

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20823236>

NEP 2020's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) Target of 50% by 2035: Progress Analysis and Barriers in Northern Indian Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduced a transformative vision for India's higher education system. One of its most ambitious goals is to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education from 26.3% in 2018 to 50% by 2035. GER refers to the percentage of individuals in the age group of 18–23 years enrolled in higher education institutions. Achieving this target is crucial for improving human capital, enhancing employability, promoting social inclusion, and strengthening India's position in the global knowledge economy. Northern India, comprising states such as Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Jammu & Kashmir, plays a significant role in achieving this national objective due to its large population and educational diversity. This paper examines the progress made toward the GER target and identifies the major barriers affecting higher education enrolment in Northern India. The study highlights regional disparities, socio-economic challenges, gender issues, infrastructural deficiencies, and digital divides that continue to hinder progress. Recommendations are provided to accelerate enrolment growth and ensure equitable access to higher education.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Gross Enrolment Ratio, Higher Education, Northern India, Educational Access, GER Target, Educational Policy

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of economic growth, social mobility, and national development. Higher education, in particular, contributes significantly to innovation, skill development, and workforce productivity. India has witnessed remarkable expansion in its higher education sector over the past two decades, with a substantial increase in universities, colleges, and student enrolments. Despite this growth, access to higher education remains limited for a significant portion of the eligible population.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to address these challenges through comprehensive reforms. Among its primary objectives is increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50% by 2035. This target reflects the government's commitment to making higher education more

accessible, inclusive, flexible, and multidisciplinary.

Northern India occupies a strategic position in this context due to its demographic significance and educational diversity. While metropolitan regions such as Delhi have relatively high enrolment rates, several rural and economically weaker regions continue to experience low participation in higher education. Therefore, understanding the progress and barriers associated with GER expansion in Northern India is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of NEP 2020.

Higher education plays a vital role in the social, economic, and intellectual development of a nation. It contributes to the creation of skilled human resources, promotes innovation, and supports sustainable economic growth. In a country like India, where a large proportion of the population consists of young people,

expanding access to higher education is essential for achieving national development goals. Recognizing this need, the Government of India introduced the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which outlines a comprehensive framework for transforming the education system. One of the major objectives of the policy is to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50 percent by the year 2035.

Gross Enrolment Ratio refers to the total number of students enrolled in higher education as a percentage of the population in the age group of 18–23 years. It serves as an important indicator of accessibility and participation in higher education. Although India has witnessed considerable growth in the number of universities, colleges, and students over the last two decades, access to higher education remains uneven across regions and social groups. Economic constraints, gender disparities, geographical barriers, and differences in educational infrastructure continue to influence enrolment patterns.

Northern India occupies a significant position in the country's higher education landscape. States such as Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Jammu & Kashmir collectively account for a substantial share of India's youth population. While some states have made notable progress in expanding educational opportunities, others continue to face challenges in improving participation rates. Therefore, an examination of the progress toward the GER target in Northern Indian higher education institutions is both timely and necessary. This study analyzes the achievements made so far and identifies the major barriers that may affect the realization of the NEP 2020 goal of achieving a 50 percent GER by 2035.

Understanding Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)

Gross Enrolment Ratio is a statistical measure that indicates the total enrolment in higher education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the official age group for higher education (18–23 years).

The GER serves as an important indicator of educational accessibility and participation. A higher GER suggests broader access to higher

education opportunities, while a lower GER indicates educational exclusion and underutilization of human resources.

The significance of GER includes:

- Measuring access to higher education.
- Assessing educational equity and inclusion.
- Supporting economic development through human capital formation.
- Monitoring policy effectiveness.
- Facilitating international comparisons.

India's GER has improved steadily over recent years, rising from approximately 24.3% in 2014-15 to over 28% by 2021-22. However, achieving the 50% target requires substantial acceleration in enrolment growth.

NEP 2020 and the GER Target

NEP 2020 emphasizes universal access to quality higher education. The policy aims to add approximately 35 million new seats in higher education institutions by 2035.

Key strategies proposed under NEP 2020 include:

Expansion of Higher Education Institutions

The policy encourages the establishment of multidisciplinary universities and colleges capable of serving larger student populations.

Flexible Learning Pathways

The introduction of multiple entry and exit options allows students to pause and resume their education without losing academic credits.

Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)

The Academic Bank of Credits facilitates credit transfer across institutions, making higher education more flexible and student-friendly.

Online and Distance Education

Digital learning platforms are expected to increase access for students in remote and underserved regions.

Inclusive Education

Special emphasis is placed on socially and economically disadvantaged groups, women, rural populations, and marginalized communities.

Vocational Integration

The integration of vocational education into mainstream higher education aims to attract students seeking employment-oriented programs.

Current Status of GER in Northern India

Northern India exhibits considerable variation in GER levels across states.

Delhi

Delhi possesses one of the highest GERs in India due to the concentration of universities, colleges, research institutions, and educational infrastructure. Institutions such as University of Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru University attract students from across the country.

Haryana

Haryana has shown gradual improvement in GER due to expanding higher education institutions and government scholarship programs. However, rural-urban disparities continue to affect enrolment.

Punjab

Punjab maintains relatively strong higher education participation rates. Professional and technical education institutions contribute significantly to enrolment growth.

Rajasthan

Rajasthan has experienced improvement in female enrolment due to targeted government schemes. Nevertheless, educational access remains uneven across districts.

Uttar Pradesh

As India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh faces considerable challenges. Despite a growing number of universities and colleges, GER remains below desired levels due to population pressure and socio-economic inequalities.

Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand

These states demonstrate comparatively better educational outcomes, but geographical barriers limit accessibility in remote mountainous areas.

Jammu & Kashmir

Political instability, infrastructure limitations, and difficult terrain continue to affect higher education participation despite recent improvements.

Progress Toward the 50% GER Target

Several positive developments indicate progress toward the NEP target.

Expansion of Institutions

Northern India has witnessed significant growth in universities, private colleges, and specialized institutions. New campuses have improved educational accessibility in previously underserved regions.

Increased Female Participation

Female enrolment has increased substantially in recent years. Government scholarships,

transportation facilities, and awareness campaigns have encouraged girls to pursue higher education.

Growth of Private Higher Education

Private universities and colleges have contributed significantly to expanding enrolment capacity. They offer diverse academic programs and professional courses.

Digital Learning Opportunities

The growth of online education platforms has expanded learning opportunities beyond traditional classrooms. Students can access courses regardless of geographical location.

Skill-Oriented Programs

The introduction of vocational and professional programs has attracted students who seek employment-focused education.

Major Barriers to Achieving the GER Target

Despite notable progress, several challenges continue to hinder the achievement of the 50% GER target.

Economic Constraints

Financial difficulties remain one of the most significant barriers to higher education enrolment.

Many families in Northern India struggle with:

- Tuition fees
- Accommodation costs
- Transportation expenses
- Educational materials

Students from low-income households often enter the workforce immediately after secondary education instead of pursuing higher studies.

Rural-Urban Disparities

Urban areas enjoy better educational infrastructure compared to rural regions.

Rural students face:

- Limited availability of colleges
- Poor transportation facilities
- Inadequate internet connectivity
- Lack of career guidance

These factors reduce higher education participation.

3. Gender-Based Challenges

Although female enrolment has increased, barriers remain in several parts of Northern India.

Common obstacles include:

- Early marriage
- Cultural restrictions

- Safety concerns
- Household responsibilities

These issues disproportionately affect women from rural and marginalized communities.

Digital Divide

NEP 2020 strongly emphasizes digital education. However, unequal access to technology remains a major concern.

Challenges include:

- Limited internet access
- Lack of digital devices
- Low digital literacy
- Poor network connectivity

Students in remote areas often struggle to benefit from online learning initiatives.

Quality Concerns

Enrolment growth alone is insufficient if educational quality remains poor.

Many institutions face:

- Faculty shortages
- Outdated curricula
- Insufficient research facilities
- Weak industry linkages

Poor educational quality can discourage students from pursuing higher education.

Regional Inequalities

Educational development varies considerably across states and districts.

Some regions possess:

- Better infrastructure
- More universities
- Higher literacy rates
- Stronger economic conditions

Others continue to experience educational deprivation, resulting in unequal GER growth.

Language and Social Barriers

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter language-related and social challenges.

These include:

- Limited proficiency in English
- Lack of academic support
- Social discrimination
- First-generation learner difficulties

Such barriers increase dropout rates and reduce enrolment.

Employment Uncertainty

Many students question the value of higher education due to concerns about unemployment and underemployment.

The perception that degrees do not guarantee jobs discourages enrolment among economically vulnerable populations.

Government Initiatives Supporting GER Growth

Several initiatives complement NEP 2020 objectives.

Scholarships and Financial Assistance

Various scholarship schemes support economically weaker students and promote educational inclusion.

Digital Education Programs

Platforms such as DIKSHA and SWAYAM provide online educational resources and courses.

Skill Development Programs

Government-sponsored skill development initiatives encourage vocational education and employability enhancement.

Infrastructure Development

Investment in educational infrastructure has improved access in many underserved areas.

Women's Education Schemes

Special incentives for female students have contributed to rising enrolment rates across Northern India.

Recommendations for Achieving the 50% GER Target

To meet the ambitious GER target by 2035, several policy measures are necessary.

Strengthen Financial Support

- Expand scholarship coverage.
- Increase education loans at affordable rates.
- Provide targeted assistance to disadvantaged groups.

Improve Rural Access

- Establish colleges in underserved districts.
- Strengthen transportation networks.
- Expand community colleges and study centers.

Bridge the Digital Divide

- Improve broadband connectivity.
- Provide subsidized digital devices.
- Enhance digital literacy programs.

Enhance Educational Quality

- Recruit qualified faculty.
- Modernize curricula.
- Promote research and innovation.
- Strengthen industry-academia collaboration.

Promote Gender Equity

- Ensure safe campus environments.
- Expand hostel facilities for women.
- Increase awareness regarding higher education opportunities.

Encourage Flexible Learning

- Expand online and blended learning programs.
- Strengthen implementation of the Academic Bank of Credits.
- Support lifelong learning opportunities.

Strengthen Career Guidance

- Establish counseling centers in schools and colleges.
- Improve awareness regarding higher education pathways and employment opportunities.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy 2020 has established a bold and transformative vision for India's higher education system through its target of achieving a Gross Enrolment Ratio of 50% by 2035. Northern India, with its vast population and diverse educational landscape, plays a critical role in realizing this objective. Significant progress has been made through institutional expansion, increased female participation, digital learning initiatives, and policy reforms. However, persistent challenges such as economic inequality, rural-urban disparities, digital exclusion, quality concerns, gender barriers, and employment uncertainty continue to impede progress.

Achieving the GER target will require coordinated efforts from governments, educational institutions, communities, and

industry stakeholders. By addressing structural barriers and ensuring equitable access to quality education, Northern India can contribute substantially to the realization of NEP 2020's vision of an inclusive, accessible, and globally competitive higher education system.

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