

Strengthening Higher Education in India: A Critical Evaluation of Government Reforms under NEP 2020

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Abstract: India's higher education sector is undergoing a profound transformation under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, with reforms aimed at widening access, promoting inclusiveness, enhancing academic flexibility, strengthening digital learning, improving institutional quality, fostering research and innovation, and expanding global academic engagement. Initiatives such as the Academic Bank of Credits, Multiple Entry and Exit, the National Credit Framework, curriculum reforms, SWAYAM, Virtual Labs, Research Development Cells, the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, and financing schemes like PM-USHA and HEFA signal a shift from expansion-driven growth to a model prioritising quality, innovation, and competitiveness.

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, drawing on secondary sources including government policy documents, Data from All India Surevy on Higher education, UGC and Ministry of Education reports, statistical data, and scholarly literature. It critically examines how reforms are being implemented, the outcomes that are beginning to emerge, and the challenges that persist—ranging from regional disparities and digital inequality to financial constraints, faculty preparedness, and institutional capacity. It emphasises that India's higher education reforms will play a decisive role in shaping the country's future as a knowledge-based society, with implications for both national development and global academic competitiveness.

Keywords: National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Higher Education Reforms, Academic Flexibility, Digital Learning, Research and Innovation,

1. Introduction

Higher education is central to social and economic development, contributing to human capital formation, knowledge creation, research, innovation, social mobility, and nation-building. In a global environment shaped by technological advancement, digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and evolving labour-market demands, its role has become increasingly significant. For India, which hosts one of the world's largest higher education systems, strengthening the sector is vital for building a knowledge-based economy and meeting the aspirations of its young population.

Over recent decades, India has witnessed considerable expansion in institutions, enrolment, and participation, with notable increases in female enrolment, Gross Enrolment Ratio, and the inclusion of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Yet expansion alone has not guaranteed equitable access, quality, employability, or research capacity. Persistent challenges include disparities in access, institutional capacity gaps, faculty development, digital inequality, and weak linkages with employment opportunities.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, approved on 29 July 2020, represents a major policy response. It emphasises access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability, while promoting multidisciplinary, learner-centred education, institutional autonomy, research, and global integration. The policy also sets an ambitious target of raising the Gross Enrolment Ratio to 50% by 2035.

Implementation has been accompanied by reforms such as the Academic Bank of Credits, Multiple Entry and Exit, the National Credit Framework, SWAYAM, Virtual Labs, the National Digital Library, accreditation reforms, the proposed Higher Education Commission of India, the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, and financing schemes like PM-USHA and HEFA. Despite this breadth, the key question remains: to what extent have these interventions translated policy objectives into measurable improvements? Against this backdrop, the present study critically evaluates reforms across seven dimensions—access and equity, academic flexibility, digital transformation, quality assurance, research and innovation, internationalisation, and financing—seeking to assess progress, identify gaps, and contribute to building a globally competitive, inclusive, and resilient higher education system.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive and analytical research design to critically examine government initiatives introduced under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 to strengthen higher education in India. The analysis is based primarily on secondary data drawn from Ministry of Education and UGC reports, AISHE statistics, government policy documents, official publications, and relevant academic literature. It highlights the policy–implementation gap and explores institutional, financial, technological, and regional factors influencing reform effectiveness.

3 AISHE Report: India's Higher Education Profile

According to AISHE reports, India's higher education network has expanded significantly over the decade. The number of universities increased from **760** in 2014–15 to **1,289** in 2023–24, representing a growth of **69.6%**. The number of colleges rose from **38,498** to **48,246**, an increase of **25.3%**. Standalone institutions increased from **12,276** to **15,221**, registering about **24%** growth. This expansion reflects a widening institutional base and greater capacity to serve learners across the country. It has strengthened the reach of higher education, supported broader participation, and contributed to building a **more accessible, diverse, and inclusive knowledge ecosystem for India's future**.

3.1 Increasing student enrolment : Advancing Equity and Inclusion

Higher education enrolment in India has risen steadily over the past decade, growing **31.5%** from **3.42 crore** students in 2014–15 to **4.50 crore** in 2023–24.

- The **Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)** in higher education rose from **23.7%** in 2014–15 to **29.5%** in 2022–23, and further to **30%** in 2023–24. This steady increase reflects growing access to and participation in higher education, supporting NEP 2020's target of raising the GER to 50% by 2035

From **2014-15** to **2023-24**, level-wise percentage increase in total enrolments was:

- o Ph.D 1.17 lakh to **3.43 lakh** (192.89%); Post Graduate 38.53 lakh to **57.85 lakh** (50.15%); Under Graduate 2.71 crore to **3.45 crore** (27.27%);
- o Diploma 25.08 lakh to **33.15 lakh** (32.22%); Certificate 1.70 lakh to **2.08 lakh** (22.55%); Integrated 1.41 lakh to **5.69 lakh** (301.36%).
- Female enrolment in higher education has witnessed steady growth over the past decade. It grew by **42.2%**, rising from **1.57 crore** in **2014–15** to **2.24 crore** in **2023–24**, outpacing the growth in total enrolment during the decade. The number of female students enrolled in various courses in **2023-24** was:
 - o Ph.D: **1.71 lakh**; Post-Graduate: **32.53 lakh**; Under Graduate: **1.71 crore**
 - o PG Diploma: **91,332**; Diploma: **13.27 lakh**; Certificate: **1.10 lakh**, and Integrated: **2.73 lakh**.
- Female GER increased from **22.9%** in **2014–15** to **31.2%** in **2023–24**, surpassing male GER (**28.9%**) for the **seventh** consecutive year.
- Higher education out-turn increased from **88.28 lakh** in 2014–15 to over **1.09 crore** in 2023–24 a **24.06%** increase. The growth reflects improved programme completion, enhanced retention, rising enrolment, and expanded institutional capacity. Supported by government initiatives, this trend highlights progress in access, equity, quality, and performance in higher education.
- **Gender Parity Index (GPI)** in higher education improved significantly, rising from **0.92** in **2014–15** to **1.08** in **2023–24**. GPI for the SC category increased from **0.91** to **1.11**, while ST category GPI rose from **0.81** to **1.08** during the same period.

- The rising GPI points to increasing parity favoring females. The progress highlights the impact of government initiatives in promoting **equity, inclusion**, and balanced **participation** in higher education.
- The share of SC enrolment rose from **13.44%** in 2014–15 to **15.5%** in 2023–24 in total enrolment. During the same period, the share of ST enrolment increased from **4.8%** to **6.4%**. OBC participation climbed from **32.8%** to **40.1%**, registering the largest increase in enrolment share among all social categories.
- The **GER** for SC students increased from **18.9%** in 2014–15 to **27.8%** in 2023–24. For the ST students, it increased from **13.5%** in 2014–15 to **22.8%** in 2023–24. Increasing participation of students from SC, ST and OBC categories reflects growing inclusivity in higher education.
- **Persons with Benchmark Disability (PwBD)** enrolment increased from **64,298** in 2014–15 to **88,816** in 2022–23, registering a growth of **38.1%**. Male and female enrolment grew by **54.4%** and **19.0%**, respectively, during this period.
- In 2023–24, **54,080** PwBD students were enrolled, including **34,080 males** and **20,000 females**. Higher male enrolment among PwBD points to a persistent gender imbalance in access to higher education. This suggests that improvements in access have not translated equally across genders.

3.2 Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) enrolment in higher education have increased steadily over the past decade. Total enrolments increased from **91.5 lakh** in 2014–15 to **1.02 crore** in 2023–24, representing an overall increase of approximately **11.5%** over the period.

The growth reflects expanding institutional capacity and sustained student interest in STEM disciplines, driven by government initiatives, digital technologies, innovation, research, and employment opportunities strengthening India's knowledge economy.

3.3 Foreign Student Enrolment

Foreign student enrolment rose from **42,293** in 2014–15 to **58,134** in 2023–24, an increase of approximately **37.5%** over the past decade — reflecting India's growing appeal as a destination for higher learning among international students. This points to the growing internationalisation of higher education, enhanced academic collaborations and global recognition of Indian institutions.

3.4 Faculty Growth in Higher Education

The number of teachers in higher education increased from **14.73 lakh** in 2014–15 to **17.32 lakh** in 2023–24, representing an overall increase of **2.59 lakh teachers**, or approximately **17.6%** growth during the period.

- The absolute number of female teachers grew by **36.7%** between 2014–15 and 2023–24, reflecting growing equity in employment opportunities for women in the sector.
- In both 2022–23 and 2023–24, the share of male teachers in the total teaching workforce remained higher than that of female teachers.
- In 2022-23, the share of female teachers was **44.3%**. It grew marginally to **44.9%** in 2023-24.

3.5 Infrastructure facilities

Between 2014–15 and 2023–24, infrastructure facilities in higher education institutions have improved considerably. Physical and digital infrastructure, green infrastructure and separate amenities for women and PwBD have been developed across institutions. In 2023–24:

- 94% of universities, 95% of colleges, and 91% of standalone institutions had a playground.
- 98% of universities, 98% of colleges, and 98% of standalone institutions had a library facility.
- 89% of universities, 85% of colleges, and 94% of standalone institutions had a laboratory.

In addition, most universities, colleges, and standalone institutions were also equipped with facilities such as health centres, skill development and computer centres, auditoriums, and conference halls.

4 . Higher Education reforms

4.1 Access, Equity and Inclusion

- Vidya Lakshmi Scheme: Financial Access for Students Launched in November 2024, the scheme offers collateral-free education loans to students in 860 top institutions, benefiting over 22 lakh students annually. Supports tuition fees and academic expenses, with a total outlay of ₹3,600 crore (FY 2024–

25 to 2030–31)—aiming to assist 7 lakh additional students. Key benefits: • Loans up to ₹7.5 lakh with 75% credit guarantee. • 3% interest subvention on loans up to ₹10 lakh for families earning below ₹8 lakh per annum, if not covered under other government schemes. Delivered via a fully digital, transparent platform with e-vouchers and CBDC wallets for smooth disbursements and repayments. Progress so far: • Applications received: 30,890 • Loans sanctioned: 13,358 (₹2,357.6 crore) • Loans disbursed: 8,379 (₹320.5 crore)

- Support for the Divyangjans : To ensure meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and mental illness in higher education, efforts are being made to through guidelines on inclusive pedagogical practices. The guidelines list following key pedagogical components: • Learning Support • Assistive devices • Curriculum design • Assessment and Evaluation • Personalized support and counselling integration

In accordance with the UGC (Open & Distance Learning and Online Programmes) Regulations, 116 HEIs offer 1,149 Open & Distance Learning programmes, and 102 HEIs offer 544 online programmes, benefiting over 19 lakh students. As per UGC's Credit Framework for Online Courses students can now transfer upto 40 % credits from SWAYAM MOOCs towards completion of their programmes, promoting flexibility, lifelong learning, and enabling HEIs to offer multidisciplinary options.

The National Digital University (NDU), envisioned in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, marks a significant advancement in India's higher education system. It is designed to broaden access to high-quality education, foster lifelong learning, and equip students with industry-relevant skills through a flexible, inclusive, and technology-enabled framework.

4.2 Academic Flexibility and Multidisciplinary Education

Multiple Entry and Exit (MEME) The Multiple Entry and Exit (MEME) framework, a cornerstone of NEP 2020, to promote academic flexibility and reduce dropout rates. • 153 universities offer multiple entry options, benefiting 31,156 UG and 5,583 PG students. • 74 universities have implemented multiple exit pathways, aiding 25,595 UG and 2,494 PG students. • 97 Centrally Funded Institutions (CFIs) have adopted MEME, with 33% of their courses offering MEME provisions.

Academic Bank of Credit (ABC) The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), facilitates academic mobility through a structured credit transfer mechanism, allowing students to pursue courses across multiple higher education institutions and accumulate credits towards a degree or diploma. This system promotes flexibility in learning and supports multidisciplinary education.

Biannual Admissions in HEIs University Grants Commission (UGC) has approved Biannual Admissions according to which university admissions will now be done in two cycles: July/August and January/February. This reform replaces the traditional single-cycle model and aligns with NEP 2020's goal of achieving 50% GER by 2035. It enhances student choice, institutional efficiency, and internationalization of Indian higher education.

National Credit Framework (NCrF) Developed collaboratively by regulators of school, skill, and higher education, and operationalized through a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) issued on August 7, 2024, NCrF offers a unified structure for credit accumulation, transfer, and redemption across School education, Higher education, Vocational training, Skill development, Work-based learning. It is embedded within the Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programs (CCFUP). National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF) Key reform under NEP 2020 aimed at standardizing and enhancing the quality of higher education in India. It provides a structured framework for the development, classification, and recognition of qualifications from Level 4.5 (first-year undergraduate) to Level 8 (doctoral programs).

4.3 Digital and Technology-enabled Higher Education

Under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, India is harnessing the power of digital innovation to expand access, enhance quality, and modernize higher education. A range of technology-driven initiatives— from online learning platforms to virtual labs and AI-powered tools—are transforming how students learn, upskill, and connect with real-world opportunities across the country.

• SWAYAM: India's national MOOC platform with over 5.15 crore enrolments, 16,530+ courses, and 388 universities permitting up to 40% credit transfer.

- SWAYAM Plus: Launched in February 2024, it offers industry-integrated online courses in fields like AI, Data Analytics, and Healthcare, forming the base of the Digital University.
- Virtual Labs: Offers 900+ virtual labs and 1,200+ experiments across STEM subjects to provide hands-on learning experiences.
- National Digital Library (NDLI): Hosts a vast collection of 8 crore+ digital academic resources in video, text, and audio formats.
- Anuvadini & e-KUMBH: AICTE's Anuvadini supports 22 languages for translation; e-KUMBH offers engineering books in multiple Indian languages.
- APAAR ID: A unique 12-digit academic ID seeded for 2.36 crore+ students, enabling seamless credit transfer, DigiLocker integration, and lifelong learning.
- NETF (National Educational Technology Forum): Established under AICTE to promote open exchange of ideas on the use of technology in education.
- NEAT (National Educational Alliance for Technology): Lists 393 EdTech firms with 171 products; 25% free coupons are allocated for EWS students, benefiting over 1.15 lakh learners.
- Internship Portal: A single platform with 11,578 HEIs and 78,759 industries, offering 54 lakh+ internships nationwide.
- IDEA Labs: AICTE-IDEA (Idea Development, Evaluation & Application) Labs has been set up in the technical institutions promoting multidisciplinary education & research, strong societal and industry linkage, support the new age learning and encouraging STEM experiential learning. 423 IDEA labs have been set up in HEIs

4.4 Research, Innovation and Faculty Development

NEP 2020 envisions a knowledge-driven higher education system that places research, innovation, and technology at its core. It aims to create a vibrant ecosystem that empowers institutions to contribute meaningfully to national and global development.

India's aspiration to become a USD 35 trillion economy by 2047 is intricately linked to its expanding research and innovation landscape. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes that the global knowledge landscape is undergoing rapid transformation, particularly in science and technology, artificial intelligence (AI), and machine learning (ML), presenting both opportunities and challenges for India. There is a need of synergizing efforts further to truly enable a robust research ecosystem that permeates across universities. At present India invests only 0.64% of GDP in research, compared to 3.47% in the USA, 5.71% in Israel, and 2.41% in China (2023-24). In alignment with NEP 2020, the Government of India has taken several initiatives to strengthen R&D landscape in the country.

The Anusandhan National Research Foundation (NRF), established under the 2023 Act, is a key NEP 2020 initiative to build a robust, inclusive research ecosystem with a ₹50,000 crore hybrid funding model. It supports peer-reviewed grants, infrastructure, mentorship, and research in regional languages while strengthening R&D through over 2,500 HEIs and 300 universities with active R&D cells, innovation hubs and industry academia linkages. Reforms such as the Ph.D. Degree Regulations 2022 promote flexible and inclusive research pathways. Ph.D. enrolment has doubled to 2.34 lakh by 2022–23, with female enrolment rising by 135.6%.

India ranked 3rd globally in research publications in 2024, with output rising 142% since 2015. Innovation has surged—patent filings reached 92,168 in 2023–24, with HEIs contributing 25% of these.

The KAPILA programme advanced IP literacy with over 10,800 patents filed and 71,000+ faculty/students trained. The NIRF India Rankings 2024 introduced a dedicated Research and Innovation Index, reflecting growing institutional competitiveness. Under the Institutions of Eminence scheme, 12 HEIs are driving industry-linked R&D, tech transfer, and start-up incubation—firmly positioning India on the global research map. Startup Ecosystem in HEIs across India Aligned with the vision of NEP 2020, the Government of India is strengthening the innovation and startup ecosystem within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through the establishment of Institution's Innovation Councils (IICs).

The Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) initiative has set up 51 centres, launched 38 interdisciplinary courses, and initiated 88 research projects, alongside 5,527 internships and training for 1,000 faculty,

with a goal to train 10,000 more. Additionally, UGC issued guidelines on 14.03.2022 for establishing Research and Development Cells (RDCs) in HEIs to foster multidisciplinary and translational research, aligning with Atma-Nirbhar Bharat goals. As of now, RDCs have been set up in around 2,871 Universities/HEIs. AICTE has established 423 IDEA (Idea Development, Evaluation & Application) Labs in technical institutions to promote multidisciplinary education, STEM-based experiential learning, and strong academia-industry linkages

4.5 Bhartiya Bhasha and Indian Knowledge Systems

Multilingualism in Education:

- Anuvadini App & e-KUMBH Portal: AICTE's Anuvadini App facilitates translation of engineering, medical, law, UG, PG, and skill books into Indian languages; these are accessible via the e-KUMBH portal.
- Multilingual Content on SWAYAM: Study materials are made available in multiple Indian languages on the SWAYAM platform to support diverse learners.
- CSTT Terminology Compilation: The Commission for Scientific and Technical Terminology (CSTT) has compiled over 30 lakh scientific and technical terms in 22 Indian languages, with 16 lakh terms digitized.
- ASMITA Initiative: Aims to produce 22,000 books in 5 years across 22 languages, supporting academic translation and original writing.
- Regional Language Education in Engineering: 41 engineering institutes across 10 states permitted to offer education in 12 regional languages, promoting technical education in mother tongues.
- Multilingual National Exams: CUET, JEE (Mains), and NEET (UG) are conducted in 12 Indian languages, enhancing access and fairness in national-level entrance tests.

4.6 Internationalisation of Higher Education

The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** seeks to position India as a global hub for higher education by fostering collaborative research, two-way student mobility, and internationalisation at home through global standards, foreign university presence, and Indian HEIs abroad. As part of this outreach, premier institutions have begun establishing overseas campuses: **IIT Madras–Zanzibar** commenced classes in Tanzania in July 2023, **IIT Delhi–Abu Dhabi** marked its first international presence in July 2023, and **IIM Ahmedabad–Dubai** signed an MoU in April 2025 to offer MBA and executive education in Dubai. Parallely, prestigious foreign universities have entered India: **Deakin University** and **University of Wollongong** from Australia established campuses in GIFT City, Gujarat, while the **University of Southampton** set up in Gurugram. Six more universities from the UK, Australia, USA, and Italy have received LoAs to establish campuses, reflecting reciprocal global engagement. The **Study in India** campaign has further expanded India's appeal, enrolling 47,602 international students, primarily from Asia and Africa, and launching a revamped portal in 2023 with 8,000+ programs across 600 institutions, supported by International Student Offices for enrolment and integration. To deepen academic collaboration, the **UGC Regulations on Academic Collaboration** issued in May 2022 enable Indian HEIs to offer Twinning, Joint, and Dual Degree programmes with reputed foreign universities, encouraging student and faculty mobility, curriculum integration, and alignment with global ranking parameters. Currently, 103 HEIs out of 230 eligible institutions are offering such collaborative programmes. Complementing these efforts, schemes like the **Global Initiative of Academic Networks (GIAN)** and **SPARC** strengthen collaborative research and academic exchange. Collectively, these initiatives reflect India's two-way internationalisation strategy—exporting Indian HEIs abroad, welcoming foreign campuses domestically, and fostering joint degrees and research partnerships—aimed at enhancing global standing, employability, and India's role as a knowledge hub.

4.7 Financing and Institutional Capacity

Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) Same status and style as MEME, To strengthen academic infrastructure and promote financial autonomy among Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) was established in 2017. Over seven years, HEFA has sanctioned ₹44,449.18 crore for 201 projects, benefiting premier institutions such as IITs, IIMs, NITs, and Central

Universities. These funds have been used to upgrade laboratories, hostels, classrooms, and research infrastructure, supporting the development of world-class academic facilities.

PM-USHA (Prime Minister Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan) Complementing this effort, the PM-USHA (Prime Minister Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan) scheme was launched under the NEP 2020 framework to transform select public universities into Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs).

PM-USHA: Strengthening Institutional Capacity The Pradhan Mantri Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA) is the flagship centrally sponsored scheme for higher education reform. It supports the transformation of state universities and colleges by providing funding tied to performance-based outcomes. The scheme has been instrumental in:

- Promoting digital infrastructure, internationalization, and academic autonomy
- Advancing equity and inclusion through targeted interventions in underserved regions

5. Critical Evaluation of NEP 2020 Higher Education Reforms

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has set in motion one of the most ambitious overhauls of Indian higher education in decades. Its vision stretches across access, equity, flexibility, digital transformation, quality, research, internationalisation, and institutional capacity. While the progress is undeniable, the journey is uneven, and the outcomes are still unfolding. Let's walk through the key areas.

5.1 Access and Inclusion

India has made real strides in expanding higher education. Enrolment has grown from 3.42 crore in 2014–15 to 4.50 crore in 2023–24, pushing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) from 23.7% to 30%. Women, in particular, have benefitted: female GER rose from 22.9% to 31.2%, and the Gender Parity Index now stands above 1.0, showing women slightly outnumber men in participation. Marginalised groups like SCs and STs have also seen notable gains. Yet, challenges remain. Persons with Benchmark Disabilities are still underrepresented, and regional disparities persist. Progress is visible, but universal equity is still a distant goal.

5.2 Academic Flexibility

The reforms around flexibility—like Multiple Entry and Exit (MEME), the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), and the National Credit Framework (NCrF)—are reshaping how students can navigate their education. These frameworks promise freedom: the ability to pause, transfer, or re-enter education without penalty. But the promise depends on institutions actually recognising credits and students making use of these pathways. Flexibility exists on paper; its real test lies in practice.

5.3 Digital Transformation

Digital initiatives such as SWAYAM, Virtual Labs, and the National Digital Library have opened doors to millions. SWAYAM alone has seen over 5 crore enrolments, and APAAR is giving students a lifelong academic identity. Still, digital inequality casts a shadow. Access to devices, connectivity, and digital literacy varies widely. High enrolment doesn't always mean high completion or employability. The digital revolution is impressive, but its inclusiveness is the real challenge.

5.4 Quality and Governance

NEP 2020 aims to shift governance from input-based regulation to outcome-oriented accountability. The Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) and graded autonomy are steps in this direction. Infrastructure has improved—libraries and labs are nearly universal—but quality is more than buildings. The true measure will be learning outcomes, teaching effectiveness, and graduate employability.

5.5 Research and Innovation

India's research ecosystem is expanding rapidly. Patent filings crossed 92,000 in 2023–24, and thousands of innovation councils and research cells have been set up. Faculty training programmes are equipping teachers with skills in AI, cybersecurity, and STEM. Yet, funding remains a bottleneck. Research expenditure as a share of GDP is still low, raising concerns about sustainability. Activity is high, but quality and global competitiveness need more focus.

5.6 Indian Languages and Knowledge Systems

The push for multilingual education—through initiatives like Anuvadini and regional-language engineering courses—has the potential to democratise access. Students can now learn in languages they are most comfortable with. But translation quality, faculty training, and usable terminology are critical. Without these, multilingual education risks being symbolic rather than transformative.

5.7 Internationalization

India is positioning itself as a global education hub. Foreign student enrolment has grown modestly, and Indian institutions are setting up campuses abroad. Joint and dual degrees with foreign universities are now possible.

Still, the scale is limited. To truly globalise, India must focus not just on numbers but on sustained collaborations, faculty mobility, and international recognition.

5.8 Financing and Capacity

Schemes like HEFA and PM-USHA have strengthened infrastructure, especially in labs, hostels, and classrooms. But financing is uneven. Elite institutions absorb funds more effectively than state universities, leaving equity concerns unresolved. Infrastructure is improving, but financial sustainability and equitable distribution remain pressing issues.

6 Challenges

The National Education Policy 2020 has undeniably reshaped the landscape of Indian higher education. Yet, translating its ambitious vision into everyday reality is proving far more complex. Expansion in enrolment, infrastructure, and programmes is visible, but the lived experience of students, teachers, and institutions reveals persistent gaps. Let's explore the challenges in a more grounded way.

6.1 Regional and Institutional Disparities

India has added hundreds of universities and thousands of colleges in the past decade. But numbers don't tell the whole story. Elite, centrally funded institutions often enjoy strong infrastructure, research facilities, and faculty resources, while many state universities struggle with limited capacity. This imbalance risks creating a two-tier system where reforms flourish in well-resourced campuses but remain aspirational elsewhere.

6.2 Digital Divide

Digital platforms like SWAYAM and Virtual Labs have opened new doors, but not everyone can walk through them. Reliable internet, devices, and digital literacy are unevenly distributed. For disadvantaged students, digitalisation can feel more like exclusion than inclusion. Participation figures look impressive, but completion and employability outcomes tell a different story.

6.3 Faculty Preparedness

Teachers are the backbone of reform. Their numbers have grown, and training programmes like the Malaviya Mission are helping. Yet, the demands of multidisciplinary education, AI-driven learning, and new assessment methods require continuous upskilling. Not all faculty have access to the training or support they need, especially in resource-constrained institutions.

6.4 Financial Constraints

Funding mechanisms such as HEFA and PM-USHA have strengthened infrastructure, but financing remains uneven. Premier institutions absorb funds more effectively, while state universities often lag behind. True reform requires not just money but equitable distribution, careful utilisation, and measurable outcomes.

6.5 Institutional Capacity

Policies like the Academic Bank of Credits and multidisciplinary education demand strong administrative systems and leadership. But institutions vary widely in readiness. Uniform policies don't translate into uniform implementation. Strengthening institutional capacity is as important as designing reforms.

6.6 From Inputs to Outcomes

Libraries, labs, and playgrounds are now widespread, and enrolments in SWAYAM or research councils are rising. Yet these are inputs, not outcomes. The real test lies in learning achievements,

employability, research quality, and social impact. NEP 2020 must move beyond counting facilities and programmes to measuring what students actually gain.

6.7 Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities

Enrolment of students with disabilities has grown, but gaps remain—especially gender imbalances. True inclusion requires accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, trained faculty, and tailored support. Numbers alone don't capture the lived challenges of these students.

6.8 Research Funding and Quality

Research activity is expanding—more Ph.D. enrolments, publications, and patents. But funding levels remain low, and quality varies. Without sustained investment and focus on relevance, collaboration, and impact, India risks producing volume without depth.

6.9 Academic Flexibility

Credit banks and multiple entry-exit pathways sound transformative, but their success depends on adoption. Institutions must recognise credits across campuses, and students must actually use these options. Measuring frameworks alone isn't enough; we need evidence of improved retention and mobility.

6.10 Internationalisation

India is opening up—foreign campuses, joint degrees, and rising international enrolments. Yet, to become a true global hub, quality, research collaboration, faculty mobility, and international recognition must deepen. Numbers of collaborations matter less than their substance.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, India's higher education system has entered a phase of rapid expansion, diversification, and reform, reflecting both quantitative growth and qualitative transformation. The rise in institutions, enrolments, and faculty strength has been matched by significant strides in equity, with female participation surpassing male GER and SC/ST/OBC enrolments steadily increasing. Infrastructure improvements, digital platforms, and inclusive pedagogical practices have broadened access, while reforms such as Multiple Entry and Exit, the Academic Bank of Credit, and the National Credit Framework have introduced unprecedented flexibility.

The emphasis on research and innovation through the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, IDEA Labs, and startup ecosystems has positioned Indian HEIs as key contributors to global knowledge creation. Parallel efforts in multilingual education, internationalisation, and financing reforms like HEFA and PM-USHA have strengthened institutional capacity and global competitiveness. Collectively, these developments underscore India's commitment to building a robust, inclusive, and future-ready higher education system.

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