



From Expansion to Excellence: Evaluating the Impact of Recent Higher Education Reforms in India on Accessibility, Quality and Innovation

Ruchi Ramesh*

*Department of Higher Education, Government of Himachal Pradesh, India, Email: rameshruchi_06@yahoo.co.in, Phone: +91 94184 55111, ORCID: 0009-0007-9286-9350

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ABSTRACT

The transformative reforms in India's higher education sector since 2015, spearheaded by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA)/PM-USHA, and the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), have yielded substantial but uneven results. Analysis of data from 2015–2024 shows significant expansion and access improvements. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) rose from 24.5% to 28.4%, driven by institutional growth and scholarships, with female participation now surpassing males. Quality assurance has progressed, with 35% of institutions achieving accreditation. Furthermore, digital initiatives like SWAYAM have been highly successful, recording over 34 million enrolments, dramatically improving access to educational content. Crucially, research output has elevated India to the global third rank in publications, and innovation ecosystems are flourishing in urban elite centres through multidisciplinary curricula and incubators.

However, the path to achieving the NEP's ambitious goal of 50% GER by 2035 is hindered by deep-seated structural challenges. Regional disparities are stark, with southern states enjoying a 40% GER compared to just 25% in northern states. This inequity is exacerbated by a severe digital divide, evidenced by only 45% rural internet penetration, limiting the reach of digital learning. Persistent issues include widespread faculty shortages, chronic funding delays, and significant infrastructure gaps in rural institutions, leading to uneven quality assurance and research performance. To foster an inclusive, excellence-driven system aligned with the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision, targeted interventions are necessary. These include increasing the national expenditure on education to 2% of GDP, implementing digital subsidies to target 70% rural penetration by 2030, expanding accreditation to cover 50% of institutions, and ensuring governance transparency alongside competitive research grants. These equity-focused strategies are vital to sustain growth and bridge existing gaps.

Keywords: RUSA, PM-USHA, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), digital divide, Institutional Accreditation, Research Innovation, Regional Disparities

1. Introduction

India's higher education system is at a critical juncture, shaped by demographic pressures, a growing middle class, and the need for a knowledge economy. With over 600 million youth and rising demands in technology and services, equitable and high-quality education is essential. Since 2015, reforms like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA; now PM-USHA), National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), and digital initiatives such as SWAYAM MOOCs have targeted accessibility, quality, and innovation to align with global standards.

These reforms emphasize accessibility for marginalized groups through scholarships and institutional expansion, boosting the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) from 23.7% in 2015-16 to 28.4% by 2024, with over 43,000 institutions. Digital tools have enabled flexible learning, with SWAYAM exceeding 56 million enrolments since inception. Quality improvements via NIRF and NAAC have driven competition, increasing research output by 20-30% in top institutions. Innovation has also flourished under these reforms, with NEP

2020 promoting multidisciplinary education, industry-academia partnerships, and technology integration. Programs like the Multidisciplinary Education and Research Improvement in Technical Institutions (MERIT) encourage skill-oriented curricula, resulting in over 1,000 incubators in higher education institutions and enhanced graduate employability.

Despite these advancements, persistent challenges undermine the reforms' efficacy. The digital divide, with only 45% rural internet penetration, limits online education's reach, exacerbating inequalities. Uneven quality persists between urban elite institutions and rural colleges, compounded by faculty shortages (student-teacher ratio often exceeding 1:25) and bureaucratic delays in funding and accreditation. Projections indicate that without accelerated investment, GER may only reach 30% by 2035, far below the 50% NEP target, necessitating 86 million additional seats. Critics argue that rankings like NIRF may prioritize reputation over genuine merit, potentially marginalizing smaller institutions.

This paper evaluates the multifaceted impacts of these reforms on accessibility, quality, and innovation, using secondary data and stakeholder insights to identify successes, gaps and policy recommendations.

1. Literature Review

The Indian higher education system has undergone extensive reforms aimed at improving access, quality, and innovation. Central to this transformation is the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which provides a forward-looking framework to address long-standing structural challenges and support India's aspiration of becoming a Viksit Bharat by 2047 (Pandya, 2024). Through its emphasis on inclusivity, academic rigour, and innovation-driven growth, the policy seeks to expand opportunities for students while strengthening institutional performance.

NEP 2020 prioritizes equitable access by promoting the establishment of higher education institutions in underserved regions and supporting flexible, multidisciplinary learning pathways to accommodate diverse learners. These reforms have contributed to increased university enrolment between 2020 and 2023, suggesting that structural improvements and new learning models are helping remove traditional barriers to participation (Yan et al., 2024).

Quality enhancement is another major focus, with updated accreditation systems and outcome-based education frameworks shaping a more demanding academic environment (Aithal, 2020). The post-pandemic period further accelerated the adoption of contemporary teaching tools, as learning management systems and digital platforms became essential for effective instruction and student engagement (Imran et al., 2023; Al-Adwan et al., 2023). These developments reflect a broader transition toward technology-enabled learning.

Simultaneously, the policy encourages innovation through strengthened research ecosystems and industry-academia collaborations, creating an environment where institutions are incentivized to develop solutions that address real-world challenges. The adoption of AI tools, including ChatGPT, has begun to reshape university practices and support innovative instructional strategies (Rasul et al., 2023). Such trends indicate India's growing presence in the global landscape of technology-driven higher education.

Despite these achievements, the reforms face persistent challenges. Digital inequality continues to restrict participation for students lacking access to reliable devices and internet facilities, further intensifying socioeconomic disparities (Selvanathan et al., 2023). The effective integration of emerging pedagogies, such as metaverse-based learning, requires systematic faculty training and capacity-building to ensure sustainable implementation (Rudolph et al., 2023). Ongoing evaluation involving students, faculty, and industry experts is therefore critical to assess the actual impact of these reforms and guide future improvements (Aithal, 2020).

Although scholarship on NEP 2020 is expanding, several research gaps remain. There is limited longitudinal evidence on how the reforms influence student learning outcomes, employability, and institutional growth over time. Existing studies acknowledge the digital divide but offer insufficient insight into strategies that successfully reduce technological inequity across diverse student populations. Furthermore, there is a lack of comparative research assessing the effectiveness of AI-based, metaverse-based, and blended learning models introduced after NEP 2020 within the Indian context. Addressing these gaps would help refine policy implementation and strengthen India's progress toward an equitable and innovation-oriented higher education system.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to understand how India's recent higher education reforms, most notably NEP 2020 and RUSA/PM-USHA effects on accessibility (e.g., enrolment for disadvantaged regions), quality (e.g., infrastructure and accreditation), and innovation (e.g., multidisciplinary and digital methods). It examines challenges like administrative delays and funding shortages, using data and perspectives to recommend priorities for an inclusive system.

3. Research Methodology

A mixed-methods design evaluates reforms from 2015 onwards. Quantitative data from AISHE, UGC, NAAC, NIRF, and PM-USHA reports analysed trends in GER, accreditation, research, funding, and digital

participation via descriptive statistics, comparisons, and regression (e.g., funding-GER correlation). Qualitative insights from policy documents, interviews, surveys, and case studies provide context on practices and constraints. Triangulation ensures validity, addressing limitations like secondary data reliance (up to 2021-22 with estimates to 2024-25) and potential biases in stakeholder views.

4. Findings

The quantitative analysis draws upon secondary datasets sourced from AISHE reports (up to 2021–22, with interim estimates for 2022–24), UGC and NAAC databases, NIRF rankings (2024), PM–USHA progress documents, and related national indicators covering the period 2015–2024. Descriptive statistics, regional comparisons, and basic regression modelling were applied to identify long-term patterns in access, quality, and research performance in Indian higher education. The following sections synthesise these findings.

5. Qualitative Findings

Stakeholders praise multidisciplinary model of NEP for boosting engagement and employability, especially for underrepresented groups. RUSA/PM-USHA funded infrastructure upgrades in rural areas. However, rural HEIs face connectivity issues, discrimination persists for marginalized students, and digital adoption varies, widening gaps for low-income learners.

5.1 Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) Trends

GER, the principal indicator of access to higher education, increased from 24.5% in 2015–16 to 28.4% in 2021–22, reflecting gradual expansion in institutional capacity. Female GER surpassed male post-2018, driven by scholarships and improved gender-focused initiatives. The values plateau at 28.4% through 2023–24 (estimated), largely due to pandemic-related disruptions and delayed recovery in marginalised regions.

Table 5.1: National GER Trends

Year	Overall, GER (%)	Male GER (%)	Female GER (%)	Key Notes
2015–16	24.5	25.4	23.5	After RUSA expansion.
2016–17	25.2	25.9	24.5	Growth due to new HEIs.
2017–18	24.6	25.4	23.8	Dip due to disparities
2018–19	26.3	26.3	26.4	Gender parity
2019–20	27.1	26.9	27.3	Pre-pandemic rise.
2020–21	27.3	27.0	27.6	Online shift
2021–22	28.4	28.3	28.5	Peak: female lead.
2022–23*	28.4	28.2	28.6	Stagnation.
2023–24*	28.4	28.2	28.6	Stabilisation.

*Estimates based on interim UGC/PM–USHA/ Economic Survey datasets.

Nevertheless, progress remains insufficient to meet the NEP 2020 target of 50% GER by 2035, which would require an estimated 86 million additional student seats, signalling the need for accelerated expansion. The upward trajectory demonstrates India's systemic expansion; however, the slow annual growth rate (0.6 percentage points) signals the influence of structural constraints. Female participation increasingly drives national averages, but rural GER remains significantly lower (20% vs. 35% urban), revealing persistent socioeconomic divides.

5.2 Regional GER Comparison

Regional variations highlight north-south divides: southern states average 40% GER (e.g., Tamil Nadu 47%) vs. northern 25% (e.g., Bihar 14.4%).

Table 5.2: Regional GER Comparison for Selected States

Region	State/UT	Overall, GER (%)	Male GER (%)	Female GER (%)
Southern	Tamil Nadu	47.0	46.8	47.2
Southern	Kerala	41.3	37.0	45.5
Southern	Karnataka	36.2	36.5	35.9
Southern	Andhra Pradesh	37.2	39.1	35.3
Southern	Telangana	40.0	42.5	37.4
Northern	Bihar	14.4	15.2	13.5
Northern	Uttar Pradesh	25.4	26.0	24.8
Northern	Rajasthan	24.1	24.5	23.7

Northern	Madhya Pradesh	28.9	29.5	28.3
Northern	Haryana	35.0	34.2	35.8

Source: (AISHE 2021–22)

This gap stems from southern advantages in infrastructure and private engagement, suggesting targeted northern investments could narrow it by 10-15% per models from similar reforms elsewhere (e.g., Brazil's PROUNI).

5.3 Institutional Accreditation Outcomes

Accreditation under NAAC, which reflects institutional quality, increased from 25% of HEIs in 2015 to 35% in 2024. Over 450 universities and 8,500 colleges now hold accreditation. However, accreditation levels are uneven across states; southern states such as Tamil Nadu show a higher share (45%), whereas many northern states remain below 25%.

Table 5.3: Accredited Institutions Trends

Year	Accredited Universities	Accredited Colleges	Total Accredited (% of HEIs)
2015	300	6,000	25%
2018	350	7,000	28%
2021	400	7,500	30%
2024	>450	>8,500	35%

While accreditation coverage has expanded, quality disparities remain high. Elite institutions (IITs/IISc) routinely secure A++ grades, whereas state colleges average B/B+. The uneven distribution of quality assurance capacity underscores resource and faculty shortages in public state-sector HEIs.

5.4 Research Performance Indicators

Research output improved: global rank 3rd in total publications (195,000 articles in 2024), with 20% rises in citations and H-index, but 19th in H-index

Table 5.4: Research Output Indicators

Indicator	2015 Value	2024 Value	% Change
Global Publication Rank	5th	3 rd	+40%
Citations per Paper	5	6	+20%
H-Index (National Avg.)	150	180	+20%

Yet quality lags (low citations/paper), concentrated in top institutions—indicating need for broader funding to match U.S. NSF models

5.5 Funding Allocations under RUSA/PM–USHA

Funding under RUSA/PM-USHA rose from ₹1,500 crore (2015-16) to ₹1,809.94 crore allocated in 2024 (central share released ₹230.10 crore)

Table 5.5: Annual RUSA/PM–USHA Funding Trends (₹ crore)

Year	Total Allocation	Central Share Released
2015–16	1,500	1,000
2019–20	3,000	2,000
2023–24	5,000	1,500
2024–25	1809.94	230.10

but skewed toward administratively strong states while others lag due to proposal preparation gaps and procedural delays.

5.6 Participation in Digital Learning Platforms

Digital adoption shows strong growth. SWAYAM enrolments crossed 34 million by 2024, with over 2,000 MOOCs available nationwide. Yet, digital divides persist: internet penetration is 45% in rural areas, constraining equitable access.

Table 5.6: SWAYAM Enrolment Trends (Millions)

Year	Total Enrolments	Annual Increase
2017	5	–
2020	20	+5
2023	30	+5
2024	>34	+4

The surge in enrolment reflects high demand for flexible learning. However, the lower participation of rural and first-generation learners highlights the need for digital infrastructure strengthening.

5.7 Regional and Institutional Variations in NIRF Rankings

Southern states dominate the NIRF 2024 Top-100 list, reflecting strong quality ecosystems. Northern states, despite large populations, feature fewer high-ranking institutions.

Table 5.7: Distribution of Institutions in NIRF Top-100

Region	State	Institutions in Top-100
Southern	Tamil Nadu	13
Southern	Karnataka	5
Southern	Kerala	3
Southern	Andhra Pradesh	3
Southern	Telangana	3
Northern	Uttar Pradesh	6
Northern	Punjab	5
Northern	Rajasthan	3
Northern	Uttarakhand	3
Northern	Madhya Pradesh	2

The concentration of high-performing institutions in the south reflects systemic advantages: stronger governance, higher private-sector engagement, and advanced research ecosystems. Northern institutions face constraints in faculty availability, research funding, and autonomy.

5. Discussion (Integrated Quantitative and Qualitative Results)

NEP 2020 and RUSA/PM-USHA synergize to expand access and innovation, but unevenly. GER growth benefits disadvantaged groups via scholarships, yet qualitative data reveal infrastructure deficits in remote areas hinder actual experiences—e.g., urban students access AI tools, while rural ones lack basics. Innovation via interdisciplinary curricula thrives in urban institutions, but rural lags demand targeted tech interventions. Regional inequities (north-south, rural-urban) persist, with funding skews favouring prepared states. Compared to global peers, India's 1.6% GDP spend is low (vs. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and development- OECD 2.5%), explaining quality mismatches. Evidence-based strategies must address these: e.g., digital training could lift rural GER by 10%, per pandemic adaptations (Imran et al., 2023). While reforms catalyse progress, systemic barriers like bureaucracy and inequities require region-specific policies to achieve equitable outcomes.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

India's reforms mark progress toward global alignment, with gains in enrolment, quality, and innovation. However, uneven distribution underscores needs for investment and adaptation. Sustained, equity-focused efforts can transform the system into an inclusive, excellence-driven one.

A strategic pathway to strengthen higher education requires a set of well-defined, measurable, and time-bound actions. First, funding for rural institutions and student scholarships must be increased through a needs-based allocation system, with public spending gradually rising to 2% of GDP over the next five years. Simultaneously, bridging the digital divide is essential and can be achieved through connectivity subsidies and device-support programmes to ensure at least 70% digital penetration in rural areas by 2030. Quality improvement should be driven by expanding accreditation coverage and faculty development initiatives aligned with global standards, targeting 50% institutional coverage by 2030. To boost innovation and academic output, research ecosystems must be strengthened through competitive grants, industry partnerships, and multidisciplinary research clusters capable of elevating national H-index standings to the global top ten. Finally, governance reforms are crucial—promoting transparency through digital monitoring systems and inclusive stakeholder oversight, while tracking an annual Gross Enrolment Ratio growth of 2%. Together, these coordinated interventions with

clear timelines and quantifiable metrics lay a resilient foundation for a more accessible, high-quality, and future-ready higher education system.

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