

EXPANDING ACCESS: THE ROLE OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN SHAPING INDIA'S GROSS ENROLLMENT RATIO IN HIGHER EDUCATION**Dr. B. R. Deshpande¹ and Mr. Pralhad Damodar Tol²**¹Principal, JVM's Mehta Degree College, Airoli²Research Scholar, Manipal School of Commerce and Economics, Manipal, Karnataka**ABSTRACT**

The system of higher education in India has been growing at a very high rate in the last three decades and the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) has increased to an approximate of 27-29% in 2020-23 as compared to 6% in 1990-91. At this time private colleges and universities have become significant providers with big proportions of student enrollment and new capacity. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has a goal of 50 percent GER in higher education by 2035 which will not be attained without involvement of the private institutions. This paper explains the role of the contribution of private university towards the widening access, how they influence the GER in India and the major issues they raise with equity, quality and regulation. It contends that the private universities should be important in achieving quantitative enrollment goals but should be informed by sound public-policy frameworks to provide a means by which expansion should be inclusive and socially fair.

Keywords: *Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Private Universities, Social Criteria*

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has been at the core of Indian dreams of turning into a knowledge based economy and achieving its demographic dividend. The government policy, such as NEP 2020, has over the last several years focused on both the rapid growth of higher education and the improvement of its quality, and GER is a significant indicator of the development in this direction.

GER in higher education, which is the number of total enrollment (whatever the age) to the number of people between 18 and 23, has been steadily increasing in India. According to the studies that are based on the data provided by AISHE, it was demonstrated that GER rose to 24.5% in 2014-15 and even higher to approximately 27.3% in 2020-21 since 6% in 1990-91. According to recent government statements, GER has also kept on increasing, with a value of approximately 28.4 per cent in 2021-22 and 29.5 per cent (provisional) in 2022-23. Nevertheless, India is still in no way close to NEP 2020 objective of 50% GER in 2035, as that will demand the system to serve tens of millions of new students within a limited period of time.

In this regard, the role of the private universities and colleges has taken a more significant role in the scenario of higher education. Their population and enrolment have increased very fast and they now comprise nearly half of the higher education enrolment when both the private universities and the private colleges are taken collectively. The most important question of this paper is: what are the ways in which the private universities are influencing the GER in India and in what circumstances do they have the potential to contribute to inclusive and equitable growth?

TRENDS AND GAPS IN GROSS ENROLLMENT RATIO IN INDIA

GER is an easy way of measuring higher education participation, and is used extensively in international and national comparisons. Some AISHE and similar analyses demonstrate that the GER in India has improved tremendously but conceals huge disparities between social groups, gender and states.

At the national level, the estimates show that, in higher education, the GER stood at 27.3% in 2020-21, the GER of men was at 27.9, and on the other hand, the GER of women was at 26.7, with a comparatively narrow yet existing gender gap. In terms of social groups, GER of Scheduled Castes (SCs) was approximately 23.1% and Scheduled Tribes (STs) approximately 18.9% and this is significantly lower than the overall all-India average and serves as an indicator of structural obstacles.

Even regional trends do not have equal distributions: the GER level of some southern and western states is approaching middle-income countries significantly, whereas many central and eastern ones are lagging behind.

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These differences point to the fact that national averages may increase when substantial segments of the population are left out or under-represented as a concern of the volume as well as the distribution of access.

NEP 2020 is to increase the GER in higher education to 50% by 2035, which means that participation will increase approximately two-fold in just over a decade and a half. The estimates in media and policy reports points that India will require adding about 80-86 million more students to achieve this mark, and it places the tremendous burden on currently existing institutions and necessitates the establishment of new capacity. This demand can not be satisfied by the public universities alone because of limitations in funding, land and infrastructure and this is the reason why the discussion of policy has taken the focus to the private institutions.

GROWTH OF THE PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN INDIA

India boasts of one of the largest systems of private higher education in the world in terms of institutions as well as the number of students being serviced. In nearly all states, particularly in recent years but perhaps going back to 1980–1990, it has been the growth of the private universities and colleges, frequently enabled by state legislation and deregulation.

According to data provided by AISHE and reports by independent market, in the FY 2021-22, the number of private universities in India is approximately 41 percent of all universities and private colleges in India are approximately 78.6 percent of all colleges. Regarding number of students, the private universities had about 26-27% of university-level students and the number of college students was about 65-66% in the case of the private colleges. Combined, the public and the private institutions are nearly equal in their total enrollment, and one analysis reported that about 51.3% of enrollment was in the public and 48.7% in the private about 2020-21.

The rise of the private universities has been especially pronounced: according to one report, the number of the latter has increased almost 480 percent in around 15 years, although there are states such as Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, which have witnessed an exceptionally high growth in the number of their universities. Demand in private universities at the university level increased by over 100 percent in the in-period 2014-15 to 2021-22, nearly 40 percent of the total university enrollment increase. Such trend indicates that the privatized sector of education, particularly the universities, has emerged as a significant growth booster within the higher education. How Private Universities Shape GER

The primary way in which private universities shape India's GER is by adding new seats and institutions, thus enabling more students to enrol in higher education. Since GER is a ratio of total enrollment to the eligible population, any significant increase in student numbers—particularly at degree level—pushes GER upward.

First, private universities create additional physical capacity by establishing campuses in urban, semi-urban, and sometimes rural areas where public universities are few or overcrowded. Many of these institutions offer professional and technical courses in engineering, management, pharmacy, law, and applied sciences, which have high demand among school leavers. As a result, they absorb students who might otherwise be unable to secure seats in public institutions due to limited intake or geographical distance.

Second, private universities often respond faster to emerging fields such as data science, artificial intelligence, design, media, and interdisciplinary studies. By diversifying programme offerings, they attract new segments of learners and broaden the types of skills available in the graduate labour market, which again contributes to higher aggregate enrollment.

Third, private institutions sometimes introduce flexible learning options, including evening programmes, blended learning, and industry-linked internships, which can draw in working students and non-traditional learners. These modes expand participation beyond the traditional 18–23 age group, affecting GER because it counts total enrollment regardless of age.

Overall, available data suggest that a large share of recent enrollment growth has come from outside public universities, with private institutions being the primary driver of expansion. In this sense, the rise in India's GER is closely linked to the growth of private capacity.

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OPPORTUNITIES ACCESS, INNOVATION, AND REGIONAL SPREAD

There are a number of possibilities of higher education access expansion through private universities.

They can be set up comparatively easily than the public universities since they are more dependent on private funding and less dependent on protracted procedures in the public budgets

They tend to take higher education opportunities to new areas, such as smaller towns and new urban centres, making students travel shorter distances to obtain an education.

They can also test new curricula, pedagogies and industry relationships, which can render higher education more appealing and applicable to students and employers.

This fast and quick expansion is beneficial in GER terms since it will raise the overall seats in the system, and possibly aid in accommodating the high numbers of young people entering post-secondary age group. Other analyses also observe that the last several years have seen particularly high enrollment gains among women, SCs and STs, which implies that, at least in aggregate, expansion is not restricted to already privileged groups.

Additionally, the private universities usually become participants in the public-privatization relationships, research-based relationships and technologically based models like online and blended learning. These strategies also can extend the horizons of higher education by breaking the bondage of physical capacity and provide more open routes.

PAIN POINTS: AFFORDABILITY, EQUITY, AND QUALITY

Even though such contributions have been made, there are also serious issues with the emergence of the private universities. The most widely discussed ones include equity of access, affordability, quality assurance, and regulation.

The cost of education in most of the private universities is high and poses a financial strain to the students of low-income families, rural areas, and historically marginalised communities. Although a few institutions offer scholarships or waive of fees, the schemes tend to be few and doubtful to cover the general cost of study that includes hostel, transportation, and living costs. Consequently, growth of private capacity can expand GER yet the gains might be concentrated among individuals who can afford the charges and this may reinforce social inequality.

Another great issue is quality. Not every private university pours enough resources into the qualified faculty, research facilities, libraries, and services to support the students. The difference is quite wide: some of the privately-run universities are high in the national and global rating and serve as the centres of excellence, whereas others are accused of low quality of teaching and their profit-oriented policy. The threat of not having good quality assurance is that GER will increase yet learning outcomes, employability and research contributions will be low.

There are also regulatory issues that remain. The system of higher education regulation in India has always been disjointed with various authorities being in control of various institutions. Imposition of standards regarding fees, admissions, infrastructure and academic procedures has been unequal, which has enabled other low standard providers to exist and a factor that has led to the citizens developing distrust towards the private sector.

POLICY FRAMEWORK AND THE NEP 2020 VISION

NEP 2020 also aims to solve most of these problems, suggesting a radical change in the government of higher education and its regulation. It imagines a harmonized system with one higher education regulator (noting medical and legal education), similar quality standards between the public and private sector and a light but tight approach of regulation that focuses on transparency and accountability and outcomes of learning.

The policy commentaries point out that it will be necessary to not only build physical institutions but also to significantly adopt technology-enabled learning, digital universities, and multiple entry-exit pathways in order to bring about 50% GER by 2035. The universities should be playing a significant role in this transformation which will be featuring:

- Growing interdisciplinary, scholarly campuses.

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- Providing modular and flexible programmes in line with NEP 2020.
- Collaborating with industry and international institutions to make it quality and relevant.

Meanwhile, the policy discourses emphasize that there is a necessity to:

Better financial assistance programs, perhaps with a mix of government and institutional funding, to make sure that disadvantaged students are able to attend the private's institutions. Strict regulations of the fees, openness in admissions, and compulsory reporting of the results, e.g., placement, and progress. Frequent accreditation and surveillance of learning outcomes as a way of ensuring the avoidance of the development of low position institutions that erode the worth of degrees.

According to leaders of AICTE and other organizations, private universities will be essential to achieving the 50% GER target, though the development of research-based, interdisciplinary environments (as opposed to vocational oriented campuses) is also significant.

DISCUSSION: THE TRADE-OFF OF EXPANSION AND INCLUSION

According to the evidence, the role of private universities in increasing the GER of higher education in India cannot be overestimated, but the contribution that they make is not always inclusive. On one hand, they supply the extra seats and programme that diversity required to absorb the increasing cohorts which directly contributes to the quantitative GER target. Conversely, excessive charges and skewed quality may reinforce the status quo and result in a hierarchical system, with public institutions serving part of the population and the private institutions serving the rest, should it not be designed carefully.

Equity-wise, the most important thing is to make sure that the GER gains consist of not only the students located in the rural areas, the families with low income, and the underprivileged social groups but also the students who are already privileged. This requires:

- Needs-based scholarship and income-contingent loan programs that would render education in the private universities affordable.
- Active recruitment of under-represented students in inclusive admission policies and outreach programmes.
- Support services: through mentoring, remedial classes and counselling to enable the first-generation and disadvantaged students to succeed once they are enrolled.

Quality wise, the system should make sure that there is no growth of the system at the expense of the academic standards. The regulations must be concerned not only with inputs (infrastructure, faculty numbers) but also with outputs like graduation rates, research output, employability and student satisfaction. Such indicators can be publicly reported to empower students work with those who want to make informed decisions and find incentives to make institutions better.

CONCLUSION

Private universities have already reshaped India's higher education system and are central to its rising Gross Enrollment Ratio. They have added significant capacity, diversified programmes, and contributed a large share of the recent growth in enrollment, making the NEP 2020 target of 50% GER by 2035 more attainable than it would be with public institutions alone.

However, the expansion of private universities also raises critical questions about who benefits from this growth and what kind of education is being provided. Without strong regulation, financial aid, and a commitment to inclusion, the system risks becoming more unequal, even as GER increases on paper.

A balanced policy approach is therefore essential. The state should recognise private universities as key partners in expanding access, while simultaneously enforcing high standards of quality, equity, and transparency. When guided by such a framework, private universities can not only help India meet its quantitative GER targets but also contribute to a more inclusive, high-quality, and socially responsive higher education system.

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