

NEP 2020 and Higher Education Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in India: A Global Perspective

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark reform in India's higher education system with a central objective of increasing the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) from around 28 percent to 50 percent by 2035. This paper examines India's GER performance in a global context and analyses how NEP 2020 reforms align with international best practices in expanding access, equity, and quality in higher education. Using secondary data from UNESCO, OECD, World Bank, and Indian government sources, the study highlights that India's GER remains below the global average and significantly lower than that of developed economies and leading emerging countries. The paper evaluates key policy interventions under NEP 2020, including multidisciplinary education, multiple entry and exit systems, the Academic Bank of Credits, expansion of digital and distance learning, and targeted inclusion strategies for disadvantaged groups. The findings suggest that NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive framework capable of accelerating higher education participation and improving student mobility and retention. However, challenges related to infrastructure capacity, faculty

availability, financing, regional disparities, and the digital divide may constrain progress. The study concludes that achieving the GER target will require sustained public investment, institutional capacity building, and inclusive implementation strategies aligned with global benchmarks of higher education expansion.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Gross Enrollment Ratio, Higher Education, Global Perspective, Access and Equity, India

I. Introduction

Higher education plays a decisive role in shaping economic growth, social mobility, innovation, and democratic participation in modern societies. The extent to which a nation's population accesses higher education is commonly measured through the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), which represents total enrollment in tertiary education as a percentage of the population in the relevant age group (18–23 years in India). A higher GER reflects wider participation, stronger human capital formation, and greater competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. Consequently, GER has become a key benchmark for comparing higher education systems across countries and assessing progress toward inclusive and sustainable development.

Globally, higher education systems have undergone rapid expansion over the last two decades, with many developed economies achieving GER levels above 70 percent and several emerging economies crossing the 50 percent threshold. Countries such as China, Brazil, and Malaysia have demonstrated that large-scale enrollment growth is achievable through sustained public investment, institutional diversification, flexible learning pathways, and digital education models. In contrast, India, despite possessing one of the largest higher education systems in the world in terms of absolute numbers, continues to record a comparatively lower GER, reflecting persistent challenges related to access, affordability, quality, and regional and social disparities.

India's GER in higher education has risen steadily from around 10 percent in the early 2000s to nearly 28–29 percent in recent years, indicating significant progress. However, this remains below the global average and far behind advanced economies and several emerging peers. The expansion of secondary education, demographic pressures, socio-economic inequalities, institutional capacity constraints, and high dropout rates have historically limited India's ability to achieve mass participation in higher education. Recognizing these structural challenges, the Government of India introduced the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, marking the first comprehensive education reform in over three decades.

NEP 2020 envisions a holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary, and learner-centric higher education system aligned with global standards. One of its most ambitious objectives is to increase India's higher education GER to 50 percent by

2035, signalling a decisive shift from elite to mass higher education. To achieve this target, the policy proposes wide-ranging reforms, including institutional restructuring, multidisciplinary universities, multiple entry and exit options supported by the Academic Bank of Credits, expansion of open and distance learning, digital education initiatives, and targeted measures to promote equity and inclusion for socially and economically disadvantaged groups.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the relationship between NEP 2020 and higher education GER in India from a global perspective. It seeks to analyse India's enrollment performance in comparison with international benchmarks, evaluate the potential of NEP 2020 reforms in accelerating access and participation, and identify the key challenges that may hinder the realization of GER targets. By situating India's higher education reforms within global trends and best practices, the study aims to contribute to policy discourse on inclusive and sustainable expansion of higher education in developing economies.

II. Review of Literature

The expansion of higher education participation has emerged as a central policy objective across countries, with the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) widely used as a key indicator of access, equity, and system performance. Scholars and international organizations have examined the determinants of GER growth, the role of public policy reforms, and the implications of massification for quality, equity, and employability. This review synthesizes global and Indian literature on GER trends and evaluates studies related to the National Education Policy

(NEP) 2020 and its potential impact on higher education enrollment in India.

1. Global Perspectives on GER and Higher Education Expansion

Trow (1974) conceptualized the transition of higher education systems from elite to mass and universal stages, arguing that expansion is driven by economic development, social demand, and state intervention. UNESCO (2015, 2021) documented a steady rise in global tertiary GER from below 20 percent in 2000 to nearly 40 percent by 2020, highlighting the role of demographic change, public financing, institutional diversification, and digital education in facilitating access. OECD (2021) observed that most advanced economies achieved GER levels above 70 percent by expanding student aid, introducing flexible learning pathways, and strengthening community college and vocational higher education systems.

Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009) emphasized that massification has transformed higher education globally but has also created challenges related to quality assurance, financing sustainability, and graduate employability. Marginson (2016) argued that participation growth improves social mobility and national competitiveness but requires strong governance frameworks to balance access with academic standards. Collectively, these studies establish that GER expansion is both an economic necessity and a social imperative, though it must be accompanied by institutional reforms and quality assurance mechanisms.

2. GER in Emerging Economies

Research on emerging economies demonstrates that rapid GER growth is achievable through sustained

policy commitment. Carnoy et al. (2014) analyzed China's higher education reforms and found that state-led institutional expansion, targeted financing, and diversification of institutions enabled GER growth from below 10 percent in the late 1990s to over 50 percent within two decades. Similarly, Levy (2018) highlighted the role of private sector participation and non-university institutions in Latin America, particularly in Brazil and Chile, where GER expanded rapidly.

World Bank (2017) studies showed that middle-income countries that invested in open and distance learning, community colleges, and vocational pathways achieved higher enrollment rates while maintaining fiscal sustainability. These findings suggest that policy coherence, financing reforms, and institutional diversity are critical drivers of GER expansion in developing contexts.

3. Trends and Challenges in India's Higher Education GER

Indian scholars have extensively examined the evolution of GER in the country. Tilak (2015) noted that despite rapid expansion in institutional numbers and enrollment, India's GER remained below global averages due to persistent inequalities, limited public investment, and uneven quality. Agarwal (2009) observed that India's higher education system experienced quantitative growth but lagged in structural reforms necessary for inclusion and mobility.

AISHE reports (Ministry of Education, 2018–2022) documented steady improvement in GER, from about 10 percent in 2001 to nearly 28–29 percent in recent years. However, disparities persist across gender, caste, region, and income groups. Kapur and Mehta (2017) emphasized that regional

imbalances and low participation of marginalized communities continue to constrain inclusive growth in higher education. Chowdhury (2020) argued that India's GER growth remains supply-constrained, with inadequate institutional capacity, faculty shortages, and limited financial aid coverage.

4. Equity, Inclusion, and GER Expansion

Several studies highlight the centrality of equity-oriented interventions in achieving sustainable GER growth. UNESCO (2017) stressed that gender parity, inclusion of first-generation learners, rural populations, and disadvantaged communities are critical for massification in developing countries. Sen and Dreze (2013) demonstrated that education outcomes in India are closely linked to socio-economic inequalities, and expansion without targeted support risks reproducing social stratification.

Tilak and Varghese (2019) emphasized the importance of scholarships, hostel facilities, language support, and community colleges in widening participation among marginalized groups. International evidence from OECD (2020) further supports the argument that need-based financial aid, student services, and flexible learning arrangements significantly improve access and retention, thereby enhancing GER.

5. Digital Education, Open Learning, and Enrollment Growth

The role of digital and distance education in expanding higher education participation has been increasingly examined in recent literature. Bates (2015) argued that online and blended learning models lower cost barriers and expand access for non-traditional learners. UNESCO (2020) reported that digital platforms played a significant role in

sustaining enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in large and geographically diverse countries.

In the Indian context, studies by Mishra and Panda (2021) and Jain et al. (2022) highlighted the potential of platforms such as SWAYAM, MOOCs, and open universities in expanding access and improving flexibility. However, they cautioned that the digital divide, uneven connectivity, and limited digital literacy remain major constraints on inclusive participation.

6. Literature on NEP 2020 and Higher Education Reform

NEP 2020 has generated extensive academic and policy debate. Agarwal (2021) described the policy as a paradigm shift toward multidisciplinary education, learner flexibility, and global integration. She argued that reforms such as multiple entry and exit, Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), and institutional restructuring are aligned with international best practices and have strong potential to improve enrollment, retention, and mobility.

Kumar and Shukla (2021) emphasized that NEP 2020's focus on equity, inclusion, and regional outreach could significantly reduce GER disparities across states and social groups. Varghese (2021) highlighted governance reforms under NEP 2020, including the creation of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), as critical for ensuring accountability, quality assurance, and coordinated expansion.

However, critics such as Tilak (2021) cautioned that achieving the GER target of 50 percent by 2035 would require substantial increases in public financing, faculty recruitment, and infrastructure

development. He argued that without adequate resource mobilization, rapid expansion could compromise academic quality and institutional sustainability. Similarly, Mukherjee (2022) stressed the importance of state-level implementation capacity and inter-governmental coordination in translating policy goals into enrollment outcomes.

7. Global Comparisons and Alignment with International Best Practices

Comparative studies by OECD (2021) and World Bank (2020) demonstrate that countries achieving high GER levels adopted:

- Flexible curricular frameworks and credit transfer systems,
- Diversified institutional ecosystems (universities, community colleges, vocational institutions),
- Strong public financing and student aid mechanisms,
- Robust quality assurance frameworks.

NEP 2020 reflects many of these global best practices, particularly through its emphasis on multidisciplinary education, credit portability, digital learning, and inclusion. However, Indian scholars note that implementation challenges related to scale, governance capacity, and regional disparities differentiate India's context from smaller or more homogenous countries.

III. Research Gap

While existing literature provides valuable insights into GER trends, equity challenges, digital learning, and higher education reforms, there is limited empirical research explicitly linking NEP 2020 reforms to projected GER outcomes in India within a global comparative framework. Most studies examine policy provisions in isolation or focus on

historical enrollment trends without systematically situating India's targets alongside international benchmarks. Moreover, the long-term impact of reforms such as ABC, multiple entry and exit, and digital universities on retention, mobility, and participation remains underexplored.

This study seeks to bridge this gap by analysing NEP 2020's higher education reforms in relation to GER expansion from a global perspective, thereby contributing to policy discourse on inclusive and sustainable higher education growth in India.

IV. Objectives

1. To examine the concept and significance of **Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER)** in higher education from a global perspective.
2. To analyses the trends and patterns of **higher education GER in India** in comparison with developed and emerging economies.
3. To study the major provisions of **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** related to access, equity, flexibility, and institutional expansion.
4. To assess the potential impact of **NEP 2020 reforms** on increasing higher education GER in India.
5. To identify the key **challenges and constraints** in achieving the GER target of 50 percent by 2035.
6. To suggest suitable **policy measures and strategies** for improving higher education participation in India in line with global best practices.

V. Research Methodology

1. Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design, aiming to examine the relationship between the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India from a global perspective. The research focuses on identifying trends, patterns, policy implications, and comparative insights using secondary data sources.

2. Nature and Sources of Data

The study is based entirely on secondary data, collected from reliable and authentic sources such as:

- Government of India publications – NEP 2020 document, All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reports.
- International databases – UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), OECD, World Bank.
- Research journals, books, policy briefs, and reports on higher education and enrollment trends.
- Official websites of education ministries and international organizations.

3. Sampling Framework

Since the study is policy- and macro-level in nature, no primary sampling is involved. Instead, purposive selection of countries is made for global comparison, focusing on:

- Developed economies (USA, UK, Germany, South Korea),
- Emerging economies (China, Brazil, Malaysia, Vietnam),
- India as the core case study.

4. Tools and Techniques of Analysis

The following analytical tools are employed:

- Trend analysis – To study changes in GER in India over time.

- Comparative analysis – To compare India's GER with global and emerging economy benchmarks.
- Content analysis – To examine NEP 2020 provisions related to access, flexibility, equity, and institutional reform.
- Descriptive statistics – Percentages, growth rates, and ratios for interpreting GER data.

5. Period of Study

The study covers the period from 2000 to the most recent available year, enabling analysis of long-term trends before and after major policy reforms and positioning NEP 2020 within a broader temporal context.

6. Scope of the Study

The study focuses on:

- Higher education GER trends in India,
- Global comparisons with selected developed and emerging economies,
- Policy interventions under NEP 2020 influencing enrollment expansion.

7. Limitations of the Study

- The study relies on secondary data, which may have definitional and reporting differences across countries.
- Recent NEP 2020 reforms are still in the implementation phase; hence, long-term impacts on GER cannot yet be empirically measured.
- Country comparisons are indicative rather than exhaustive.

VI. Analysis

1. Trends in Higher Education GER in India

India's higher education Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) has shown consistent improvement over the past two decades. From around 10 percent in 2001,

GER increased to approximately 19 percent by 2011, reaching nearly 28–29 percent in recent years. This steady rise reflects expansion in institutional capacity, improved secondary school completion rates, increased participation of women, and policy initiatives aimed at widening access.

However, despite this progress, India's GER remains below the global average and significantly lower than that of developed economies, many of which have GER levels exceeding 70 percent. Even among emerging economies, India trails behind countries such as China and Brazil, indicating the need for accelerated reforms to transition from elite to mass higher education.

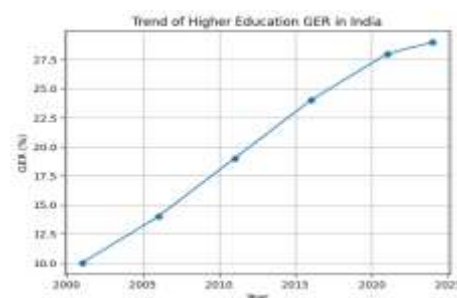
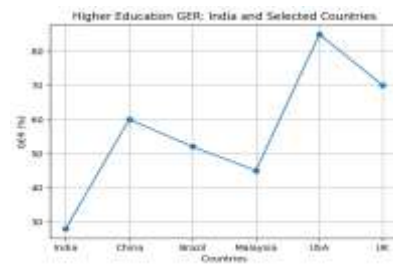
2. Global Comparison of GER

A comparative analysis reveals three broad patterns:

- Developed economies (USA, UK, South Korea, Germany) typically record GER levels above 70–80 percent, supported by strong public investment, student aid systems, and diversified higher education institutions.
- Emerging economies (China, Brazil, Malaysia, Vietnam) exhibit GER levels ranging from 40 to over 60 percent, driven by institutional expansion, vocational education pathways, and digital learning.
- India, with GER around 28–29 percent, remains in the lower-middle range among emerging economies, though its scale of enrollment in absolute numbers is among the largest globally.

This comparison suggests that India's GER performance lags behind international benchmarks,

reinforcing the importance of NEP 2020's ambitious target of 50 percent GER by 2035.



Analysis with Graphical Representation

Graph 1: Higher Education GER – India and Selected Countries(*Displayed above*)

Interpretation:

- India's GER (~28–29%) is significantly lower than developed countries like the USA (~85%) and UK (~70%).
- Among emerging economies, China (~60%), Brazil (~52%), and Malaysia (~45%) outperform India.
- This highlights the urgency and relevance of NEP 2020's target of 50% GER by 2035, which aims to bridge India's global participation gap.

Graph 2: Trend of Higher Education GER in India(*Displayed above*)

Interpretation:

- India's GER increased steadily from 10% in 2001 to nearly 29% by 2024.

- The growth rate accelerated after 2010 due to expansion of institutions, scholarships, digital learning initiatives, and increased secondary education completion.
- Despite progress, the current pace is insufficient to reach 50% GER by 2035 without structural reforms like those proposed in NEP 2020.

3. Impact of NEP 2020 Reforms on GER Expansion

3.1 Institutional Expansion and Multidisciplinary Education

NEP 2020's proposal to transform colleges into large multidisciplinary institutions and establish at least one higher education institution in every district is expected to significantly increase capacity and regional access. This approach aligns with global best practices, where diversified institutions have facilitated higher enrollment and reduced geographic disparities.

3.2 Multiple Entry and Exit and Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)

The introduction of flexible learning pathways and the Academic Bank of Credits promotes student mobility and reduces dropout rates by allowing learners to pause and resume education. International experiences suggest that credit portability improves retention and participation, which could contribute to sustained GER growth in India.

3.3 Digital and Distance Education

NEP 2020 emphasizes online and distance learning through platforms such as SWAYAM and the proposed National Digital University. These initiatives can expand access to working adults,

women, rural learners, and marginalized communities by lowering cost and geographic barriers. However, uneven digital infrastructure and connectivity gaps remain key challenges.

3.4 Equity and Inclusion Measures

Targeted scholarships, hostel facilities, regional language instruction, and special education zones aim to enhance participation among socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Since GER gaps in India are largely concentrated among rural populations, SC/ST communities, minorities, and low-income groups, these measures are central to inclusive expansion.

4. Regional and Social Disparities in GER

Despite national-level progress, significant disparities persist:

- **Gender:** Female GER has improved and, in some states, now exceeds male GER, but gaps remain in rural and disadvantaged regions.
- **Social Groups:** GER among SC/ST communities remains substantially below the national average, reflecting structural barriers to access and retention.
- **Regional Variation:** Southern and western states record higher GER compared to northern and eastern states, indicating uneven institutional development and socio-economic conditions.
- **Urban–Rural Divide:** Urban students continue to enjoy higher access to higher education institutions compared to rural learners.

NEP 2020's district-level institutional expansion and targeted inclusion strategies are designed to

reduce these disparities, though effective implementation will be critical.

5. Financial and Infrastructure Constraints

Achieving the GER target of 50 percent requires substantial investment in:

- Physical infrastructure (classrooms, laboratories, hostels),
- Faculty recruitment and development,
- Digital connectivity and learning resources,
- Student financial aid and support services.

Public expenditure on education in India remains below the recommended 6 percent of GDP, raising concerns about the sustainability of large-scale expansion. Without adequate funding, rapid enrollment growth could compromise quality and equity outcomes.

6. Alignment with Global Best Practices

NEP 2020 reflects several globally successful strategies:

- Flexible curricula and credit transfer systems,
- Multidisciplinary institutions,
- Expansion of vocational and skill-based education,
- Integration of digital learning,
- Strengthened quality assurance and governance mechanisms.

These reforms position India's higher education system closer to international standards of mass participation. However, India's demographic scale, socio-economic diversity, and federal governance structure pose unique implementation challenges not faced by smaller or more homogeneous countries.

GER in Emerging Economies (Recent Estimates)

The following figures give a snapshot of GER — reflecting how emerging countries are progressing in higher education participation:

Country / Region	Approx. GER (%)	Notes / Source
China	~60–63%	Higher GER due to rapid expansion and government investment.
Brazil	~50–55%	Brazil's enrolment has grown strongly over the past decades.
Malaysia	~40–45%	Reflects growth in tertiary participation.
Mexico	~40–45%	Moderate-level GER among Latin American emerging economies.
Vietnam	~35–45%	Significant growth over the past decades.
Indonesia	~35–40%	Growing but lower than some peers.
South Africa	~23–25%	Lower higher education participation compared to some emerging peers.
India	~28–31%	Increased from single digits decades ago but

Country / Region	Approx. GER (%)	Notes / Source
		still below many emerging economies.
Pakistan	~10–12%	Among the lowest GER in South Asia.
Bangladesh	~20–25%	Moderate but lower than China and Brazil.

Note: Data varies slightly depending on source year and methodology, but these figures reflect broad trends in emerging economies.

Regional and Global Context

Emerging vs Developed Countries

- High-income countries commonly have much higher GER levels — often above 75–80% (e.g., OECD averages are around 76%).
- Emerging economies tend to be in the 30–60% range, with China and Brazil leading within this group.

Growth Trends

- Emerging countries have seen rapid increases over recent decades:
 - China's GER jumped dramatically from very low levels to above 60% in recent years.
 - Brazil also saw substantial growth from around 10% in the 1980s to over 50% today.
 - India improved from less than 10% in the early 2000s to around 28–31% in recent years.

Key Insights for Emerging Economies

1. Economic Development MattersGER generally increases with economic growth, as wealthier societies can invest more in education infrastructure and support.
2. Policy and Access Initiatives Drive GrowthCountries with targeted policies(scholarships, expansion of universities, flexible pathways) tend to achieve higher GER faster.
3. Disparities Within RegionsGER varies widely even among emerging economies — e.g., China (over 60%) vs Pakistan (~10%).
4. Digital and Alternative LearningOnline and open learning platforms can help improve access, especially where physical campus infrastructure is limited. (Trendnoted broadly across literature, though specific numeric citations vary.)

7. Overall Assessment

The analysis indicates that NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive and globally aligned framework for increasing higher education GER in India. Its emphasis on flexibility, institutional restructuring, digital education, and inclusion has strong potential to accelerate enrollment growth and improve retention. Nevertheless, the success of these reforms depends on sustained public investment, faculty capacity building, digital infrastructure expansion, and effective state-level implementation.If implemented effectively, NEP 2020 can enable India to transition from a selective to a mass higher education system and move closer to global benchmarks of higher education participation.

VII. Major Findings

1. India's higher education **Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER)** has improved steadily over the past two decades but remains **below the global average** and behind several emerging economies.
2. **NEP 2020 sets an ambitious target of 50 percent GER by 2035**, signalling a major shift toward mass and inclusive higher education.
3. The policy's focus on **multidisciplinary institutions, multiple entry and exit systems, and the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)** is aligned with global best practices and is likely to improve student retention and mobility.
4. Expansion of **digital, online, and distance education** under NEP 2020 offers significant potential to increase access for rural learners, women, working adults, and marginalized groups.
5. **Equity-focused interventions** targeting socially and economically disadvantaged groups are essential, as GER disparities persist across regions, social categories, and income groups.
6. **Infrastructure limitations, faculty shortages, and financing constraints** remain major challenges to achieving rapid GER expansion.
7. Regional and inter-state variations in GER indicate that **uniform national strategies may be insufficient**, requiring state-specific and district-level implementation approaches.
8. NEP 2020 provides a **comprehensive and globally aligned framework** for improving

higher education participation, but its success depends on sustained public investment and effective governance reforms.

9. Without strong monitoring mechanisms and quality assurance systems, rapid expansion may risk **compromising academic standards and graduate employability**.
10. Overall, NEP 2020 has the potential to significantly improve India's higher education GER and bring it closer to international benchmarks if implemented effectively and inclusively.

VIII. Conclusion

The study concludes that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative reform agenda aimed at expanding access, improving equity, and enhancing quality in India's higher education system, with a central objective of achieving a Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of 50 percent by 2035. While India has made notable progress in increasing GER over the past two decades, it continues to lag behind global averages and several emerging economies, highlighting the need for sustained and systematic policy interventions. From a global perspective, successful higher education systems have expanded participation through flexible academic pathways, diversified institutions, strong student support mechanisms, and robust public investment. NEP 2020 aligns closely with these international best practices by promoting multidisciplinary education, multiple entry and exit options supported by the Academic Bank of Credits, digital and distance learning, and targeted inclusion strategies for disadvantaged groups. These reforms have the

potential to significantly improve enrollment, retention, and student mobility across regions and social categories. However, the realization of NEP 2020's ambitious GER targets depending on addressing critical challenges such as infrastructure deficits, faculty shortages, financing constraints, regional disparities, and the digital divide. Without adequate resource mobilization, institutional capacity building, and effective governance mechanisms, rapid expansion could risk compromising educational quality and equity outcomes. Overall, NEP 2020 provides a strong and globally aligned policy framework for transforming India into a mass higher education system. With sustained political commitment, enhanced public investment, and inclusive implementation strategies, India can not only achieve its GER targets but also strengthen its global standing in higher education and contribute meaningfully to human capital development and socio-economic transformation.

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