

HIGHER EDUCATION IN 21st CENTURY: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education system in India has grown incredibly and significantly contributed towards nation building. Higher Education is a significant factor instrumental to the development of a country. It aims for development of such an individual who is enlightened, socially conscious, knowledgeable and can contribute towards an innovative, progressive and prosperous nation. Since independence, India as a developing nation is contentiously progressing in the education field and has successfully proved its global significance. Although there have been lot of challenges to higher education system of India but equally have lot of opportunities to overcome these challenges and to make this system much better. An insight into NEP 2020 outlines the vision of India's new education system and has proposed sweeping changes in the higher education system. There still arises a need to address the challenges and qualitatively strengthen the education in general and higher education specifically on various forefronts such as socio-economic front, digitalization and traditional methods of teaching, research constrains, access and equity and many more to name. India has to rise to the occasion urgently and reorient its higher education system to be vibrant, competitive, meaningful and purposeful. Thus, this conceptual paper aims to highlight various emerging issues and discover its solutions to overcome these stumbling blocks of Higher Education in India in the 21st Century.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education, Global significance, Digitalization, NEP 2020



INTRODUCTION

Higher Education is third- level or tertiary level education leading to an award of academic degree or some sort of credentials. Higher Education covers widely a number of higher education institutions including universities. However, in consideration of goals and national and institutional diversifications, it is not an easy task to separately describe both modern higher education and a university. In general context, the terms ‘Higher Education’ and ‘University’ are used interchangeably although they do not cover the same reality. Higher Education is pursued after secondary education and thus is also called post-secondary education. Thus, the higher education institutions are a more holistic resonance.

For a country like India, Higher Education is very important for further development. Higher education in India has experienced phenomenal expansions since independence. India has produced scientists, engineers, technologists, doctors, teachers and managers who are in great demand all over the world. Now it is one of the top ten countries in our industrial and technological capacity, because of the significant contribution of manpower and tools provided by higher education, especially, technical education.^[1]

India is likely to have the world’s largest workforce by 2027, with a billion people aged between 15 and 64. ^[2] The increasing youth population can be a great asset if their potential employability is enhanced. Conversely, if we fail to provide education and employment to this young generation then it will sooner or later prove to be a downside gate for Indian economy.

Vision of Higher Education

The spiritualism of Indian philosophy and progressive outlook of the western people were blended together to give rise to a renowned educationist of India, Rabindranath Tagore, whose educational philosophy marked its distinction in comparison to other educationists. He envisioned education as “it is enabling the mind to find out the ultimate truth which emancipates us from the bondage of the dust and gives us the wealth, not things but of inner light, not of power but of love making the truth its own and giving expression to it.”



The most prominent social reformer and an educator of India unfolded the objective of education and said “Education means the manifestation of divine perfection already existing in man.” He further said, "We want that education by which character has formed the strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded and by which one can stand on one's own feet.”

Looking into his insights, what makes a liberal education is his transformative nature to bring about a change and such an education is critical for students to prepare for global citizenship, develop a sense of well- being and foster personal and social responsibility. In addition to this, the aim of higher education is to help individuals develop their potentials to the highest so that they not only grow intellectually but also become well- equipped for work environment for the progress of society as well as personal fulfilment. Higher education is necessary to serve the needs of a sustainable and adaptable economy at local, regional and national levels and further become leading individuals in creating and shaping a democratic and civilized society.

The expectations can be achieved only when the knowledge workforce is accelerated towards global economy with interdisciplinary approach as shown.



Fig: The predicted peak of higher Education in 21st Century^[3]

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The Indian Education system is huge, vast and complex with a number of Universities, colleges and stand-alone institutions. India's Higher Education sector has witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of Universities/University level Institutions & Colleges since independence.

Discussing the current scenario of Indian Education System, survey conducted by All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) covers all the institutions of Higher Education in India. As per AISHE (2018-19 report)^[4] there are total 993 Universities, 39931 Colleges and 10725 Stand Alone Institutions listed on AISHE web portal. Total enrolment in higher education has been estimated to be 37.4 million with 19.2 million male and 18.2 million female. Female constitute 48.6% of the total enrolment. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher education in India is 26.3%, which is calculated for 18-23 years of age group. GER for male population is 26.3% and for females, it is 26.4%. For Scheduled Castes, it is 23% and for Scheduled Tribes, it is 17.2% as compared to the national GER of 26.3%.

About 79.8% of the students are enrolled in Undergraduate level programme. 1,69,170 students are enrolled in Ph.D. that is less than 0.5% of the total student enrolment Maximum numbers of Students are enrolled in B.A. programme followed by B.Sc. and B.Com. programmes. 10 Programmes out of approximately 187 cover 80.3% of the total students enrolled in higher education.

At Undergraduate level the highest number (35.9%) of students are enrolled in Arts/ Humanities/Social Sciences courses followed by Science (16.5%), Engineering and Technology(13.5%) and Commerce (14.1%).

At Ph.D. level, maximum number of students are enrolled in Science stream followed by Engineering and Technology. On the other hand at Post Graduate level maximum students are enrolled in Social Science stream and Management comes at number two. Uttar Pradesh comes at number one with the highest student enrolment followed by Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Scheduled Casts students constitute 14.9% and Scheduled Tribes students 5.5% of the total enrolment. 36.3% students belong to Other Backward Classes. 5.2% students belong to Muslim Minority and 2.3% from other Minority Communities.



Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) in Universities and Colleges is 29 if regular mode enrolment is considered whereas PTR for Universities and its Constituent Units is 18 for regular mode.

The aim is to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education including vocational education from 26.3% (2018) to 50% by 2035. (NEP,2020)^[5]

With the expansion and increased autonomy, there is a widespread concern of quality amongst Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Thus, with an endeavour to make quality the defining element of higher education in India through a combination of self and external quality evaluation, promotion and sustenance initiatives, HEIs are evaluated by National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) .

Looking at the global scenario, India's higher education system is the world's third-largest in terms of students, next to China and the United States. In the prestigious **Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings 2020**, three Indian Universities- IIT-Bombay, IIT-Delhi and IISc (Bangalore)- have been included in the top 200 institutes^[6] This significant improvement in rankings of the Indian universities at a global level since the past years is evident because of boosting the research ecosystem, bettering teacher-student ratio and strengthening their connect with external stakeholders.

The Indian system of higher education is in its transition stage where it is trying to develop generic skills, application skills and life skills to foster global competencies amongst its students. To achieve these value framework, GOI has also introduced the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 that outlines the vision of India's new education system and has proposed sweeping changes in the higher education system. NEP 2020 aims that a quality higher education must enable personal accomplishment and enlightenment, constructive public engagement, and productive contribution to the society. It must prepare students for more meaningful and satisfying lives and work roles and enable economic independence.^[5]

THE STUMBLING BLOCKS OF HIGHER EDUCATION



Higher education plays an extremely important role in promoting human as well as societal wellbeing and in developing India as envisioned in its Constitution - a democratic, just, socially conscious, cultured, and humane nation upholding liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice for all. Higher education significantly contributes towards sustainable livelihoods and economic development of the nation. As India moves towards becoming a knowledge economy and society, more and more young Indians are likely to aspire for higher education. There are additional number of students knocking at the doors of Higher Education every year. With this arises the need for immediate addressal of a number of problems that come forth. Moreover, the new global scenario unrivalled challenges for the higher education systems. TheUGCstatedthatawholerangeofskillswillbedemandedfromthegraduatesofcommerce,humanities ,naturalsciencesandsocialscience,aswellasfromthevariousprofessionaldisciplinessuchashospitality ,tourism,agriculture,law,management,medicineorengineering.^[1] A number of basic challenges associated with Higher Education are stated in the figure below:

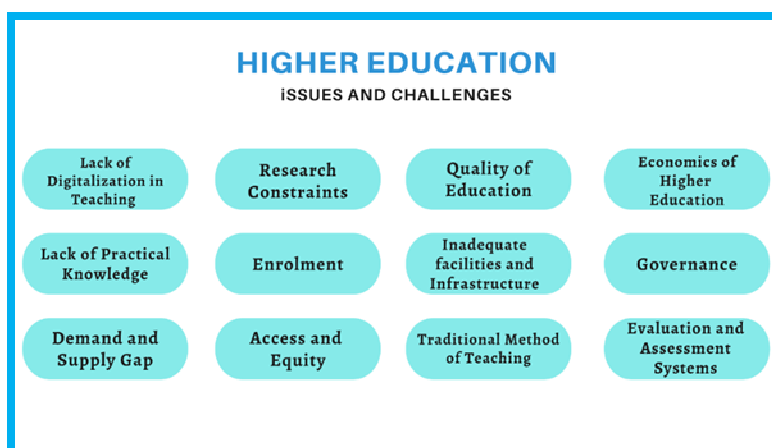


Fig: Listing a few challenges before Higher Education in the 21st Century

The above figure highlights major challenges before Higher Education in the 21st century. Few of these issues are discussed below in detail.

- **Enrolment:** Total enrolment in higher education has been estimated to be 37.4 million with 19.2 million male and 18.2 million female. Female constitute 48.6% of the total enrolment. ∞ Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher education in India is 26.3%, which

is calculated for 18-23 years of age group. GER for male population is 26.3% and for females, it is 26.4%. For Scheduled Castes, it is 23% and for Scheduled Tribes, it is 17.2% as compared to the national GER of 26.3% []. According to National Education Policy 2020, the aim is to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education including vocational education from 26.3% (2018) to 50% by 2035. (NEP, 2020)



Fig: GER: Distributed according to social category and gender (AISHE, 2018-19)

- Traditional Methods of Teaching, inadequate facilities and Infrastructure:** Infrastructure plays an important role in education sector. Classroom designs, auditoriums, laboratories, campus area etc. are all crucial elements of a learning environment. Poor infrastructure is a major challenge in the higher education system of India particularly the institutes that are run by public sector suffer from poor facilities and infrastructure. Poor building conditions often include dark classrooms with no proper ventilation, broken furniture, inappropriate lighting, leaky washrooms, poorly maintained cafeterias, messed-up library arrangements and poor or no internet facilities. Lack of such basic infrastructural requirements evidently affects the student's outcomes in the higher education. Although the NEP 2020 has given a significant segment to address this problem and stated that Institutions will have the option to run Open Distance Learning (ODL) and online programmes, provided they are accredited to do so, in order to enhance their offerings, improve access, increase GER, and provide opportunities for lifelong learning^[5]

- **Lack of Practical and field knowledge:** The higher education system is entirely lacking in practical and field based knowledge and a major focus has been diverted to theoretical knowledge and scoring more than what is actually imbibed by a student to be practically implemented during their field work. Theoretical knowledge provides very little connections to the problems and challenges faced by the world. According to Times International ^[8], Practical work should include experiments in laboratories, study tours, projects, assignments, etc. the advantages of practical work are unmatched. Getting theoretical knowledge has no value until students can apply it for practical purposes.

- **Driving Innovations:** Three main challenges that the higher education sector faces across the globe and that are also driving innovation in this sector have been identified:
 - (i) pressures from globalisation;
 - (ii) changing supply of and demand for higher education; and
 - (iii) Changes in higher education funding.

These various challenges determine the development and implementation of various innovative practices to address them. The same challenge may trigger the introduction of different innovative practices in different institutional contexts, while the same innovative practice may be simultaneously driven by more than one challenge.

A higher education innovation system can be seen as a set of functions, components and relationships, which allow us to disaggregate the various levels of interactions among the elements of the system and analyse the unfolding of innovation in higher education.^[8]

Higher education innovation system		
Functions	Components	Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Research • Engagement ('third mission') 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct and indirect actors • Institutional and individual actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration/conflict moderation • Substitution • Networking

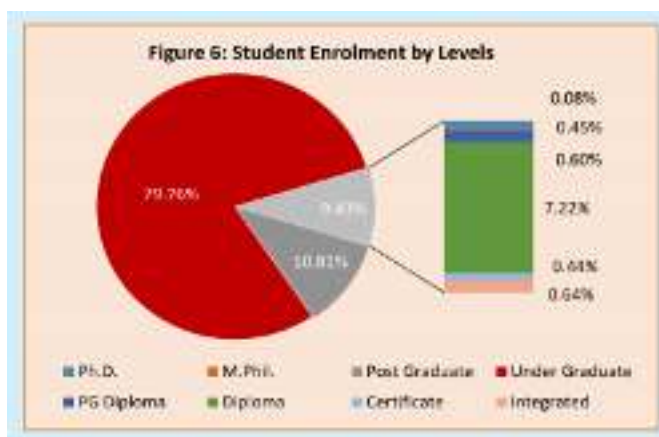


- **Lack of Diversification and Vocationalization:** As a result of the expansion of higher education and the increasing complexity of society and the economy, higher education has needed to target the diverse backgrounds and needs of its students. Furthermore, various skills and abilities are demanded and to master them the levels of training have also become more diversified.

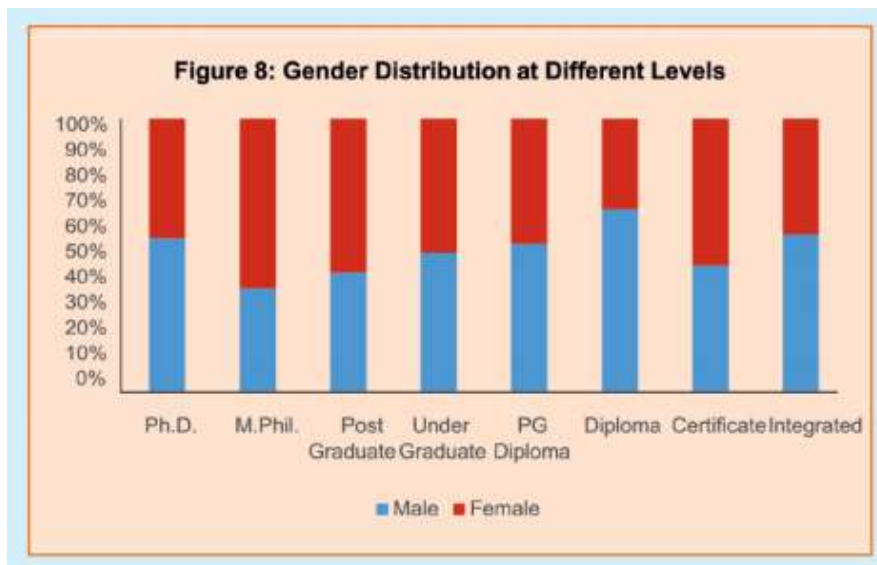
The 12th Five-Year Plan (2012–2017) estimated that only a very small percentage of the Indian workforce in the age group of 19–24 (less than 5%) received formal vocational education. Whereas in countries such as the USA the number is 52%, in Germany 75%, and South Korea it is as high as 96%. These numbers only underline the urgency of the need to hasten the spread of vocational education in India.^[1]

- **Research Constraints:** Although, a large number of students are enrolled in higher education in undergraduate programs, India still has a very low level of PhD enrolment. India does not have enough high quality researchers. In Indian education system there is a lack of early stage research experience; a weak ecosystem for creativity and innovation, and low levels of industry engagement.

Fig: Student enrolment by levels (AISHE, 2018-19)



- **Access and Equity:** Taking a look at the AISHE report of 2018-19, it is clearly evident that there is no equity in GER amongst various sections of society. Nor there is any equity in GER amongst males and females in various programmes of higher education in India.



Taking a look at the Male-Female ratio at each level in the given figure, it may be seen that ratio of male is higher than female in almost every level, except M.Phil., Post Graduate and Certificate. Student enrolment at Under Graduate level has 51% male and 49% female. Diploma has a skewed distribution with 66.8% males and 33.2% females. Ph.D. level has 56.18% male and 43.82% female. Integrated levels have 57.50% male and 42.50% female. PG Diploma student enrolment is 54.09% for male students and 45.91% for female students.[AISHE report, 2018-19]

- Declining Quality of Higher Education:** The most important factor in the success of higher education institutions is the quality and engagement of its faculty.^[3]To secure quality education while responding to continued increasing demand, it is necessary to raise the quality of various aspects, including teachers, students, facilities, equipment, educational materials and methods, and financing. The quality of teachers is particularly indispensable for raising the quality of higher education. The NEP 2020 discussed the functioning of all the independent verticals for Regulation (NHERC), Accreditation (NAC), Funding (HEGC), and Academic Standard Setting (GEC) and the overarching autonomous umbrella body (HECI) that will be based on transparent public disclosure, and use technology extensively to reduce human

interface to ensure efficiency and transparency in their work. The underlying principle will be that of a faceless and transparent regulatory intervention using technology^[5]

Recommendations for Improving Quality of HEIs

After independence, there has been tremendous increase in higher education institutions of learning in all disciplines and evidently a number of students coming ahead to knock the doors of higher education institutions. But still India is way behind in providing world class education. For improvising the quality of higher education in India, there is a need to relook into finances, psychological growth of children, equity and access amongst various sections of society, infrastructural improvements and many more necessities to look after. Following are a few recommendations for the same:

- **Industries may be encouraged to be partners** with educational institutions directly for the development of human resources dedicated to their interests. This could happen in the areas of creating infrastructure, faculty sharing and direct support with funds.
- **Strong quality control measures** to assure performance above an acceptable benchmark is essential for the institutions.
- **Dynamic methods and student centred teaching methods** must be employed to give an exposure to students and better understanding of both theoretical and practical concepts.
- **Student exchange programs** must be encouraged to enhance global knowledge and let students think in a diversified manner, add innovations, creativity and lead a helping hand for a progressive and prosperous nation.

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