Challenges and Prospects of Higher Education in India: A Critical Analysis for Viksit Bharat @2047

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Abstract

This study employs a descriptive and exploratory research design to analyse the current state of higher education in India, specifically in the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. A comprehensive review of secondary data was conducted, utilizing information from valid sources, including government reports and academic literature, to establish a robust analytical framework. The findings reveal critical challenges within the sector, such as infrastructural inadequacies, faculty shortages, and funding constraints, alongside an alarming Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 27.3%. Notably, NEP 2020 aims to achieve a 50% GER by 2035, underscoring the necessity for inclusive access and enhanced educational quality. Despite the challenges, the study identifies significant opportunities for reform through innovative pedagogical approaches and collaborative partnerships. Ultimately, the paper presents targeted recommendations for reforms designed to elevate educational standards, promote inclusivity, and position higher education as a vital contributor to national development in India for Viksit Bharat @2047

Keywords: *Higher Education, NEP2020, Privatization, Equity, GER, Issues & Challenges*

Introduction

Higher education serves as a cornerstone of economic growth and occupies a vital position within the educational landscape of any nation. It acts as a catalyst for rapid economic advancement and provides essential pathways for upward mobility. (Kumar & Sinha, 2021). Through higher education, individuals gain opportunities to engage in the development process while critically reflecting on the political, social, moral, cultural, spiritual, and economic issues that affect their society. As a key driver in building a knowledge-based society, higher education can instigate significant reforms by cultivating a scientific outlook, enhancing skills, broadening perspectives, and promoting self-sustainability among youth (Maheshwari et al,

2022) Higher education in India has witnessed unprecedented growth over the past few decades, according to a World Bank 2019 report after the USA and China India has the third largest Higher Education system in the world (Nathan & Das, 2010). This growth reflects India's commitment to enhancing educational access and promoting knowledge-driven economic development. However, despite these advancements, the sector grapples with persistent challenges that threaten to undermine its efficacy and sustainability (Maheshwari et al, 2022). Despite various government initiatives aimed at improving higher education, such as the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and the introduction of technology-enhanced learning, significant hurdles remain in bridging the gap between policy and practice (Sharma, 2022). For the further development and reform introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks an ambitious effort to address persistent issues and reform the higher education landscape in India. With a target of achieving a 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by 2035, the policy aims to dramatically increase access while also enhancing educational quality and outcomes, but the implementation of the reform of policy will require sustained effort and investment (Rai & Avasthi, 2021). However, the current GER of 27.3% highlights the considerable gap that needs to be bridged, for its discussion and deliberation among the stakeholders of education is needed, therefore this paper aims to explore the multifaceted challenges faced by higher education in India, examining both systemic issues and the advancing solutions that can be leveraged to create a more equitable and effective educational landscape**.** The paper also evaluates the potential impact of policy reforms proposed under NEP 2020. By exploring these dynamics, the research seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions on enhancing the quality, accessibility, and relevance of Indian higher education in a globalized knowledge economy for Viksit Bharat @2047

Research Question

What are the key challenges facing the higher education system in India? How can it be tackled to meet the demands of a dynamic workforce and global standards?

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the key challenges of the higher education system in India.
2. To study the recommendations for further Development of the Higher Education System in India in light of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive and exploratory research design to critically analyze the current state of higher education in India and the implications of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. A comprehensive review of secondary data was conducted, drawing from valid sources such as government reports, academic journals, and relevant literature to ensure a robust analytical framework. Data collection involved systematically sourcing information from reputable entities, including the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Ministry of Education, and the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE). In addition, peer-reviewed research papers, scholarly articles, and credible news publications were meticulously reviewed to gather diverse perspectives on the challenges and prospects of higher education in India. The analysis was guided by a thematic framework that identifies key issues, including infrastructural inadequacies, faculty shortages, and funding constraints. Furthermore, the study evaluates the effectiveness of existing policies and practices in addressing these challenges while exploring opportunities for reform and innovation within the sector. Qualitative data analysis techniques were employed to synthesize findings from multiple sources, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the landscape of higher education in India. This approach highlights the interplay between policy, practice, and outcomes, providing insights into the pathways for enhancing educational access, quality, and equity.

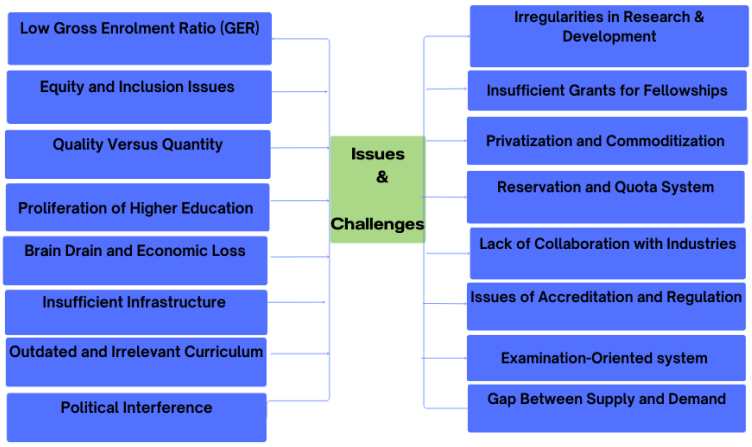
Result and Discussion

Low Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)

India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education stands at a mere 27.3%, as reported by the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) for 2020-2021. This figure significantly lags behind the global average and is lower than many other nations, despite India possessing the world's largest youth population, as indicated by the World Bank. Such a low GER highlights the exclusion of a considerable proportion of eligible youth from accessing higher education opportunities. The Enrolment rates are not uniform across the country; states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh exhibit particularly low participation levels, reflecting deep-rooted socio-economic disparities. Moreover, a stark urban-rural divide persists, whereby urban areas typically enjoy better access to educational resources, while rural youths remain significantly marginalized (Sharma & Singh, 2021).

Figure 1

Issues and Challenges in Higher Education in India



Equity and Inclusion Issues

As a developing nation, India faces formidable challenges regarding equity in access to higher education. A substantial segment of the population lives in poverty, adversely affecting their ability to pursue higher education. Access is especially problematic for individuals from socially and economically disadvantaged groups. For instance, the GER for females remains stagnant at 27.3%, while it is notably lower for Scheduled Castes at 23.1% and Scheduled Tribes at 18.9% (ASER Report, 2021). Regional disparities are also evident, as college density varies substantially; states like Bihar have fewer colleges per lakh eligible population compared to more developed states like Telangana. Additionally, premier institutions tend to congregate in metropolitan areas, exacerbating discrepancies between regions. The reservation system, intended to promote inclusivity, does not fully address the complexities posed by urban-rural divides, interstate variations, inter-religious differences, and inter-caste disparities. The unequal distribution of educational resources exacerbates high dropout rates, particularly among female students. For instance, the average dropout rates at the primary, upper primary, and secondary levels are 1.4%, 3.3%, and 12.3%, respectively (UDISE, 2021). With a GER of just 27% (AISHE Report, 2020), the dropout rates skyrocketed among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes due to socioeconomic disparities. Discrimination within institutions further complicates accessibility issues, with reports of suicides among students at prestigious institutes like IITs linked to systemic biases.

Quality Versus Quantity

The dichotomy between quality and quantity in Indian higher education is increasingly concerning, impacting students' competitiveness in the global arena. A significant gap exists in terms of the skill and employability of graduates, a reflection of systemic inadequacies in the educational framework. The current system prioritizes rote learning and examinations over skill development and practical applications. Despite 75 years of independence, India has not yet allocated even 6% of its GDP to education. Consequently, none of the Indian institutions rank among the top 100 globally. Although engineering remains a popular field, a staggering 80% of engineering graduates are deemed unprepared for professional demands (*National Employability Report*, 2019). Contributing factors to declining quality include outdated teaching methodologies, minimal industry collaboration, and a prevailing emphasis on quantity over substantive quality.

Expansion of Higher Education Institutions

In the seven decades post-independence, India has seen a substantial rise in both public and private higher education institutions. This growth often occurs without a corresponding enhancement in academic quality. Many institutions offer degrees at exorbitant costs while lacking rigorous academic standards, fostering a culture where students adopt shortcuts to success. Alarmingly, approximately 20 universities have been classified as "fake" by the University Grants Commission (UGC, 2023), contributing to a dilution of educational integrity.

Brain Drain and Economic Loss

In the search for better employment prospects, about 500,000 Indian students pursued higher education abroad in 2020, while only about 49,000 foreign students enrolled in Indian institutions. This trend incurs an annual economic loss of approximately USD 17 billion for India, depriving the country of valuable human resources and investment (FICCI, 2022). In 2024, approximately 1.33 million Indian students pursued higher education abroad, marking a significant increase from 1.32 million in 2023 and 907,404 in 2022 In contrast, Indian institutions enrolled about 46,878 foreign students during the 2021-2022 academic year (Economic Times, 2024). This disparity contributes to an annual economic loss for India, estimated at around USD 17 billion, as funds are spent on tuition and living expenses overseas. Additionally, the country experiences a depletion of valuable human resources, with many students opting to remain abroad after completing their studies. (Kumar & Sharma, 2021).

Insufficient Infrastructure

The effectiveness of teaching and learning hinges on adequate infrastructure, including state-of-the-art laboratories, classrooms, recreational areas, and sanitary facilities, public universities often suffer from budget deficits owing to corruption and mismanagement, while even many private institutions frequently fail to meet global standards. This lack of infrastructure continues to hinder the overall educational experience and impedes the development of a conducive learning environment (Kapur & Mehta, 2021**)**.

Outdated and Irrelevant Curriculum

The curriculum of Indian higher education predominantly emphasizes theoretical knowledge, with minimal opportunities for experimentation, creativity, and innovative thinking. Research suggests that many graduates find their education irrelevant to employment and real-world complexities. Nearly 90% of universities maintain outdated curricula, contributing to rising unemployment and increasing mental health concerns among youth. An urgent overhaul is necessary to integrate hands-on, practical, and skill-based learning into the curriculum. The relevance of education persists as a fundamental concern, encompassing various dimensions. Higher education must dissipate scientific knowledge to develop a scientific temper while fostering intellectual capacity critical for national economic growth. Value education that promotes principles of equality, democracy, justice, fraternity, and secularism is equally crucial. According to the India Skill Gap Report (2022), approximately 52% of graduates remain unemployed, largely due to a significant skills gap stemming from curriculum irrelevance.

Political Interference, Ideological Influences and Violence at University Premises

Political interference within universities poses a considerable hurdle. Political ideologies often dictate recruitment, administrative processes, and admissions, leading to conflicts among students and disruptions within the academic environment. Furthermore, political entities may exploit students for their agendas, undermining the integrity of educational institutions. Key appointments in institutions are frequently determined by political loyalty rather than merit, as seen in controversies involving universities. This interference fosters favoritism and governance issues. Additionally, political parties exploit students for activism. Campus violence, such as incidents in some central universities, in 2019 further disrupted academic environments. Such interference also affects academic freedom, with government influence on curricula raising concerns about institutional autonomy. Transparent policies strengthened

regulatory frameworks and depoliticized student unions are essential to safeguard universities as spaces for learning and innovation (Srinivasan, 2020).

Irregularities in Research &Development

Investments in research and development remain lacking in India, currently standing at only 0.7% of its GDP—well below the global average of approximately 1.8% (The Hindu, 2023). Although the Union Budget for 2023-2024 allocated ₹2000 crore for the National Research Foundation under NEP 2020, the existing state of research in India remains subpar. Ethical concerns related to the credibility of research are prevalent, compounded by a lack of qualified faculty and inadequate funding opportunities. Furthermore, only 6% of candidates qualify for the National Eligibility Test (NET), with a mere 1% qualifying for the Junior Research Fellowship (JRF), which often fails to sustain academic research careers (Chadha, 2020).

Privatization and Commoditization of Education

The trends of globalization and privatization, along with insufficient public funding, have triggered a surge in privately managed higher education institutions. Currently, 21.4% of colleges are government-owned, while a staggering 65% are private (AISHE Report, 2020). Many of these private institutions prioritize profit over education quality, resulting in high tuition fees that render quality education inaccessible to economically disadvantaged groups. As former President Barack Obama asserted, "Higher education is not a luxury reserved for the privileged; it is an economic necessity for every family."

Insufficient Grants for Scholarships and Fellowships

Scholarships and fellowships are essential for broadening access to higher education; however, funding for these programs has seen a steady decline. Although the government is increasing expenditures in other areas, the budget allocated specifically for education remains constricted, drawing concerns from advocates of equitable access to higher education.

Lack of Collaboration with Industries

The disconnection between higher education and industry is a significant issue hindering the development of a workforce equipped for modern demands. The educational system predominantly emphasizes theoretical knowledge while offering limited opportunities for practical, skill-based learning. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to bridge this gap by advocating for greater collaboration between education providers and industries from

Class 6 onwards; however, challenges remain in executing this initiative (Rao & Gupta, 2021).

Issues of Accreditation and Regulation

According to the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), only 25% of higher education institutions in India are accredited, with a mere 30% of universities and 45% of colleges achieving an 'A' grade. A significant number of institutions—600 out of 1,043 universities and 25,000 out of 40,000 colleges—remain unaccredited, compromising educational quality. This lack of accreditation affects at least 50% of higher education institutions (NAAC survey, 2020). The Indian higher education system is fraught with various regulatory challenges, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, over-centralization, lack of transparency, and limited accountability. These systemic flaws dilute the educational focus on research and academic excellence, stymying the growth of a robust higher education ecosystem (Yeravdekar et al., 2022).

Examination-Oriented System vs. Learning Enhancement

The examination-centric nature of the Indian educational system poses a considerable barrier to genuine learning and nation-building efforts. The overwhelming focus on passing exams often eclipses the importance of acquiring knowledge, leading to a workforce ill-equipped to meet industry demands and contributing to a chronic shortage of skilled professionals. (Kumar & Sharma, 2021).

Gap Between Supply and Demand

India currently has only 31 colleges per lakh eligible population (AISHE Report, 2021), reflecting a shocking shortage of educational institutions in a nation with a burgeoning youth demographic. With a GER of 27.1%, India lags behind global enrolment averages. A pressing demand for digital-skilled labour outstripped the size of the fresh talent pool by eight times in 2020 and is projected to increase twentyfold by 2024. This disconnect illustrates a significant gap between the availability of skilled labour and labour market demands (Yeravdekar et al., 2022).

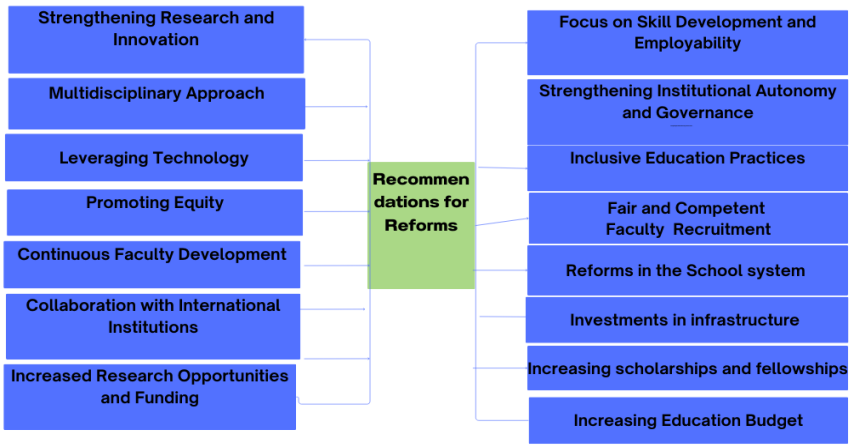
Reservation and Quota System

The reservation and quota system in admissions, particularly at prestigious institutions such as IITs, IIMs, and AIIMS, is a contentious issue with implications for educational quality. Approximately 49.5% of seats are reserved for historically disadvantaged groups; however,

many universities and leading institutions often struggle to fill all their seats. Consequently, any unclaimed seats should be made available to all eligible students, fostering a more equitable admission process.

Figure 2

Recommendations for the further Development of the Higher Education System in India in light of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.



The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has set forth a comprehensive framework aimed at transforming the higher education system in India. As the country endeavours to improve its educational landscape, it is imperative to consider certain recommendations that can further facilitate the achievement of these objectives.

Strengthening Research and Innovation

One of the cornerstones of NEP 2020 is to promote research and innovation among higher education institutions (HEIs). This can be facilitated by increasing funding for research projects, establishing collaborations between universities and industries, and creating incubators for startups Institutions should be encouraged to adopt a research-led approach, incorporating research methodologies into undergraduate programs, thereby nurturing a culture of inquiry from an early stage (Rai & Avasthi, 2021).

Multidisciplinary Approach

NEP 2020 endorses a multidisciplinary education framework that allows students to choose subjects across various disciplines. Institutions should develop flexible curricula and promote interdepartmental collaborations, which will enable students to gain knowledge across diverse fields. This could be accomplished through the establishment of integrated programs and dual-degree opportunities.

Leveraging Technology in Education and Enhancing Digital Infrastructure

Strengthening the digital infrastructure of HEIs is crucial for implementing NEP 2020 effectively. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for robust online education platforms. Institutions should invest in high-quality digital resources, including virtual labs and online libraries, to facilitate blended learning environments (Srinivasan, 2020). Furthermore, training faculty and students in the use of these resources will be essential to maximizing their potential. The NEP advocates the integration of technology into education, which can be further expanded through the establishment of digital education platforms. E-learning tools and resources should be made accessible to students in remote areas to bridge the digital divide Universities can collaborate with tech companies to develop interactive learning modules that cater to diverse learning styles (Chaudhary, 2021).

Promoting Equity

NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of inclusive education, particularly for marginalized and disadvantaged groups (Ministry of Education, 2020). Institutions should develop targeted scholarship programs, mentorship initiatives, and support services to ensure that all students have equal access to quality education. Adopting policies that promote gender equality and disability inclusion will also be vital in enhancing equity in higher education.

Continuous Faculty Development

The success of NEP 2020 greatly depends on the quality of teaching. Continuous professional development programs for faculty members should be implemented to keep them updated with the latest pedagogical techniques and technological advancements (Kumar & Sharma, 2021). Encouraging research and publishing opportunities for faculty will also enhance their expertise and teaching quality.

Collaboration with International Institutions

Establishing partnerships with foreign universities can open knowledge exchange and student mobility avenues. Facilitating study-abroad programs, joint degree initiatives and faculty exchange programs will enhance the global perspective of Indian higher education. These collaborations can also improve the ranking of Indian universities on global platforms (Rao & Gupta, 2020).

Strengthening Quality Assurance Mechanisms

A robust accreditation system must be established to ensure that higher education institutions meet the required quality standards. Regulatory bodies like the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) should be empowered to conduct regular assessments and provide guidelines for improvement. Institutions should be motivated to strive for quality and excellence through a transparent ranking system. (Sarkar & Roy, 2021).

Increased Research Opportunities and Funding

Increased funding for research and development is essential to positioning India as a global research hub. Institutions should be encouraged to forge partnerships with international universities to promote collaborative research projects. Establishing research grants and scholarships can incentivize students and faculty to engage in innovative research (Rao & Gupta, 2021).

Focus on Skill Development and Employability

The NEP emphasizes the importance of skill development in higher education. Integrating vocational training programs within higher education curricula can provide students with practical skills that meet industry demands Institutions should actively involve industry stakeholders in curriculum design to ensure the relevance and application of skills learned (Naseem & Agarwal, 2021).

Strengthening Institutional Autonomy and Governance

To foster a competitive educational environment, the autonomy of higher education institutions must be enhanced. Empowering institutions to make decisions regarding curriculum, faculty recruitment, and administration can lead to improved governance and accountability. Establishing a transparent framework for governance can ensure that institutions adhere to high standards of education while allowing flexibility in operations (Sharma, 2021).

Inclusive Education Practices

The NEP emphasizes inclusive education, which should be further developed through tailored programs for marginalized and underrepresented groups. Institutions should implement responsive admission policies and support services that cater to diverse student populations Creating awareness and implementing outreach programs can promote a more inclusive academic environment (Mishra & Nair, 2021).

Conclusion

Enhancing India's higher education system requires a comprehensive strategy. A key aspect of this strategy involves prioritizing merit-based fair transparent faculty recruitment processes. Equally, reforms in the school system are also important to better prepare students to meet the demands of higher education. Further, establishing a robust research ecosystem is vital for driving innovation and addressing societal challenges. Alongside this, increasing scholarships for economically disadvantaged students can promote equity by ensuring access to quality education for all. Aligning vocational and professional courses with market demands can further enhance the relevance of education to the evolving needs of the workforce. Expanding digital education and updating curricula with job-oriented skills can be a critical step toward bridging the digital divide and addressing the workforce requirements of the future. At the same time, promoting STEM education, and incorporating bilingual medium of instruction or mother language can make education more accessible and foster deeper learning. Efforts to empower women, ensure political neutrality in educational policies, and foster international collaborations can further strengthen the higher education system and its global competitiveness. Ultimately, achieving these goals will require collaborative efforts by policymakers, educational institutions, and industries. Such partnerships can create an education system that is accessible, relevant, and inclusive, effectively preparing India's youth to thrive in an increasingly dynamic and interconnected global landscape (Kapur & Mehta, 2021).

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