The Bombay legislature of the erstwhile Bombay Presidency established Karnataka University through the Karnataka University Act 1949. It became a statutory University on 1st March 1950. The jurisdiction of the University covers Dharwad, Gadag, Haveri and Uttar Kannada districts. It has several Post Graduate centres. The University (888 acres) is offering courses in the faculties of Arts, Commerce, Education, Law, Management, Science and Technology and Social Sciences. Symbolic of the University's vision and mission the emblem of the University consists of papal tree at the centre, an open book. Figures of a bull, a rising sun and the legend ‘Arive Guru’ i.e., Wisdom is Guru, implying that both wisdom and knowledge should be all pervading like the ramifying papal tree and light up the world with knowledge and eradicate illiteracy.

There are 47 PG Departments, 224 teachers and 4500 students (PG, M.Phil., Ph.D.). The girl students constitute 47% of the total strength. Including PG Diploma, M.Phil and Ph.D. Courses, 6% of the students are from outside the State. To eliminate social exclusion and promote social justice, seats are reserved for SC/ST, Cat-I, Minorities, OBC and BC categories in accordance with the policy of the State Government. One seat each is reserved for the children of ex-servicemen, freedom fighters, physically challenged and sportsmen. The University has its own High School (University Public School) since 1964. Which meets the practice requirements of the B.Ed College of Karnataka University.

There are 5 constituent colleges offering UG and PG courses in science, arts, commerce, fine arts, law and education. There are 21 hostels in all, including a working women’s hostel and ladies hostels. These provide residential accommodation to 2600 students of UG and PG courses. Over the last 60 years the number of affiliated colleges has increased from a mere 34 to more than 250. The University has 3 PG campuses, at Haveri (42 acres), Gadag (32 acres) and Karwar (6 acres) all of which are district headquarters. All campus are self-contained and are at various stages of development. They cater to the needs of local people as well as promote specialized studies. For instance, the course on Pulp and Paper Technology is run from the premises of the West Coast Paper Mills, Dandeli (Uttara Kannada District). The University provides wide options and choices – 50 PG Courses, 4 advanced diplomas and 28 diplomas, 11 certificate courses, 26 M.Phil., and 42 Ph.D. programmes. Most of the Departments incorporate interdisciplinary components in designing their curricula keeping in view the emerging thrust areas. During the last five years new technical courses have been introduced to compensate the loss of medical and engineering faculties and the consequent loss of revenue to the University.