEIs, social and structural inequalities, ragging, increasing academic pressure, and the failure to properly address mental health concerns.<sup>4</sup>

While court-based approaches provide legal enforceability, they contribute to overburdened judicial systems, prolonged uncertainty for students and administrators alike, and erosion of trust within the academic ecosystem. This situation underscores the growing relevance of mediation as a preferred Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanism. Mediation offers a faster, confidential, cost-effective, and relationship-preserving pathway that empowers both students and the administration to collaboratively resolve disputes while preserving the academic environment.

In the Indian context, mediation finds statutory support through the Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996 (as amended), Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908, and various University Grants Commission (UGC) regulations that encourage internal grievance redressal mechanisms. Despite these enabling provisions, mediation remains significantly underutilised in most Indian HEIs, particularly in student-administration disputes. It is often limited to a few institutions due to challenges such as lack of trained mediators, hierarchical power dynamics, cultural preference for adversarial processes, and inadequate institutional integration of mediation practices.

## II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Despite the existence of internal grievance redressal mechanisms in Indian higher education institutions, several critical issues persist that hinder effective and timely resolution of student-administration disputes, ultimately affecting campus harmony, stakeholder trust, and institutional efficiency.

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<sup>3</sup>IC3 Institute, *Student Suicides: An Epidemic Sweeping India*, Volume 2 (2024), based on NCRB 2022 data, recorded 13,044 student suicides in 2022.

<sup>4</sup>*Amit Kumar v. Union of India*, 2026 INSC 62

First, many internal committees suffer from perceived or actual bias due to their composition. These committees are often chaired or dominated by senior university officials such as the Vice-Chancellor, Dean, or Registrar, creating a significant power imbalance between students and the administration. Students frequently hesitate to raise genuine concerns fearing retaliation, unfair treatment, or suppression of evidence. This lack of genuine impartiality discourages students from fully participating in the internal process and undermines confidence in the system.

Second, internal grievance processes frequently suffer from significant delays and inefficiency. Even when complaints are filed regarding academic evaluation, fee structures, hostel allocations, scholarship delays, or administrative decisions, inquiries often exceed prescribed timelines, decisions remain pending for months or even years, and follow-up actions are weak or ignored. Such prolonged uncertainty frustrates students and administrators alike, erodes trust in the university's administrative system, and often compels students to approach overburdened courts.

Third, the current mechanisms lack sufficient focus on restorative and relationship-preserving outcomes. Most internal processes adopt an adversarial or punitive approach similar to litigation, emphasising fault-finding and punishment rather than dialogue, mutual understanding, and reconciliation. This approach damages long-term relationships between students and the administration and fails to create the inclusive, harmonious, and learning-conducive environment that NEP 2020 seeks to promote. These persistent challenges highlight the urgent need for an effective, impartial, and collaborative mechanism. Mediation, as a structured yet flexible Alternative Dispute Resolution process, offers a promising alternative by facilitating voluntary, confidential, and mutually acceptable solutions while preserving relationships and restoring trust between students and university administration.

### **III. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

(i) to identify the major types of student-administration disputes occurring in Indian higher education institutions and examine the existing internal grievance redressal mechanisms for resolving them;

(ii) to evaluate the key limitations of the current internal grievance systems and assess the potential of mediation as an effective Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanism to overcome these limitations; and

(iii) to propose practical suggestions for integrating mediation into Indian higher education institutions to ensure faster, fairer, confidential, and relationship-preserving resolution of disputes, thereby promoting greater trust and campus harmony.

#### **IV. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The central research hypothesis of this study is that the integration of mediation into internal grievance processes for student-administration disputes will substantially shorten timelines and reduce litigation.

This hypothesis is tested against three research questions:

1. What are the major types of student-administration disputes in Indian HEIs, and how are they currently addressed through existing internal grievance redressal mechanisms?
2. What are the key limitations of the existing grievance redressal systems that lead to delays, bias, lack of trust, or escalation of disputes to courts?
3. And how can the adoption of mediation as an ADR mechanism improve the efficiency, fairness, confidentiality, and relationship-preserving outcomes in resolving such disputes?

#### **V. METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE**

The present study adopts a doctrinal research methodology, which is qualitative and library-based in nature. It relies entirely on the systematic analysis and interpretation of primary and secondary sources without collecting any empirical data such as surveys or interviews. The research critically examines key legal provisions including the Mediation Act, 2023, Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908, and the Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996 (as amended). It also analyses the University Grants Commission (Redressal of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2023, along with relevant portions of NEP 2020 and judicial decisions. Secondary sources such as scholarly books, journal articles, research papers, and official UGC guidelines on mediation are thoroughly reviewed. The scope is limited to student-

administration disputes in Indian HEIs regulated by the UGC, and the findings are normative and suggestive in nature, requiring future empirical validation.

## VI. LITERATURE REVIEW

Neil H. Katz in *The Handbook of Mediation* explores how U.S. colleges and universities have increasingly turned to ADR, especially mediation, to handle inevitable conflicts among diverse students, faculty, and staff in tight-knit campus environments, moving beyond outdated punitive approaches that often ignore relational roots and drain resources. Drawing from a survey of over 100 institutions, Katz traces ADR's growth from the 1970s through key milestones like Hewlett Foundation funding for elite programs and the rise of ombuds offices, highlighting how these tools cut costs and boost retention, morale, and productivity through preventive training, restorative justice circles, and community outreach. He spotlights success stories like the University of Georgia's system-wide model (saving millions in litigation via 800+ mediations) and Minnesota's Office of Conflict Resolution (slashing grievances by 80%), urging broader adoption and emphasising ADR's potential to transform conflicts into opportunities for growth and harmony.<sup>5</sup>

Selahattin Turan and Charles Taylor introduce Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) as a flexible, collaborative framework for managing conflicts in educational settings, contrasting it with rigid traditional methods like courts and administrative decisions that often breed dissatisfaction, high costs, and unresolved tensions. The authors advocate ADR's emphasis on face-to-face problem-solving, consensus-driven decisions, and third-party facilitation to foster constructive outcomes, reduce stress, and align with educational goals of prosocial behaviour and peace, offering practical implications like training educators in informal processes to preempt escalations.<sup>6</sup>

Josef Leidenfrost explains that ombudsman mediation serves as the main internal tool for handling conflicts in universities and other higher education institutions. Conflicts arise from differing interests, goals, and values among students, faculty, staff, and administration, and they can quickly become public if not addressed early. Leidenfrost stresses that timely

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<sup>5</sup>Neil H. Katz, *Mediation and Dispute Resolution Services in Higher Education*, in *The Handbook of Mediation: Theory, Research, and Practice* 176 (Alexia Georgakopoulos ed., 2017).

<sup>6</sup>Selahattin Turan & Charles Taylor, *Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR): A Different Framework for Conflict Resolution in Educational Settings* (paper presented at the 51st Annual Meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, Vail, Colo., Aug. 10-16, 1997)

ombudsman mediation promotes low-barrier, consensus-based solutions over formal or punitive processes, fitting the complex, regulated but culturally varied world of higher education.<sup>7</sup>

Andriyana Andreeva and Desislava Serafimova from the University of Economics in Varna spotlight mediation as a vital strategy for resolving escalating conflicts in higher education institutions, where digital transformation has amplified tensions like communication breakdowns, personality clashes, and stakeholder disputes. The authors expand its role beyond litigation alternatives to a proactive conflict resolution framework that prevents disputes, rebuilds trust, and cultivates a collaborative academic culture. They advocate embedding mediation across university levels and propose a model of university mediation centres for swift, low-threshold dispute handling and communication training.<sup>8</sup>

K. Matthews outlines seven compelling benefits of embedding mediation programs in higher education institutions to transform conflict resolution from punitive, top-down processes into collaborative, empowering ones. These include teaching students problem-solving as a lifelong skill, providing a gentler alternative to rigid disciplinary policies through confidential dialogues, building democratic leadership, promoting open student-staff communication, modelling essential soft skills valued by employers, and fostering self-reflection to address biases and unconscious behaviours.<sup>9</sup>

Margarita Aimilia Gkanatsiou and colleagues examine how AI and digital platforms are revolutionising mediation and leadership in HEIs. Grounded in Media Richness Theory (MRT) and Social Presence Theory (SPT), the authors argue that these tools simulate trust-building non-verbal signals, enabling efficient, inclusive conflict management through real-time dialogue, adaptive AI for emotion detection, and simulated empathy. Looking ahead, the paper envisions emotionally intelligent AI fostering empathetic leadership paradigms that turn disputes into collaborative opportunities.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Josef Leidenfrost, Conflict Resolution at Universities: Ombudsman Mediation as a Tool?, Perspective | Focus, Feb. 2015, at 101, [https://www.theioi.org/downloads/9p76t/PM\\_2-15\\_Leidenfrost\\_German\\_to\\_English.pdf](https://www.theioi.org/downloads/9p76t/PM_2-15_Leidenfrost_German_to_English.pdf).

<sup>8</sup>Andriyana Andreeva & Desislava Serafimova, Mediation in Higher Education - Aspects of Application in Conditions of Digital Transformation (Munich Personal RePEc Archive, Working Paper No. 113417, 2022), <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/113417/>.

<sup>9</sup>K. Matthews, 7 Benefits of Mediation Programs in Higher Education Institutions, Mediate.com (Oct. 10, 2019), <https://mediate.com/7-benefits-of-mediation-programs-in-higher-education-institutions/>.

<sup>10</sup>Margarita Aimilia Gkanatsiou et al., AI and Digital Tools: Transforming Mediation and Leadership in Higher Education (HEIs), 107 Eng. Proc. 104 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3390/engproc2025107104>.

Additional scholarship by Jincy Denny et al.<sup>11</sup> and Dr. Chaya Ravi Jadhav et al.<sup>12</sup> has explored web-based grievance support systems and student grievance redressal models, highlighting the shift towards automation in recording and verifying student complaints, though noting limitations around validation and timely resolution. Manish Rohatgi and Meenu Gupta's analysis of grievance redressal policies in Indian universities provides a comprehensive survey of the types of complaints handled and the systemic gaps in policy and law.<sup>13</sup>

## **VII. STUDENT-ADMINISTRATION DISPUTES IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

Student-administration disputes have become increasingly common in Indian higher education institutions due to rapid expansion in enrolment, rising administrative complexities, and heightened awareness of student rights under NEP 2020. These disputes often involve academic evaluation, financial matters, campus facilities, and administrative decisions, creating friction between students and university authorities. While internal grievance redressal mechanisms such as Students' Grievance Redressal Committees (SGRC) and Ombudspersons exist under the UGC (Redressal of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2023, they frequently fail to deliver timely, impartial, and relationship-preserving outcomes.

Student-administration disputes in Indian HEIs are primarily non-adversarial in origin but become contentious due to perceived administrative rigidity, lack of transparency, and power imbalances. Academic disputes encompass issues related to evaluation and grading, reevaluation of answer sheets, attendance shortages, examination results, and research supervision. Students often challenge arbitrary marking, delayed result declarations, or denial of reevaluation requests, which directly affect their academic progression and future opportunities.

Administrative and financial disputes represent one of the most frequent categories and cover disputes over fee structures, fee hikes, refunds, scholarship delays, and reimbursement of tuition fees, especially for SC/ST and minority students. A prominent example is the Supreme

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<sup>11</sup>Jincy Denny, Ramya Chanda, A. Srija Reddy, Sweta Rani Lenka, Sahithya Vallabaneni, A Web Portal for Student Grievance Support System, e-ISSN: 2395-0056, p-ISSN: 2395-0072, Volume: 08 Issue: 05, (2021).

<sup>12</sup>Dr. Chaya Ravi Jadhav, Divyanshu Saroj, Ved Gawai, Deven Sinha "Student Grievance Redressal Model" International Journal of Innovative Research in Engineering, ISSN NO: 2583-8764, Volume 3, Issue 3, (2022).

<sup>13</sup>Manish Rohatgi, Meenu Gupta "Grievances Redressal Mechanism of University's Students in India- Policy and Law", 02 Oct (2019). International Journal Of Recent Technology And Engineering (IJRTE)

Court proceedings wherein the Court directed the Central Government and states to explain delays in disbursing post-matric scholarships to SC/ST students even after sanction, highlighting administrative lethargy that forces students to approach courts.<sup>14</sup>

Campus facility-related disputes involve hostel allocations, mess charges, rent during vacations or pandemics, and infrastructure facilities. A notable case is the Punjab and Haryana High Court order directing a university to charge only 50% hostel rent during the COVID-19 period and refund the excess amount collected, illustrating how universities often treat students as revenue sources rather than stakeholders.<sup>15</sup>

Equity and inclusion-related disputes involve discrimination or unequal treatment based on caste, religion, gender, disability, or identity changes in university records. The matter of *Ayesha Jain v. Amity University, Noida* concerns a student who legally changed her name and alleged that the university failed to update its records despite proper documents, thereby denying her access to classes and examinations. The case also raises concerns of religious identity and dignity, as she alleged that university officials taunted her for adopting a Muslim-sounding name. The Supreme Court treated it seriously and required the university to explain its conduct, demonstrating how rigid university procedures can affect a student's right to education.<sup>16</sup>

Disciplinary and conduct-related disputes include suspensions, expulsions, hostel restrictions, alleged misconduct, and violations of campus rules. Such disputes often raise questions about proportionality, natural justice, and whether the institution followed a fair and reasoned procedure before taking punitive action. These disputes are not merely individual grievances; they reflect systemic issues in institutional governance. In the absence of effective internal resolution, students are compelled to approach High Courts and the Supreme Court, overburdening the judiciary and straining campus relationships.

## VIII. LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK GOVERNING STUDENT-

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<sup>14</sup>In Re: Post-Matric Scholarship for SC/ST Students, Supreme Court of India (proceedings initiated on application by Amicus Curiae Aparna Bhat), as reported in The Tribune (13 October 2025). The Court directed the Centre and states to explain delays in scholarship disbursement even after sanction. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/sc-asks-centre-to-explain-delay-in-disbursing-scholarship-amount-to-sc-st-students/>

<sup>15</sup>Aditya Kashyap v. State of Punjab, LPA No. 716 of 2022, Punjab & Haryana High Court (21 November 2022).

<sup>16</sup>Ayesha Jain v. Amity University, Noida, W.P.(C) No. 531/2025, Supreme Court of India

## ADMINISTRATION DISPUTES

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides the broad policy foundation for grievance redressal in higher education. It emphasises the creation of a student-centric, equitable, and inclusive academic environment. The Policy stresses the need for transparent, efficient, and fair mechanisms to address student grievances so that disputes do not escalate and campus harmony is maintained.<sup>17</sup>

The primary and most specific regulation governing student-administration disputes is the University Grants Commission (Redressal of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2023, which apply to all universities and colleges established or recognised by the UGC. Regulation 3 defines "grievance" to include complaints relating to admission, academic matters (evaluation, grading, attendance), fees, scholarships, hostel and campus facilities, and any other administrative decision affecting students.<sup>18</sup> Regulation 5 mandates every institution to constitute a Students' Grievance Redressal Committee (SGRC) consisting of senior faculty members and student representatives.<sup>19</sup> The SGRC must dispose of grievances within 15 days, and an aggrieved student may appeal to the Ombudsperson within 15 days of the SGRC decision, with the Ombudsperson required to decide within 30 days.<sup>20</sup>

Where student-administration disputes escalate to civil courts or High Courts through writ petitions, Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 plays a significant role. This section empowers the court to refer a dispute to mediation, conciliation, Lok Adalat, or arbitration if it appears that there exist elements of a settlement acceptable to the parties. Courts have increasingly used this provision to encourage parties to attempt mediation before proceeding with full adversarial litigation.<sup>21</sup>

The Mediation Act, 2023 provides a comprehensive statutory framework strongly supporting the use of mediation for student-administration disputes. Section 3 defines mediation as a voluntary and confidential process whereby parties attempt to reach a mutually acceptable settlement with the assistance of a neutral third party.<sup>22</sup> Section 5 promotes voluntary

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<sup>17</sup>Nat'l Educ. Policy 2020, Ministry of Educ., Gov't of India, paras. 13.6-13.7, 14.4 (2020).

<sup>18</sup>Univ. Grants Comm'n (Redressal of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2023, Reg. 3 (definition of "grievance"), Gazette of India, pt. III sec. 4 (Apr. 11, 2023).

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, Reg. 5

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, Reg. 6

<sup>21</sup>Code of Civil Procedure, 1908, s. 89.

<sup>22</sup>The Mediation Act, 2023, No. 32 of 2023, s. 3

pre-litigation mediation; Section 7 empowers courts and tribunals to refer parties to mediation at any stage of proceedings.<sup>23</sup> Section 22 ensures strict confidentiality of the mediation process, and Section 44 makes the mediated settlement agreement enforceable as a decree of a civil court.<sup>24</sup> The Act also encourages institutional mediation and provides for the establishment of the Mediation Council of India to regulate mediators and mediation service providers. Collectively, the NEP 2020, UGC Regulations 2023, Section 89 CPC, and the Mediation Act, 2023 provide both specific institutional mechanisms and general statutory support for resolving such disputes, yet the existing system remains largely committee-based and adversarial in practice.

## **IX. FUNCTIONING AND LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL MECHANISMS**

The existing grievance redressal system in Indian higher education institutions operates primarily through a two-tier institutional mechanism comprising the SGRC at the first level and the Ombudsperson at the appellate level.<sup>25</sup> In practice, a student with a grievance is required to submit a written complaint to the SGRC, either physically or through the institution's online portal. The Committee examines the complaint, calls for explanations from the concerned administrative department, and provides an opportunity to the student to present their case. Hearings are usually conducted in a formal manner following the principles of natural justice.

The SGRC, being dominated by senior professors and administrative officials, functions more like an internal disciplinary or administrative inquiry body rather than a neutral dispute resolution forum. After deliberation, the Committee forwards its recommendations to the competent authority for final decision. In many institutions, the entire process from filing to disposal takes significantly longer than the stipulated period due to frequent adjournments, non-availability of members, and bureaucratic delays. Even when decisions are issued, implementation often remains weak, leaving students dissatisfied.

If the student is not satisfied with the SGRC's decision, they may file an appeal before the Ombudsperson. However, in practice, the Ombudsperson's role is largely limited to paper-based review, and the disposal rate remains slow in most universities. Moreover, many

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, ss. 5, 7.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, ss. 22-44.

<sup>25</sup>Supra Note 17

institutions have either not appointed an Ombudsperson or the position remains vacant for extended periods, forcing students to either accept the SGRC decision or approach the courts directly.

Higher education institutions also maintain multiple parallel specialised committees such as the Anti-Ragging Committee, Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) under the POSH Act, SC/ST Cell, and Equal Opportunity Cell. While these bodies serve specific purposes, their overlapping jurisdictions often create confusion for students. A single grievance involving multiple issues may require the student to approach different committees simultaneously, resulting in parallel proceedings, contradictory findings, and prolonged uncertainty.<sup>26</sup> The UGC's e-Samadhan portal was introduced as a centralised online platform to streamline grievance lodging, but in practice the portal merely forwards the grievance to the concerned institution for action, without any independent monitoring or enforcement authority.<sup>27</sup>

Despite having a statutory framework, the existing grievance redressal mechanisms suffer from several serious practical challenges and structural limitations. The most prominent issue is the perceived and actual bias arising from the composition of the SGRC. Since the Committee is usually chaired by a senior professor or dean and dominated by senior administrative officials, students often view it as an extension of the administration rather than an impartial forum. This power imbalance creates hesitation among students to file genuine complaints for fear of retaliation, adverse academic consequences, or being labelled as troublemakers.

Lack of transparency also severely undermines the system. Students often have no way of knowing the status of their grievance or the final resolution taken. The grievance process itself may be opaque and the absence of a feedback loop makes it difficult to identify areas for improvement.<sup>28</sup>

Another major limitation is procedural delay and inefficiency. Although the UGC Regulations, 2023 prescribe strict timelines, these are rarely adhered to in practice. Frequent

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<sup>26</sup>Univ. Grants Comm'n (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2012 (as amended); Univ. Grants Comm'n (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal of Sexual Harassment of Women Employees and Students in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations, 2015.

<sup>27</sup>Univ. Grants Comm'n, e-Samadhan Portal, <https://samadhaan.ugc.ac.in/> (launched 2024); see also UGC Circular on Operationalisation of e-Samadhan Portal (2024).

<sup>28</sup>Harshil Sheth et al., Addressing Student Grievances: A Comprehensive Analysis of Grievance Management Systems, 12 *Int'l J. Sci., Engineering & Tech.* 122 (2024).

adjournments, non-availability of committee members, lengthy correspondence with departments, and bureaucratic red tape often result in grievances remaining pending for several months or even years. Furthermore, there is a widespread problem of non-implementation and weak enforcement. Even when the SGRC or Ombudsperson gives clear recommendations in favour of the student, the competent authority often delays or selectively implements the decisions.

In *Amit Kumar v. Union of India* (2026), the Supreme Court observed that many support bodies like Equal Opportunity Cells (EOCs) and Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) either exist only on paper or remain merely tokenistic. The Court noted that these bodies often lack independence, may function in favour of perpetrators or aggressors rather than the students for whom they are created, and frequently face suppressed complaints and biased proceedings, creating an atmosphere of fear of academic or social backlash among students.<sup>29</sup>

A glaring illustration of poor implementation is the failure of many institutions to even constitute the mandated bodies. As per data released by the UGC on 1 April 2024 and 1 July 2024, 157 and 64 universities respectively had not established the office of Ombudsperson. The UGC has repeatedly published lists of defaulting universities that have not appointed Ombudspersons or constituted SGRCs even years after the notification of the 2023 Regulations.<sup>30</sup> One prominent example is IIT Bombay, where despite releasing a detailed SGRC policy report in January 2024 and repeated student demands, the institute had not formally appointed the committee as of late 2024 due to administrative delays and leadership transitions.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, low awareness and institutional multiplicity compound these issues. Many students are unaware of the SGRC or the e-Samadhan portal. The existence of multiple parallel committees often creates confusion regarding the appropriate forum, leading to forum-shopping and overlapping proceedings. Delays and lack of transparency can lead to frustration and a sense of being unheard, negatively impacting student morale.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Supra Note 2

<sup>30</sup>Univ. Grants Comm'n, List of Defaulting Universities (2024 or 2025), [https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/7225326\\_List-of-defaulting-Universities.pdf](https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/7225326_List-of-defaulting-Universities.pdf) (last visited March 29, 2026)

<sup>31</sup>Insight IIT Bombay, Student Grievance Redressal Committee: A New Way to Get Your Grievances Resolved? (Dec. 27, 2024).

<sup>32</sup>Supra Note 27

## X. JUDICIAL PERSPECTIVE ON STUDENT-ADMINISTRATION DISPUTES

Indian courts have consistently highlighted the shortcomings of existing internal grievance redressal mechanisms while dealing with student-administration disputes. In numerous cases, the judiciary has expressed concern over delays, bias, arbitrary decision-making, and the failure of universities to provide effective redressal at the institutional level.

A recent and telling illustration is the case of ILS Law College, Pune. In 2025-26, student and advocate Mayur Suhas Garud filed a writ petition in the Bombay High Court alleging illegal collection of excess fees amounting to Rs. 1,04,863 over multiple academic years (2020-21 to 2024-25). The Court, in February 2026, directed the Maharashtra Government to decide the complaint within two months, underscoring how institutional mechanisms are bypassed when they lack credibility or speed. The DHE directed ILS Law College to pay Rs. 1,04,863 along with interest of 6% to the student.<sup>33</sup>

In *Gargi Nandapurkar v. State of Maharashtra*, final-year law students from Government Law College, Mumbai, challenged the deduction of 30 out of 40 internal assessment marks due to low attendance. The Bombay High Court granted interim relief, observing that the college had failed to follow the attendance protocols mandated by the University of Mumbai. The Court directed the college authorities to reassess the students' internal marks, underscoring how rigid and arbitrary administrative decisions in academic evaluation force students to seek judicial intervention when internal mechanisms prove ineffective.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, in *Kali Charan Sabat v. Union of India*, the Madhya Pradesh High Court in 2024 quashed disciplinary proceedings arising out of an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) inquiry at MANIT Bhopal. The Court found that the ICC inquiry into allegations of sexual harassment suffered from serious procedural irregularities, including denial of adequate opportunity to cross-examine witnesses and non-compliance with statutory safeguards under the POSH framework and service rules. Characterising the process as an "eye wash," the Court set aside the termination order and emphasised that ICC inquiries must strictly adhere to principles of natural justice and statutory procedure.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Mayur Suhas Garud v. Principal, ILS Law College, W.P. No. 11546 of 2025 (Bom. HC Feb. 19, 2026).

<sup>34</sup>Gargi Nandapurkar vs. State of Maharashtra Through the Secretary Higher, W.P. No. 817/2025

<sup>35</sup>Kali Charan Sabat v. Union of India, 2024 SCC OnLine MP 7314 (M.P. HC Nov. 8, 2024).

In a recent Rajasthan High Court ruling, the court held that educational institutions lack authority to retain students' original documents as security for unpaid dues, declaring such retention an illegal method of fee recovery and directing that documents must be returned on demand as they remain the property of the students.<sup>36</sup>

In *Vanshika v. University of Delhi*, a B.A. (Hons.) English student at Kalindi College could not appear in her first-semester examination due to a failed fee payment transaction. She was assured by university authorities that she could take the first-semester examination along with the third semester. Relying on this assurance, she attended second- and third-semester classes and appeared in the second-semester examination. However, the University withheld her second-semester result and refused to allow her to appear in the third-semester examination, citing non-promotion from the first semester. The Delhi High Court allowed the writ petition, directed immediate declaration of the second-semester result, and permitted the petitioner to continue her course, holding that once a student is allowed to attend classes and appear in examinations, the University cannot later penalise her for its own lapses or administrative failures.<sup>37</sup>

These judicial interventions reveal fundamental shortcomings in the grievance redressal systems of Indian higher education institutions: perceived bias discourages students from approaching internal forums, chronic delays undermine trust, and the adversarial, punitive approach damages long-term relationships between students and administration rather than repairing them. It is in this context that the integration of mediation as a structured Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanism becomes imperative. The persistent escalation of student-administration disputes to the judiciary exposes three core failures of the existing system: (i) perceived bias and power imbalance, (ii) inordinate delays and weak enforcement, and (iii) an adversarial approach that harms long-term campus harmony instead of restoring it.

## **XI. MEDIATION AS AN ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION MECHANISM FOR STUDENT-ADMINISTRATION DISPUTES**

The inherent diversity in Indian higher education institutions fosters innovation and growth, yet it also gives rise to frequent student-administration disputes. Traditional grievance redressal mechanisms under the UGC Regulations, 2023 often suffer from perceived bias,

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<sup>36</sup>Eshita Gupta v. Jaipur Nat'l Univ., S.B. Civil Writ Pet. No. 7084/2024, Misc. Appl. (Raj. HC Dec. 3, 2025).

<sup>37</sup>Vanshika v. University of Delhi, W.P.(C) 16398/2023, Delhi High Court (19 February 2024)

procedural delays, and an adversarial approach that damages long-term campus relationships.<sup>38</sup> In this context, mediation has emerged as a highly suitable Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanism. Mediation is a structured, voluntary, and confidential process through which an impartial third party, known as the mediator, helps two or more disputing parties reach a mutually acceptable resolution to their conflict.<sup>39</sup> Unlike formal committees that focus on fault-finding, mediation is defined by its voluntary nature, the neutrality of the mediator, the confidentiality of proceedings, and the self-determination of the parties involved.<sup>40</sup>

Mediation rests on five fundamental principles: voluntary participation, whereby parties join and may withdraw at any stage of their own free will; neutrality, whereby the mediator remains completely impartial and does not favour any side; confidentiality, whereby all discussions and information shared remain strictly private and cannot be used in later litigation; impartiality and avoidance of conflicts of interest, whereby the mediator must maintain objectivity and avoid any situation that could compromise fairness; and self-determination, whereby the parties themselves retain full control over the outcome.<sup>41,42</sup>

These principles give mediation distinct advantages over the existing committee-based grievance redressal system. Mediation is significantly faster and more cost-effective, usually resolving disputes within weeks rather than months or years. It reduces power imbalances between students and administration, ensures confidentiality, and focuses on interest-based solutions rather than fault-finding. Most importantly, mediation is relationship-preserving; it helps restore trust and promotes long-term campus harmony instead of damaging relationships through adversarial proceedings. Because parties themselves craft the solution, compliance rates are considerably higher.<sup>43</sup>

## **XII. LEGAL FRAMEWORK SUPPORTING MEDIATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The Indian legal and policy framework provides strong statutory support for the integration of mediation in resolving student-administration disputes. The Mediation Act, 2023

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<sup>38</sup>Supra Note 27

<sup>39</sup>Varun Singh & Ms. Shailja Khosla, Conceptual Framework of Mediation, Indian Journal Of Legal Review (IJLR), 5 (8) OF 2025, PG. 811-819, APIS - 3920 - 0001 & ISSN - 2583-2344

<sup>40</sup>Ibid

<sup>41</sup>Mariam Pilishvili, Principles of Mediation 2-3 (Faculty of Law and Administration, University of Lodz, 2018-2019)

<sup>42</sup>Id. at 4-8.

<sup>43</sup>Id. at 2-3; see also Varun Singh & Shailja Khosla, Conceptual Framework of Mediation, Indian Journal of Legal Review (IJLR), 5(8) 811, 814-816 (2025).

is the cornerstone legislation. Section 3 defines mediation as a voluntary and confidential process facilitated by a neutral third party. Section 5 promotes pre-litigation mediation, while Section 7 empowers courts and tribunals to refer disputes to mediation at any stage. Section 22 ensures strict confidentiality, and Section 44 makes mediated settlement agreements enforceable as a decree of a civil court.<sup>44</sup>

Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 further strengthens this framework by authorising courts to refer suitable disputes to mediation where elements of a settlement exist.<sup>45</sup> High Courts have increasingly applied this provision in student writ petitions involving academic, financial, and administrative grievances. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 complements these statutes by emphasising transparent, efficient, and harmonious grievance redressal mechanisms to promote equity and inclusion in higher education.<sup>46</sup> The UGC (Redressal of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2023 also leave sufficient scope for alternative informal resolution methods such as mediation before formal SGRC proceedings.<sup>47</sup>

### **XIII. INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES AND LESSONS FOR INDIA**

To identify best practices that can be adapted to the Indian context, this study examines mediation models from three leading institutions: Emory University (USA), University of Georgia (USA), and the University of Melbourne (Australia). These institutions were selected because they operate in large, diverse, multi-campus university systems that closely resemble Indian HEIs, face similar student-administration disputes involving academic, financial, and administrative issues, and have successfully institutionalised mediation with measurable impact on resolution rates, litigation reduction, and campus harmony.

Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, provides a model through its Faculty-Peer Mediation Committee, launched in January 2016. Trained faculty mediators assist colleagues in resolving conflicts and repairing working relationships. The program delivers certification-level training via third-party vendors, pre-escalation strategies, and deploys 40 "mediation ambassadors" across Emory's nine schools to promote awareness informally. Strict confidentiality governs proceedings, with exceptions for participant consent, imminent physical danger, illegal harassment or criminal activity, or court subpoena. Emory's approach achieves

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<sup>44</sup>The Mediation Act, 2023, No. 32 of 2023, ss. 3, 5, 7, 22-44.

<sup>45</sup>Code of Civil Procedure, 1908, s. 89; see also Supra Note 37

<sup>46</sup>Nat'l Educ. Policy 2020, Ministry of Educ., Gov't of India, paras. 13.6-13.7, 14.4 (2020)

<sup>47</sup>Univ. Grants Comm'n (Redressal of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2023, Regs. 2 & 4

70-90% resolution rates, reducing litigation - a blueprint for Indian HEIs under the Mediation Act 2023.<sup>4849</sup>

The University of Georgia operates a comprehensive system-wide mediation programme that has successfully conducted over 800 mediations. It combines professional mediators with trained faculty and staff mediators and focuses on early intervention for student-administration conflicts. The programme emphasises restorative justice, preventive training, and relationship repair. It has resulted in substantial cost savings by reducing formal grievances and litigation, with some units reporting up to an 80% decrease in formal complaints.<sup>50</sup>

The University of Melbourne integrates mediation into its formal student complaints and grievances policy. It offers early-stage facilitated dialogue and mediation through its Ombudsman service and dedicated mediation pathways before formal investigation. The process is impartial, timely, and restorative, allowing students and administration to resolve administrative, academic, and equity-related disputes collaboratively. The university's policy explicitly encourages local-level mediation where appropriate, resulting in high student satisfaction rates and reduced escalation to external bodies such as the National Student Ombudsman.<sup>51</sup> These international models demonstrate that well-designed, institutionally embedded mediation programmes can achieve high resolution rates while preserving relationships - lessons that Indian HEIs can adapt to strengthen their grievance redressal systems.

#### **XIV. CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTATION OF MEDIATION**

Although the Mediation Act, 2023, Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908, NEP 2020, and UGC Regulations, 2023 provide a strong enabling framework, the practical implementation of mediation for student-administration disputes in Indian higher education institutions faces several formidable challenges.

The most critical barrier is the severe shortage of trained and certified mediators. Very

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<sup>48</sup>AdvanceRIT, Conflict Resolution and Mediation Benchmarking in Higher Education: Institutional Need, Benchmarking, Development, and Evaluation 4-5 (A. Rommel & M. Bailey eds., Jan. 12, 2016, updated May 1, 2017),

[https://www.rit.edu/advance/sites/rit.edu.advance/files/docs/Expanded\\_Conflict\\_Res\\_Mediation\\_Report\\_05.01.17\\_final.pdf](https://www.rit.edu/advance/sites/rit.edu.advance/files/docs/Expanded_Conflict_Res_Mediation_Report_05.01.17_final.pdf)

<sup>49</sup>Ibid

<sup>50</sup>Supra Note 5

<sup>51</sup>University of Melbourne, Student Complaints and Appeals Policy (2023-2024).

few faculty members or administrators in Indian universities possess formal mediation training recognised by the Mediation Council of India. Without skilled neutral facilitators, institutions cannot run effective mediation programmes. This is compounded by deep-rooted hierarchical culture and resistance from senior administrators, who often perceive mediation as a threat to their authority or as an unnecessary dilution of the formal grievance redressal process. Students, on the other hand, frequently lack awareness about mediation and tend to view it as a weaker alternative to the SGRC or court proceedings, resulting in low participation rates.<sup>52</sup>

Infrastructure and institutional readiness remain major constraints. Most HEIs lack dedicated mediation centres, adequate funding, and administrative support systems. Confidentiality concerns are particularly acute in academic settings, where students fear that information shared during mediation may later affect their academic records or future relations with faculty and administration.<sup>53</sup> The multiplicity of existing committees also creates confusion regarding the appropriate forum, leading to procedural overlaps and forum-shopping. Furthermore, integrating mediation with the existing SGRC mechanism raises practical difficulties relating to referral timelines, enforceability of mediated agreements, and the risk of parallel proceedings. Cultural preference for adversarial and punitive approaches continues to dominate institutional thinking, making the shift to a restorative, interest-based model slow and challenging.<sup>54</sup>

## **XV. CONCLUSION**

This study has comprehensively examined the nature, causes, and resolution of student-administration disputes in Indian higher education institutions. It has clearly established that, despite the existence of a statutory framework under the UGC (Redressal of Grievances of Students) Regulations, 2023 and the policy directives of NEP 2020, the existing grievance redressal mechanisms remain largely ineffective. Perceived bias arising from senior administrative dominance, chronic procedural delays, lack of confidentiality, weak enforcement of decisions, and an adversarial, punitive approach have eroded student trust and compelled frequent escalation of disputes to the courts, thereby overburdening the judiciary and straining campus relationships.

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<sup>52</sup>Supra Note 27

<sup>53</sup>Mediation in Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities, 15 Indian J. L. & Just. 89, 95 (2023)

<sup>54</sup>Afcons Infrastructure Ltd. v. Nagpur Metro Rail Corpn. Ltd., AIR 2016 SC 4305

The central hypothesis of the study - that the integration of mediation will substantially shorten resolution timelines, minimise litigation, and promote harmonious student-administration relations in Indian HEIs - stands firmly established. The doctrinal analysis, judicial trends, and international benchmarks demonstrate that mediation, with its core principles of voluntariness, neutrality, confidentiality, impartiality, and self-determination, offers a restorative and relationship-preserving alternative to the current committee-based system. Supported by the Mediation Act, 2023 and Section 89 of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908, mediation has the proven potential to resolve disputes faster, more confidentially, and with greater stakeholder satisfaction. International models from Emory University, University of Georgia, and the University of Melbourne further validate that well-institutionalised mediation programmes achieve high resolution rates (70-90%), reduce litigation costs, and restore campus harmony - outcomes directly relevant and adaptable to the Indian context.

In conclusion, mediation is not merely an optional tool but a necessary and timely reform for strengthening grievance redressal and achieving the vision of equitable, inclusive, and harmonious campuses envisaged by NEP 2020. Its effective integration holds the key to transforming student-administration disputes from sources of conflict into opportunities for collaboration and trust-building in Indian higher education institutions.

## XVI. SUGGESTIONS

Mediation can be effectively incorporated into Indian higher education institutions through a multi-pronged, phased approach that aligns with the existing legal and regulatory framework.

**1. Policy and Regulatory Integration:** The UGC should issue specific guidelines making mediation the first preferred step for all eligible student-administration disputes before the matter reaches the SGRC. The UGC may amend the 2023 Grievance Regulations to include a mandatory mediation referral clause at the institutional level, giving mediation statutory recognition and ensuring uniformity across all HEIs.

**2. Establishment of Dedicated Campus Mediation Centres:** Every university and affiliated college should establish an independent Campus Mediation Centre as a separate unit, headed by a trained coordinator and staffed with certified mediators (internal faculty as well as external empanelled mediators). The Centre should have a simple online portal for students to request

mediation and should function as a low-threshold, confidential forum.

**3. Training and Capacity Building:** A comprehensive training programme should be made mandatory for faculty, administrators, and selected student representatives, conducted in collaboration with the Mediation Council of India and recognised institutions. Regular certification and refresher courses must be organised so that a pool of skilled mediators is available in every HEI.

**4. Multi-Tiered Mediation Model:** A three-tier model should be adopted: Tier 1 involves informal institutional mediation conducted by trained faculty mediators within the university within 15 working days; Tier 2 involves the SGRC chaired by the Ombudsperson as a formal committee stage with neutral oversight; and Tier 3 involves direct access to court only if the dispute remains unresolved after the first two tiers.

**5. Independent UGC-Level Appellate Mechanism:** An independent panel should be constituted under the UGC to address grievances where the institutional Ombudsperson or SGRC is alleged to be biased or has failed to ensure fair adjudication. Students must be given the right to escalate complaints to this UGC panel through a structured and time-bound procedure. The panel should consist of neutral experts, including legal professionals and trained mediators, to ensure impartial review. This mechanism would act as a safeguard against institutional bias and strengthen accountability, transparency, and trust in the grievance redressal system.

**6. Awareness and Cultural Shift:** Awareness campaigns, orientation programmes, and workshops should be conducted regularly to familiarise students and staff with the benefits of mediation. The university must promote a cultural shift from adversarial to collaborative dispute resolution.

**7. Monitoring and Enforcement:** Each Campus Mediation Centre should maintain annual statistics on cases received, resolved, and referred further. Mediated settlement agreements should be signed by the parties and treated as enforceable under Section 19 of the Mediation Act, 2023. These suggestions are practical, scalable, and fully aligned with NEP 2020's vision of harmonious and student-centric campuses. Their implementation will significantly reduce litigation, restore trust, and strengthen academic governance in Indian HEIs.

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