



ACCESS, EQUITY, AND QUALITY IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The landscape of higher education in India has rapidly grown in recent years; however, issues regarding access, equity, and quality still significantly affect its overall performance. Despite accommodating a much larger number of students, disparities in opportunities persist based on region, caste, gender, economic status, and digital access. This study analyses how the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to address these ongoing challenges. With measures like flexible academic pathways, enhanced mobility, wider technology usage, and focused assistance for marginalized learners, the policy aspires to foster a more inclusive educational environment. Nevertheless, shortcomings in institutional infrastructure, insufficient faculty numbers, inconsistent academic standards, and regional disparities impede the comprehensive achievement of these reforms. Utilizing existing research, this paper investigates the influence of digital education, policy reforms, and changing teaching practices on higher education outcomes. It also identifies the structural obstacles that continue to obstruct equal participation. The study concludes that improving access, ensuring fairness, and elevating quality standards necessitate coordinated governance, ongoing public funding, and effective implementation strategies. Fortifying these aspects is vital for boosting social mobility and allowing India to develop a more competitive and inclusive higher education system.

Keywords: Access, Equity, Quality, Higher Education, Inclusion, Digital learning and NEP 2020

Introduction

Access, equity, and quality in the Indian higher education system are vital components of the education framework in any nation, significantly influencing the socio-economic environment. In India's context, it is crucial to tackle concerns regarding access and equity in higher education to foster inclusivity and ensure that opportunities for advanced education reach all demographics. Following independence in 1947, India implemented a homegrown socialist model prioritizing state-controlled education provisions (Desai and Bhagwati, 1975; Virmani, 2004; Goswami, 2013; Hsu, 2016). With its vast and varied population, India encounters considerable obstacles in providing higher education access to everyone. Historically, the government has been the main education provider, but it has struggled to keep up with the increasing demand (Qamar, 2021). Education is vital for sustaining democratic societies, and higher education plays a key role in enhancing living standards and boosting a community's economic well-being (Amaral, 2022). Ensuring equitable access to higher education is seen as a fundamental responsibility of government. A primary objective for any government is to establish a high-quality higher education system that is accessible to all societal segments. In contemporary society, governmental educational policies and international organizations work towards promoting equitable access to higher education by offering various scholarships and incentives to students. Creating inclusive educational environments is deemed essential for fostering a sense of acceptance among marginalized students in higher education (Nieminen & Pesonen, 2022). According to Nieminen, J. H., & Pesonen, H. V. (2022), educational policies profoundly influence the landscape of learning and opportunity. As societies progress, the urgency to ensure equal access to quality education for all individuals becomes increasingly pressing. Grasping the historical evolution of these policies, along with their effects on both equity and access, provides valuable insights into the educational challenges and achievements seen globally. F. S. Shaikh and S. Prajapati note that the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) underlines the crucial implications of higher education (HE) for a nation's economic, political, socio-cultural growth, sustainability, and global competitiveness (Eggins, 2010). This significance is highlighted by the Sustainable Development Goal "Quality Education" (SDG 4), which sets a target (4.3) for ensuring equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university education, by 2030. These objectives represent an international commitment by the United Nations, with members, including Indonesia, pledging to achieve the targets by 2030 in pursuit of a more sustainable world. The National Knowledge Commission (NKC, 2006) recommended increasing the number of universities from the current 345 to 1500 by 2015, which would increase enrolment

from 10% to 15%. Indian higher education ranks as the third largest globally, following China and the USA, yet the expansion in India pales in comparison to that of China. The drive towards privatization has significantly shaped access to higher education in India. The Twelfth Plan (2012) concentrated on six key areas concerning higher education: expansion, equity, excellence, governance, funding, and implementation and monitoring. Currently, 63.9% of higher education institutions are unaided private, with 58.9% of students enrolled in these institutions. The Indian higher education system holds the title of the largest in the world based on the number of institutions and is the second largest in terms of enrolment. Although access to higher education in India has expanded remarkably concerning the number of institutions and enrolments, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) remains considerably low. The Indian higher education system stands as the largest globally concerning the number of institutions and is second in terms of enrolments. There has been a significant increase in access to higher education in India, reflected in the growth of institutions and student enrolments. Nonetheless, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) remains considerably lower. The higher education sector in India encounters six challenges related to equity, each linked to gender, caste, regional differences, religion, geographical location, and income levels. Ensuring equity and access in higher education is vital for creating a just and inclusive academic atmosphere (McNair et al., 2020). The importance of providing equitable opportunities and accessibility is paramount, as these elements are crucial for fostering social justice, enhancing economic mobility, and contributing to national development. In the contemporary interconnected and rapidly changing landscape, higher education acts as a driver for personal growth and societal advancement (Shishakly et al., 2024). However, ongoing disparities due to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, and other factors continue to obstruct the achievement of genuine equity and access within educational systems (Halabieh et al., 2022). Currently, the Indian higher education sector is undergoing a transitional phase. Shifts in student demographics, quickly changing stakeholder expectations, and emerging technologies are prompting universities to rethink conventional beliefs regarding location, program types, timing, and quality (Varghese, 2020). In the 21st century, everyone relies heavily on technology. Technology is extensively utilized in the teaching-learning process. Higher educational institutions in India are evolving from traditional pedagogical methods to newer, technology-integrated teaching approaches. Advances in technology have diminished digital barriers across the nation. Students from various underserved regions are now able to engage in higher education. Access, quality, and equity serve as the core policy foundations that every higher education system should aim to achieve. Acknowledging their interrelated nature, these three policy areas should be viewed as an integrated whole, as their success depends on one another (Wang, 2023). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant change in the higher education landscape in India, intending to not only reshape its framework but also tackle the long-standing issues of access, equity, and inclusion. The National Education Policy-2020 introduces important reforms designed to promote equity and inclusion in higher education. NEP is committed to fulfilling Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030 (UN, 2015).

Background

In recent decades, higher education in India has undergone significant transformation, shifting from an exclusive, limited system to becoming one of the largest and most varied educational networks globally. With over a thousand universities and countless colleges, the sector has grown in both size and diversity. However, this quick expansion has brought forth a series of intricate challenges related to access, equity, and quality—three interconnected pillars that determine the overall robustness and inclusivity of a nation’s higher education framework. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020’s implementation of a multiple entry and exit system allows students to join higher education programs at different stages and leave with suitable qualifications. This approach enhances access by addressing the varied needs of learners. The policy encourages online and digital learning, further broadening access for those who face geographical or physical limitations. Access is characterized as a stage where a student can enrol in a program and pay the initial fee (Walker, 2019). Walker suggested that access transcends personal necessity, influenced by objective factors (economic conditions, governmental policies, and gender and race structures) as well as subjective experiences (such as academic effort or support from family). For instance, in India, social affiliations (such as caste) and poverty are major determinants influencing students’ admission to higher education institutions, followed by location, with gender playing a minimal role (Borooah, 2017). India’s Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education has consistently risen, signalling increased aspirations and better outreach. Government initiatives, the establishment of new institutions, distance and open learning models, and the proliferation of private universities have all enhanced access. Despite these advancements, access continues to be highly uneven. There exists a significant gap in digital access, creating a divide in online and blended learning settings. Additionally, Dan and Mino (2016) noted that challenges such as miscommunication, misunderstandings, or cultural disparities undoubtedly arise among diverse student populations. To mitigate the issues stemming from student diversity, it is essential to identify the factors that influence how students from varied backgrounds engage in learning activities at university. Thatcher (1999) asserted that the diversity within a team or group does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes; conversely, it may often result in dissatisfaction and, to some extent, negative effects. Thus, while the system may appear broader and more accessible, the allocation of opportunities still disproportionately benefits certain regions and social groups, relegating many young learners to the margins.

In Indian society, diversity is ubiquitous. Higher education in India faces challenges associated with five dimensions of inequity related to gender, caste, geography, religion, and financial status (Joshi, & Ahir, 2019). The NEP 2020 recognizes and aims to tackle historical inequities by offering targeted scholarships and financial support to economically disadvantaged and marginalized groups. The policy also emphasizes the significance of promoting regional languages as mediums of instruction, making education more accessible to those who do not speak English. Equity in higher education encompasses more than just

access; it requires fairness in participation, experiences, and outcomes. Given India's socio-cultural diversity and the historical disadvantages experienced by marginalized communities, equity is a primary concern in higher education policy. Students from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), minorities, and individuals with disabilities frequently encounter structural disadvantages. Socio-economic disparities influence access to coaching, quality schooling, and preparatory materials. Women in various areas face gender-related obstacles, restricted decision-making authority, and societal constraints. Government initiatives such as reservation policies, scholarships, targeted fellowships, residential facilities, and remedial programs aim to bridge these gaps. However, ingrained inequalities in society and significant differences in institutional quality continue to hinder the achievement of genuine equity.

Strengthen quality assurance mechanisms to guarantee that new institutions, courses, and programs adhere to strict standards. Establish a solid accreditation and evaluation system to uphold educational quality. It considers equity as being connected to inclusion and fairness. According to him, it serves as a guiding principle to enhance the education system's ability to reach every learner in the community. This means it should be viewed as a fundamental principle governing all educational policies and practices, grounded in the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more equitable society (Ainscow, 2016). Quality is crucial for both national and global competitiveness. However, achieving high-quality teaching, learning, and research remains a significant challenge for India. Numerous institutions struggle with faculty shortages, insufficient infrastructure, and outdated curricula.

Enhancing access, equity, and quality is not just an educational necessity but also a national priority that will influence India's social mobility, international standing, and long-term growth.

Objectives

- To Evaluate the effectiveness of NEP 2020 in promoting Access, Equity and Quality in Higher Education System.
- To analyze role of technology and digital learning ecosystem in expanding Access, Equity and Quality in Indian Higher Education System.
- To identify the major structural and systemic barriers in Indian Higher Education System.
- To suggest strategies for improving the effectiveness of Access, Equity and Quality in Higher Education System.

Methodology

This research report uses only secondary information as its foundation. The study uses an interpretive methodology, gathering and analyzing qualitative evidence through the documentation of publications, research papers from journals, documents gathered by different authorities and institutions, papers appearing in local, national and worldwide publications and web-based resources.

Review of Literature

Jha (2016) attempted to investigate the quality, equity, and accessibility of Indian higher education following the policies of liberalization, privatization, and globalization. The investigator made an effort to look at the prospects, threats, weaknesses, and strengths of higher education. The administration has made several attempts, but the quality of the educational system is appalling. In order to make our young employable, access, equality, and quality issues must be resolved as soon as possible.

Usman (2016) Generally speaking, the phrase "access" refers to the ways in which educational institutions and regulations guarantee, or at the very least attempt to guarantee, chances to receive educational services. Every person must have access to the tools necessary to reach their full potential

Misra and Bal (2014) in their investigation of equitable excellence in Indian higher education. They discovered that while enrolment in Indian higher education has significantly increased, there are still gaps in the system for underprivileged groups and religious minorities. India must take the initiative to redesign the entire educational system and allocate resources in a fair and appropriate manner. The underprivileged population may benefit from increased equity as a result.

Marber and Araya (2014) Access-providing HEIs continue to be at the bottom of the current quality indices, which are self-reinforcing and include institutional rankings, research funding, faculty quality, and infrastructure needs. The existing quality metrics are a self-fulfilling process of selectivity since the top-ranked schools draw better students and attain management yield rates.

OECD (2012) In order to provide high-quality education, educational colleges must always maintain the bare minimum of infrastructure. The teacher-to-student ratio and ideal ratio can be used to interpret these minimal requirements. Under this topic, the number, calibre, and credentials of teachers are crucial.

Barriers in the Indian Higher Education System: Access, Equity, and Quality

Access pertains to the opportunities available for learners to enter, engage in, and finish higher education. In India, numerous obstacles inhibit equitable access: A significant number of higher education institutions (HEIs) are primarily located in urban or semi-urban areas. Students hailing from rural, tribal, and remote locales encounter limited institutional availability, poor infrastructure, and inadequate transportation options. High tuition fees, escalating costs of private education, and insufficient financial support hinder access for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Many families perceive higher education as an economic burden because of the associated expenses (such as hostel fees, books, and travel). Gender biases, early marriages, and

family obligations diminish women's opportunities for access. Socially marginalized groups (SC, ST, OBCs) endure discrimination, subpar schooling quality, and restricted exposure.

Equity signifies fairness and inclusivity regarding the distribution of educational opportunities. Dan and Mino (2016) indicated that challenges such as miscommunication, misunderstanding, or cultural disparities certainly exist in interactions among diverse students. Individuals from marginalized backgrounds frequently encounter stereotyping, micro-aggressions, and limited social support. Dropout rates are notably high due to unfriendly campus environments. Gender disparities remain prevalent in STEM fields, professional education, and research-oriented programs. Concerns for safety and socio-cultural norms limit women's mobility. Regions like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and North-East India suffer from institutional shortages in contrast to states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra. Students from low-income families wrestle with hidden expenses, insufficient scholarships, and inadequate educational backgrounds. The trend toward privatization exacerbates inequality as elite institutions become financially out of reach. An English-centric curriculum puts students from vernacular backgrounds at a disadvantage. The absence of multilingual resources hampers inclusivity. Quality pertains to academic standards, learning outcomes, faculty expertise, research culture, and institutional governance. Numerous institutions contend with significant faculty shortages. Inadequate teacher training and a lack of innovative teaching methods impact classroom quality. Curriculum revisions progress slowly. There is an overemphasis on rote learning rather than fostering critical thinking, research skills, and creativity. Limited funding, scarcity of laboratories, and poor connections with industry diminish research output. There is a brain drain of talented scholars to international universities. Many HEIs lack essential ICT infrastructure, laboratories, libraries, and effective student support systems. Elite institutions (such as IITs, IIMs, AIIMS, and Central Universities) uphold high standards; however, state universities and affiliated colleges that enrol the majority of students frequently lack quality assurance measures.

Strategies for Enhancing Access, Equity, and Quality in the Higher Education System

To enhance access, equity, and quality within the higher education system, a thorough array of strategies is needed to tackle structural deficiencies, institutional shortcomings, and evolving educational demands. The strategies outlined below represent a multifaceted approach that can assist national objectives of inclusivity, excellence, and competitiveness on a global scale.

1. Increasing Institutional Outreach and Improving Infrastructure

Enhancing access necessitates broadening the geographical availability and institutional capacity of higher education. The establishment of new universities and colleges in underrepresented rural, tribal, and socio-economically disadvantaged areas can help diminish regional inequalities. It is crucial to bolster physical infrastructure such as classrooms, hostels, laboratories, libraries, and digital resources to support enrollment growth and ensure active involvement from a diverse range of learners.

2. Augmenting Financial Assistance and Alleviating Economic Hurdles

Targeted financial support initiatives, including scholarships, fee exemptions, low-interest educational loans, and direct benefit transfer programs, can greatly enhance access and equity. Special financial packages aimed at students from marginalized backgrounds, first-generation learners, and women can help lower dropout rates and promote greater participation. Institutions should also broaden need-based financial aid structures to assist economically vulnerable learners.

3. Utilizing Digital Technologies to Close Access Gaps

Technology and data analytics are vital in fostering equity and access in higher education by improving accessibility, backing evidence-based decision-making, and pinpointing areas needing enhancement (Maiya and Aithal, 2023). Technology can significantly boost accessibility for students with disabilities by offering alternative formats for learning materials, facilitating communication and collaboration, and enhancing the accessibility of digital resources (Olubusola et al., 2024). Digital platforms, open educational resources, and hybrid teaching models can help make access more equitable. To enhance effectiveness, both government and institutions must invest in affordable internet connectivity, provide subsidized digital devices, and establish community digital learning centers in isolated areas. Fostering digital literacy skills for both students and educators is critical to ensuring equitable involvement in technology-driven learning settings. By leveraging data analytics, institutions can pinpoint areas for improvement, allocate resources more efficiently, and apply targeted measures to encourage equity and access for all learners (Mbada et al., 2017). Moreover, technology can promote communication and collaboration among students and instructors, allowing individuals to engage in academic activities without regard to their physical location or mobility (Odeyemi et al., 2024). By utilizing technology to enhance accessibility, institutions can guarantee that every student has equal opportunities to fully engage in the educational experience.

4. Promoting Inclusive Policies and Support Systems

Creating a culture of inclusivity necessitates deliberate actions to establish an environment where all community members feel acknowledged, valued, and included. This includes encouraging diversity within the curriculum and teaching methods, nurturing inclusive classroom settings, and enacting policies and practices that foster equity and fairness (Killen and Rutland, 2022). Inclusive teaching approaches might incorporate diverse viewpoints and voices into course materials, utilize inclusive language and examples, and create opportunities for student engagement and involvement (Segun et al., 2021). Achieving equity involves institutionalizing inclusive frameworks such as gender-sensitive policies, anti-discrimination units, accessible campus facilities, language support centers, and mentoring initiatives for underprivileged learners. Additionally, the increasing focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education mirrors broader societal movements toward social justice and equity (Williamson and Kizilcec, 2022). Special Education Zones, community outreach initiatives, and bridge programs can be strategically implemented

to aid students from varied socio-cultural backgrounds. Academic counseling, peer mentoring, and psychosocial support systems are also essential for promoting student retention and achievement. Affirmative action policies remain one of the most contentious and litigated topics within higher education law (Carter and Lippard, 2020).

5. Enhancing Governance, Autonomy, and Institutional Accountability

To improve overall quality, effective governance structures are crucial. Institutions ought to be granted autonomy in academic, administrative, and financial matters, allowing them to innovate in curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and research. Furthermore, strong accountability mechanisms that include transparent accreditation, regular performance audits, and data-driven assessments can help ensure that institutions uphold high standards. Streamlining regulatory frameworks and minimizing bureaucratic obstacles can improve institutional responsiveness and facilitate the implementation of reforms.

6. Strengthening Faculty Capacity and Teaching-Learning Practices

The quality of faculty is fundamental to achieving educational excellence. There should be ongoing investments in professional development, training in digital teaching methods, research capabilities, and interdisciplinary instruction. Hiring qualified faculty, decreasing vacancy rates, and establishing performance-based incentives can lead to enhanced teaching quality. Collaborative teaching frameworks and exposure to global best practices can further enrich the learning experience.

7. Promoting Multidisciplinary and Flexible Learning Pathways

Flexible academic frameworks such as credit transfer systems, various entry and exit points, and competency-based education can make higher education more accessible and student-focused. By integrating disciplines, offering elective courses, and encouraging interdisciplinary programs, academic relevance can be improved while fostering student choice and independence. This flexibility caters to diverse learning needs and boosts overall educational quality. There is a pressing need for a Transformative Curriculum aimed at delivering Holistic and Multidisciplinary Higher Education. Here, a 'Transformative Curriculum' refers to all curricula, pedagogical approaches, and teaching-learning systems that are deeply rooted in Indian culture, traditions, heritage, customs, languages, philosophies, geography, as well as ancient and contemporary knowledge, societal and scientific requirements, and indigenous and traditional learning methods, etc. (Mittal & Pani, 2023).

8. Enhancing Research Ecosystems and Innovation Capacity

To elevate the quality of higher education, strong research and innovation ecosystems are essential. This includes creating well-funded research centers, increasing funding for socially relevant and multidisciplinary studies, and encouraging partnerships with industry, government, and international organizations. Strengthening incubation centers, fostering entrepreneurship, and providing more opportunities for student-led research can significantly improve institutional quality and global standing.

9. Strengthening Industry Linkages and Improving Employability

Aligning curricula with industry requirements, offering internships, apprenticeships, skill-development initiatives, and career counselling services can enhance employability. Institutions should work alongside employers to collaboratively design course modules, incorporate vocational elements, and establish placement services with robust industry connections. This alignment ensures that higher education effectively meets the demands of the labour market.

10. Ensuring Monitoring, Evaluation, and Data-Driven Decision-Making

Consistent monitoring of institutional performance is vital for enhancing access, equity, and quality. Developing centralized data systems, carrying out regular audits, and utilizing analytical tools to monitor enrollment, retention, learning outcomes, and employment trends can facilitate evidence-based policy-making. Ongoing evaluation helps identify shortcomings, assess progress, and refine strategies.

The role of technology and the digital learning ecosystem in enhancing access, equity, and quality within the Indian higher education system

Technology is crucial in enhancing the quality of higher education by promoting innovative teaching methods, improving research capabilities, and encouraging collaboration between students and educators. Advanced learning management systems, engaging multimedia resources, and virtual laboratories make the educational experience richer, allowing students to interact with course materials in vibrant and immersive ways. Moreover, assessment tools driven by technology and data analytics enable educators to tailor learning pathways, monitor student progress, and offer timely feedback, which fosters ongoing improvement in teaching and learning practices. Nonetheless, effectively integrating technology into higher education necessitates careful attention to pedagogical principles, technological infrastructure, and digital literacy skills. By thoughtfully and strategically leveraging technology's potential, higher education institutions can maintain and enhance educational quality, equipping students for success in a progressively complex and interconnected world. The influence of technology has revolutionized teaching and learning by offering educational opportunities that overcome barriers related to race, gender disparities, financial constraints, and physical limitations (Anthony, 2020). The concept of equity in higher education is intricate and multi-dimensional, continuing to develop over time (Willems, Farley, & Campbell, 2019). In India, SWAYAM serves as a platform that offers abundant learning opportunities to all students across a wide range of academic, technical, vocational, and professional courses, facilitated by leading institutions in their respective fields (Bhesera & Bika, 2024).

Evaluate the Effectiveness of NEP 2020 in promoting Access, Equity and Quality in Higher Education System

Assess the efficacy of NEP 2020 in enhancing Access, Equity, and Quality within the Higher Education System. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a significant shift in policy aimed at increasing participation, fostering inclusivity, and

improving the academic standards of higher education in India. Its provisions signal a thorough reform initiative that prioritizes not only structural growth but also transformations in governance, pedagogical methods, and digital integration (Ministry of Education, 2020). To evaluate its effectiveness, one must investigate both the intended policy goals and the early trends in implementation that are surfacing throughout the higher education sector. NEP 2020 has introduced various strategies designed to broaden access. These strategies encompass initiatives to create multidisciplinary higher education institutions, aim for a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 50% by 2035, enhance Open and Distance Learning (ODL), and integrate online learning platforms (Aithal & Aithal, 2020). Early evidence suggests an increase in enrolments in online and hybrid programs, attributed to their added flexibility and reduced geographical restrictions (Kumar, 2022). However, India's advancement remains inconsistent, as challenges such as infrastructural deficits, faculty shortages, and ongoing digital divides continue to adversely impact rural, tribal, and economically disadvantaged areas (AISHE, 2023). While the policy provides structural avenues for increasing participation, its practical effectiveness is significantly influenced by the capacity of states and the preparedness of institutions. The policy exhibits a robust conceptual commitment to equity, particularly in its focus on Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), the encouragement of regional languages, the establishment of Special Education Zones (SEZs), and the expansion of financial assistance programs (Mehta, 2021). Utilizing mother-tongue instruction in higher education has proven advantageous for first-generation learners, by mitigating language barriers and boosting academic self-assurance (Sharma, 2022). Nonetheless, during the surge of online learning, digital inequalities have intensified, limiting fair access for many socially marginalized students (Nanda & Mishra, 2021). Consequently, the policy's outcomes in terms of equity appear mixed—there are promising signs at the policy level, yet implementation is inconsistent. Regarding quality, NEP 2020 stresses a multidisciplinary and holistic approach to education, outcome-based learning, reforms in accreditation, and the enhancement of research environments through the National Research Foundation (NRF) (MHRD, 2020). These reforms have prompted numerous institutions to revamp their curricula, incorporate skill-based courses, and embrace academic flexibility (Pathak & Srivastava, 2021). Preliminary changes in accreditation and governance are enhancing accountability, although a limited number of institutions have fully embraced the new quality standards (NAAC, 2022). Challenges such as inadequate research funding, a lack of faculty development opportunities, and structural inflexibility within public institutions continue to hinder the quality advancements envisioned by the policy (Gupta & Singh, 2023). Despite these obstacles, the gradual implementation of multidisciplinary programs and digital learning resources indicates a positive trend towards elevating quality. In summary, the effectiveness of NEP 2020 in advancing access, equity, and quality can be characterized as strategically robust yet operationally inconsistent. The policy offers an ambitious framework aligned with global education standards, and initial signs indicate significant progress in curricular reform, digital expansion, and institutional reorganization. However, disparities in execution, financial limitations, and technological inequities present major hurdles. The enduring impact of NEP 2020 will be contingent upon continuous government funding, strong cooperation between federal and state bodies, and diligent monitoring of institutional results. Ensuring equitable access to digital resources, bolstering faculty development, and expediting regulatory reforms are crucial steps to unlocking the transformative potential of NEP 2020.

Recommendations

Given that social support emerged as a crucial element throughout our study, alongside equity and access, it is suggested that both national and institutional policies prioritize enhancing opportunities for student learning success within universities. Mentoring initiatives could align with these policies. Drawing from our literature review, barrier identification, and policy assessment, the following suggestions aim to bolster access, equity, and quality in higher education across India:

1. Enhancing Access

Strengthen Public Higher Education Institutions: Increase funding to broaden institutional capabilities, especially in underserved rural, tribal, and remote areas. **Develop Regional Resource Centres:** Create multidisciplinary centers equipped with libraries, laboratories, and digital resources that are accessible to surrounding colleges. **Expand Open and Distance Learning (ODL):** Advocate for blended learning approaches while ensuring affordable internet access and digital devices for every learner. **Improve Transport and Hostel Facilities:** Offer subsidized transportation, secure hostels, and residential assistance for rural and female students.

2. Promoting Equity and Inclusion

The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) and various government initiatives underscore the necessity for policies that generate equal opportunities for all students (Taimur, 2018). Research indicates that while affirmative action policies, such as reservations for SC, ST, and OBC students, have boosted enrollment, problems like insufficient support systems, socio-cultural biases, and weak infrastructure persist (Feuchter & Fischer, 2023; Lang & Spitzer, 2020). **Inclusive Pedagogical Practices:** Implement support systems like bridge courses, mentorship, counselling, remedial instruction, and language assistance programs. **Strengthen Anti-Discrimination Mechanisms:** Establish comprehensive grievance redressal systems, diversity committees, and sensitization programs to combat caste, gender, and religious discrimination. **Gender-Friendly Policies:** Create safe campus environments, flexible academic frameworks, maternity support, adequate sanitation facilities, and women-centric hostels to enhance participation and retention.

3. Improving Quality of Higher Education

Curricular Modernization: Regularly revise curricula in collaboration with industry, research institutions, and international standards to maintain global relevance.

Faculty Development: Invest in ongoing professional development initiatives, pedagogical training, and research fellowships to improve teaching quality.

Strengthen Accreditation and Quality Assurance: Adopt outcome-based accreditation, clear ranking systems, and routine academic audits.

Promote Research and Innovation: Formulate research parks, incubators, and partnerships with industry to foster a culture of inquiry, entrepreneurship, and innovation.

4. Bridging the Digital Divide

Digital Infrastructure Development: Ensure high-speed internet, smart classrooms, and ICT laboratories are available in government-run educational institutions.

Digital Literacy Programs: Equip students and educators with training in digital skills and online teaching methods.

Affordable EdTech Solutions: Work with technology firms to provide subsidized devices, software, and educational platforms.

5. Governance and Policy Reforms

Several scholarships, including the National Means-cum-Merit Scholarship, Post-Matric Scholarship for SC/ST students, and merit-based financial assistance programs, aim to assist economically disadvantaged learners (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Autonomy with Accountability: Provide academic, administrative, and financial autonomy to educational institutions while ensuring transparent accountability measures.

Strengthen Data-Driven Decision Making: Employ data analytics, EMIS systems, and regular assessments to gauge policy effectiveness.

Promote Public-Private Partnerships: Foster collaborations for infrastructure development, skills training, and research while upholding equity principles. Initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao are designed to boost female enrolment in higher education (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2015).

Discussion

The evaluation of access, equity, and quality within India's higher education system highlights a multifaceted and dynamic environment influenced by historical contexts, socio-economic inequalities, and modern policy efforts. India's shift from an elite educational framework to one of the largest higher education systems worldwide signifies substantial advancements; however, the enduring disparities and quality issues illustrate that mere expansion does not ensure inclusiveness or excellence.

The initiation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 signifies a substantial shift in policy aimed at revolutionizing higher education through multidisciplinary approaches, adaptable curricula, improved digital frameworks, and reinforced measures for equity. Nevertheless, while NEP presents an ambitious blueprint, its success is largely reliant on efficient execution, adequate funding, governance, and the ability of institutions to embrace structural changes. Research indicates that although enrolments are increasing, disparities related to gender, caste, region, and income persist significantly. Learners from marginalized backgrounds frequently encounter multiple obstacles, such as inadequate schooling, limited financial resources, language difficulties, and prejudiced socio-cultural practices. Another significant emerging theme is the impact of technology and digital ecosystems. Digital education has broadened opportunities and forged new avenues for access; however, the digital divide characterized by inconsistent internet availability, device accessibility, and varying levels of digital literacy has concurrently deepened inequalities. Therefore, while technology possesses the potential for transformation, its advantages are not universally available. Quality remains a persistent issue. Shortages in faculty, outdated programs, weak research environments, and insufficient infrastructure hinder both academic success and job readiness. The substantial reliance on private institutions, which make up nearly two-thirds of all higher education institutions, has increased capacity but also raised concerns over affordability, commercialization, and inconsistent academic quality. The interconnectedness of access, equity, and quality is apparent across all facets of the system. Improving access without enhancing quality results in overcrowding without significant learning outcomes, while prioritizing quality without addressing equity can perpetuate social disparities. Achieving lasting progress necessitates a comprehensive, integrated strategy that acknowledges these elements as interdependent components of a unified higher education system. Ultimately, this discussion underscores that India is at a crucial crossroads. With its demographic advantage and increasing global integration, the nation must promptly reinforce its higher education policies and practices to create a more equitable, inclusive, and high-quality system that can foster national advancement and international competitiveness.

Conclusion

The Indian higher education sector has experienced considerable changes, yet the issues of access, equity, and quality continue to influence its path. Despite remarkable growth, inequalities stemming from socio-economic factors, geography, caste, gender, and digital access endure. Concerns regarding quality covering outdated curricula, insufficient faculty, and weak research environments further obstruct the pursuit of global competitiveness. NEP 2020 offers a hopeful and progressive policy framework that acknowledges the necessity for comprehensive reform. Its focus on multidisciplinary education, adaptability, technology incorporation, and inclusivity aligns appropriately with global movements and national development objectives. However, fulfilling the goals of NEP necessitates efficient implementation, ongoing funding, institutional readiness, and collaborative efforts from governments, educators, businesses, and communities. Guaranteeing fair access, fostering meaningful

engagement, and improving quality are not standalone aims; they constitute the basis of a resilient and inclusive higher education landscape. Overcoming structural and systemic challenges is vital for empowering India's youth to realize their full potential and contribute to national progress. In summary, India is positioned at a pivotal moment. By adopting transformative reforms, enhancing institutional capabilities, encouraging inclusive practices, and focusing on quality improvements, the nation can establish a higher education system that is globally competitive, socially equitable, and capable of promoting sustainable development. The future of India's higher education hinges on how efficiently the country integrates access, equity, and quality to elevate every learner and cultivate a knowledge-driven society.

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