

REIMAGINING THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA: QUALITY ASSURANCE AND SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract: Higher Education Institutions are undergoing rapid transformation, necessitated by evolving societal needs, technological advancements, and policy mandates. Frameworks such as the National Education Policy 2020, Sustainable Development Goals, and updated accreditation systems have redefined institutional priorities in India. This paper examines the interplay between quality assurance, policy implementation, and sustainable institutional development. It highlights challenges such as rigid organizational cultures and fragmented policies, proposing inclusive, grassroots-driven strategies to foster resilience and adaptability. The paper explores how HEIs can align their Institutional Development Plans with national and global frameworks to ensure excellence, inclusivity, and long-term impact.

Keywords: Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs); National Education Policy (NEP) 2020; Institutional Development Plan (IDP); National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF); Quality assurance

1. Introduction

The global higher education system is at a critical juncture, reflecting significant transformations over the past two decades. Central to these changes is the growing recognition of knowledge societies' reliance on skilled and competent knowledge workers, leading to the massification of higher education systems. This evolution is marked by a dramatic increase in enrollment levels, with higher education now reaching unprecedented numbers of students worldwide. The modalities, places, and spaces for higher education have also undergone profound shifts [1]. Adopting innovative educational technologies, blended learning environments and the democratization of knowledge has transformed traditional higher education into a dynamic, multi-modal ecosystem. These shifts necessitate a re-evaluation of policies, practices, and institutional structures to ensure that higher education remains responsive to the needs of an interconnected and knowledge-driven world.

2. What is fascinating about India's higher education institutions?

India's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) form one of the world's largest and most diverse education systems. Since the beginning of the century, there has been a fourfold increase in the number of universities, colleges, students, and faculty members. The Indian higher education system includes an extensive network of 1,168 universities, 45,473 colleges, and 12,002 stand-alone institutions, as per the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22 data [2]. These institutions cater to over 4.33 crore students, with nearly 2.07 crore female students, marking a 32% increase in female enrollment since 2014-15. This vast ecosystem accommodates diverse educational needs, offering programs in general education, professional disciplines, and specialized technical fields. The Gross Enrollment Ratio in higher education has increased significantly, reaching 28.4% in 2021-22 from 23.7% in 2014-15 [2].

India's higher education system promotes access across diverse geographies, as evidenced by the distribution of institutions across urban and rural settings. As per AISHE 2021-22, government universities enroll 73.7% of students, underscoring their pivotal role in ensuring educational equity and access. Private institutions, on the other hand, are vital for introducing specialized courses and innovative pedagogy, contributing to 4.6% annual growth in overall student enrolment [2]. This balanced coexistence of public and private entities fosters competition and innovation. With an unparalleled mix of public and private institutions, these HEIs have a rich legacy and contribute significantly to the global workforce.

3. Opportunities and challenges in the higher education landscape

The higher education sector globally, including India, is witnessing transformative opportunities driven by technological advancements, globalization, and evolving educational paradigms. These opportunities include digital transformation, international collaborations, and innovative learning methods that promise to redefine the sector. Digital technologies have revolutionized the delivery and accessibility of education. The growth of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and digital universities has enabled millions of learners to access education anytime and anywhere [3]. Collaboration between institutions across borders has led to the rise of joint degree programs. These programs not only enhance the global employability of graduates but also foster cross-cultural exchanges and interdisciplinary research. With advancements in technology, education has transcended geographic boundaries. Virtual classrooms, international webinars, and collaborative online platforms epitomize the idea of a borderless education system [4].

Despite the myriad opportunities, higher education faces significant challenges that require innovative solutions and collaborative efforts. The emergence of private providers has increased competition and diversity in the sector. However, it has also led to quality

assurance and equitable access issues. While academic mobility fosters cultural exchange and collaboration, it poses challenges such as brain drain and inequities in access. HEIs are pressured to adopt sustainable campus operations and curricular practices. Financial constraints, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have forced institutions to innovate while operating within tight budgets. Market-driven approaches, such as rankings and competition for funding, are reshaping priorities in higher education. While encouraging innovation, they also risk sidelining core academic values such as inclusivity and equity [4].

4. Why should we be interested in quality assurance?

4.1. The National Education Policy 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has introduced transformative measures to enhance the quality of higher education in India. These include transitioning to a multidisciplinary approach in undergraduate education, fostering academic and administrative autonomy, and ensuring faculty merit-based appointments and career progression. By revamping the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and student support systems, NEP 2020 aims to improve learning outcomes and elevate Indian higher education to global standards [5].

An essential feature of NEP is the establishment of large multidisciplinary universities and colleges in every district, which not only expand access but also promote instruction in local and Indian languages. Another cornerstone of quality assurance is the creation of a National Research Foundation designed to support peer-reviewed research and cultivate a robust research culture in HEIs. Coupled with the principle of "light but tight" regulation through a unified higher education regulator, these reforms aim to streamline governance while preserving institutional autonomy.

4.2. Quality assurance and the role of the national institutional ranking framework in Indian higher education

Quality assurance is essential in higher education, ensuring institutions deliver consistent, equitable, and globally competitive education. The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), launched by the Ministry of Human Resource Development in 2015, establishes a systematic methodology for ranking institutions across India [6]. By focusing on parameters such as Teaching, Learning & Resources, Research and Professional Practices, Graduation Outcomes, Outreach and Inclusivity, and Perception, NIRF sets clear benchmarks

for academic excellence. Metrics like the faculty-student ratio, quality of doctoral education, research output, and inclusivity measures incentivize institutions to improve their performance while addressing critical societal and industry needs [6]. By prioritizing aspects such as innovation, regional diversity, and facilities for marginalized communities, NIRF encourages a comprehensive approach to institutional development. NIRF's robust parameters ensure accountability and guide institutions to focus on critical areas such as research excellence, equity, and sustainability. Metrics like Intellectual Property (IP) and Patents, Economic and Social Inclusivity, and Women's Diversity drive innovation and inclusivity, fostering a learning ecosystem aligned with national and global priorities. The ranking system also promotes data-driven reforms and enables institutions to enhance their reputation through strategic initiatives. By standardizing quality assurance practices and emphasizing continuous improvement, NIRF plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of Indian higher education and aligning it with global benchmarks.

4.3. New NAAC metrics and new challenges

The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) was established in 1994 as an autonomous institution under the University Grants Commission (UGC) to assess and accredit HEIs such as colleges, universities, and other recognized entities [7]. NAAC aims to evaluate institutions' adherence to quality standards across various domains, including educational processes, curriculum coverage, teaching-learning practices, faculty, research, infrastructure, learning resources, organization, governance, financial stability, and student services. Since its inception, NAAC has played a crucial role in transforming HEIs through its transparent and rigorous assessment and accreditation processes. Until January 2024, NAAC has accredited 8,469 colleges and 391 universities [8].

The role of quality assurance has evolved from being merely evaluative to becoming a strategic tool for continuous institutional improvement. Recent updates to the NAAC matrix exemplify this shift, emphasizing processes and outcomes (75%) over input metrics (25%). These updates necessitate a transition from conventional, top-down approaches to more dynamic, inclusive, and adaptive methodologies.

The new NAAC accreditation framework introduces a paradigm shift in evaluating the quality of HEIs by focusing on the interplay between inputs, processes, and outcomes. The weightage now allocates 25% to inputs, such as resources and institutional capabilities, and 75% to processes and outcomes, which include student performance, research output, and sustainability initiatives. This holistic evaluation approach ensures a comprehensive assessment, categorizing metrics as Good, Concern, or Weak. These changes push institutions to adopt rigorous strategies to achieve excellence. With nearly 50-60% of the metrics revised, HEIs must integrate new processes that align with global educational standards and enhance institutional accountability [7].

The framework also eliminates the traditional CGPA and grading system, instead adopting categorical assessments and data-driven metrics. The absence of physical expert visits further highlights the shift toward objective, evidence-based evaluations. While this fosters greater transparency and consistency, it introduces complexity that demands meticulous planning and robust execution from HEIs. By prioritizing measurable outcomes such as research innovation, employability, and inclusivity, the updated framework raises the bar for institutional performance. This aligns Indian HEIs with the evolving needs of a knowledge-driven global economy.

5. Why should we be interested in quality assurance?

Policy failures in higher education often stem from a disconnect between policy intentions and real-world outcomes, creating significant implementation challenges. Although policies are usually ambitious and well-intentioned, they frequently lack alignment with institutional capabilities and regional contexts essential for their success [9]. For example, while frameworks emphasize resources such as advanced technology and financial investments, these are not always the primary obstacles. Instead, rigid and hierarchical institutional cultures that resist change and fail to adapt to evolving challenges pose the most significant barriers. Institutions that do not incorporate mechanisms for feedback and self-assessment struggle to address complex issues effectively. Additionally, many policies are fragmented, short-term, and lack a cohesive vision, further complicating institutional reform efforts [9].

Resistance to change within institutional frameworks remains a persistent issue. Entrenched hierarchies and traditional approaches stifle innovation and reduce the agility required for transformative policy implementation. Achieving transformation goes beyond adopting new policies; it requires a fundamental shift in mindset and culture. HEIs must transition from what George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton term "identity economics," embracing institutional identity as a driver of sustainable practices [10]. Conventional top-down directives, which prioritize mandates over collaboration, often alienate key stakeholders, including faculty, students, and administrative staff. This exclusionary approach frequently results in superficial compliance rather than genuine transformation. Furthermore, the absence of robust feedback mechanisms prevents policies from being refined and recalibrated based on real-world experiences, compounding the difficulty of achieving meaningful results.

Higher education policy frameworks must transition from centralized, prescriptive models to approaches that encourage active participation, shared ownership, and grassroots-driven solutions. Engaging stakeholders at all levels, faculty, students, and community members, ensures that policies are thoughtfully designed and grounded in institutional and community realities. Bottom-up strategies that incorporate continuous

feedback loops and collaborative planning enhance responsiveness and adaptability. Cultivating a culture of shared responsibility ensures the full adoption of policies, enabling seamless integration that drives long-term reform and innovation in higher education. By addressing systemic barriers, institutions can create an inclusive, dynamic environment that supports sustainable growth and development.

6. What can higher education institutions do, and what should they do?

A vision for India

India's HEIs stand at a critical juncture, tasked with addressing global challenges, fulfilling national aspirations, and meeting the demands of a rapidly evolving knowledge economy. No single approach or model can achieve the economically robust, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable progress required for the future of HEIs. However, the NEP 2020 and the University Grants Commission's (UGC) guidelines for Institutional Development Plans (IDPs) outline a transformative roadmap for HEIs to emerge as hubs of excellence, innovation, and societal development. Key action areas for HEIs in India are listed below [11].

6.1. The National Education Policy 2020

Effective governance is the backbone of institutional excellence. HEIs must adopt governance models that ensure transparency, accountability, and participatory decision-making. Establishing robust boards of governors and academic councils is essential for strategic oversight. Governance must balance institutional autonomy with regulatory compliance while fostering a culture of responsibility and ethical practice.

Indian HEIs often face rigid governance structures that discourage innovation and collaboration. Key challenges include bureaucratic inertia, lack of participatory governance, and inadequate stakeholder engagement. To address these challenges, HEIs should strengthen participatory governance by involving stakeholders such as faculty, students, alums, and industry representatives. Enhancing institutional autonomy in academic and administrative decisions while maintaining accountability through annual reviews is vital. Developing robust grievance redressal systems can further improve trust and transparency. Institutional leaders must align their vision with the institution's mission and implement strategies that foster academic, financial, and social sustainability [11].

6.2. Financial enablers and funding models

Financial sustainability is crucial for institutional excellence and requires diversified funding sources and efficient resource management. Over-reliance on government funding limits flexibility for research, innovation, and infrastructure investment, creating financial instability for many HEIs in India. To achieve their goals, HEIs must diversify their funding sources. While government grants remain critical, institutions should explore revenue streams such as alumni endowments and Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives for funding educational projects. Transparent financial management practices and strategic investment in high-impact areas are essential for long-term sustainability. HEIs should also focus on cost efficiency without compromising the quality of education and research. Promoting public-private partnerships for infrastructure development and research funding, as well as generating revenue through consultancy, training programs, and IP commercialization, can significantly enhance financial stability [11].

6.3. Academic enablers: curriculum innovation and pedagogy

Curriculum design in HEIs must transcend rote learning to emphasize critical thinking, interdisciplinary knowledge, and real-world applications. Academic enablers focus on learner-centric curricula, interdisciplinary approaches, and teaching innovations. The NEP 2020 advocates for a flexible, multidisciplinary education system that enables students to acquire skills across diverse domains. Challenges such as outdated curricula and limited industry engagement hinder the employability of graduates in Indian HEIs. Addressing these issues requires developing skill-based and interdisciplinary programs aligned with NEP 2020. Regularly updating curricula in collaboration with industry experts can address emerging trends in AI, sustainability, and digital technologies. Adopting modular credit systems, flexible learning pathways, and blended learning models, combining traditional and digital pedagogy, can make education more engaging and accessible. Integrating MOOCs, flipped classrooms, and experiential learning opportunities into curricula can cater to diverse learning needs [11].

6.4. Research and development enablers

Research is the cornerstone of innovation and societal progress. Enabling research involves fostering a culture of innovation, securing research funding, and encouraging IP creation. India's low research output stems from inadequate funding, limited faculty

engagement, and weak collaboration between academia and industry. HEIs must integrate research into their institutional priorities to address societal and economic challenges. Establishing robust research ecosystems that encourage original, interdisciplinary, and applied research is critical. Collaboration with government bodies, industries, and international institutions can amplify the impact of research initiatives. Institutions should establish dedicated research management offices to streamline funding, IP management, and technology transfer through innovation hubs. Incentives for faculty and students to engage in high-impact research, along with investments in state-of-the-art laboratories and libraries, are essential. Aligning research priorities with Sustainable Development Goals and national missions such as Digital India and Make in India ensures research outcomes contribute directly to societal and economic needs [11].

6.5. Human capital management enablers

"People are the real wealth of a nation," stated Amartya Sen. Human resource enablers aim to attract, retain, and develop talent by promoting continuous professional development and equitable policies. Indian HEIs face challenges in recruiting and retaining skilled faculty. Faculty development programs focusing on pedagogy, digital tools, and interdisciplinary teaching can enhance faculty effectiveness. Institutions should establish mechanisms to recognize and reward faculty contributions in teaching, research, and community engagement. Creating a supportive work environment that encourages innovation and collaboration is key to attracting and retaining top talent, and inclusiveness should be a cornerstone of India's higher education landscape. HEIs must ensure equitable access to education for marginalized communities, including women, differently-abled individuals, and socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Scholarships, financial aid, and mentorship programs can bridge gaps in access and participation [11].

6.6. Networking and collaboration enablers

Global collaboration is vital for enhancing the quality and competitiveness of India's higher education system. Networking enablers focus on partnerships between HEIs, industries, and global institutions to improve academic and research excellence. Limited international collaborations and weak industry-academia linkages reduce innovation and global competitiveness in Indian HEIs. HEIs can overcome these challenges by establishing Memorandums of Understanding with global universities for joint research, faculty exchanges, and student mobility. Actively seeking partnerships with foreign universities for collaborative degree programs, joint research, and internationalization initiatives can

broaden perspectives and foster cross-cultural understanding. Strengthening industry partnerships to align research with market demands and enhance employability through internships and curriculum co-design is also essential. Promoting Collaborative Online International Learning connects Indian students with international peers virtually. Attracting international students through competitive programs, world-class facilities, and supportive campus environments is critical, and establishing dedicated international offices can facilitate these initiatives [11].

6.7. Physical enablers

Physical enablers include sustainable infrastructure, accessibility for all, and state-of-the-art facilities to support academic excellence. Many HEIs face infrastructural constraints, particularly in rural areas. Colleges with enrollments under 500 students account for 35.2% of institutions, highlighting a gap in scalability as per the AISHE report of 2022. Poorly maintained facilities and inadequate accessibility hinder inclusivity and the overall learning experience. Addressing regional disparities and the urban-rural divide is crucial. Developing greener physical infrastructure and sustained investments in green energy infrastructure can promote environmental sustainability and create new livelihood opportunities in the country [11].

6.8. Digital enablers

Digital enablers focus on integrating Information and Communication Technology tools to enhance learning, research, and administrative efficiency. Digital infrastructure development can improve access to quality education, public service delivery, and information transparency. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the critical role of digital transformation in education. Online learning platforms and digital content repositories have already improved access and quality at a lower cost, especially in remote and underserved areas. Despite these merits, India faces challenges related to the digital divide, including limited access to high-speed internet and devices in rural and underprivileged communities. Institutions must invest in digital infrastructure, such as high-speed internet, smart classrooms, and Learning Management Systems. Offering digital literacy training for students and faculty can maximize the use of MOOC platforms like SWAYAM and SWAYAM PLUS to expand access to quality education. Expanding data-driven decision-making tools and implementing cybersecurity measures are equally important to ensure technology's safe and effective use [11].

7. Conclusions

India's HEIs play a crucial role in shaping the nation's future. By adopting strategies that prioritize inclusivity, innovation, and international collaboration, HEIs have the potential to emerge as global leaders in education and research. While the NEP 2020 and UGC's guidelines offer a comprehensive framework, no single approach or model can fully ensure the development of socially inclusive, equitable, and thriving HEIs. Success hinges on effective implementation tailored to the unique context of each institution. HEIs can position themselves as catalysts for societal progress and sustainable development by embracing visionary leadership, robust governance, and a steadfast commitment to excellence. Achieving this vision, however, requires a collective commitment from policymakers, educators, and stakeholders. Reimagining higher education demands that HEIs go beyond structural reforms to address underlying cultural and operational challenges. A holistic approach is essential to align institutional goals with broader societal objectives, enabling HEIs to anticipate better and navigate the complexities of an increasingly unpredictable higher education landscape.

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