Rethinking India’s Higher Education Model

This editorial is based on “Fixing higher education: Research quality, soft skills gap, and NEP 2020 reforms” which was published in The Hindu on 15/07/2025. The article brings into focus the pressing challenges facing India’s higher education—declining academic standards, poor soft skills, and growing commercialization.

For Prelims: National Education Policy 2020, "Institutes of Eminence" scheme, DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) , Higher Education Financing Agency , Gender Parity Index, Gross Enrollment Ratio.

For Mains: Key Developments in India's Higher Education System, Key Issues Associated with India's Higher Education System.

India’s higher education system stands at a pivotal crossroads, facing challenges of **declining academic rigor, inadequate soft skills training, and growing commercialization.** Once rooted in strong fundamentals and guided mentorship, today’s institutions often prioritize rankings and revenue over quality and purpose. Though the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a progressive framework, its uneven implementation raises concerns. A **strategic reorientation—**anchored in foundational excellence, ethical leadership, and institutional integrity—is essential to revitalize the sector.

What are the Key Developments in India's Higher Education System?

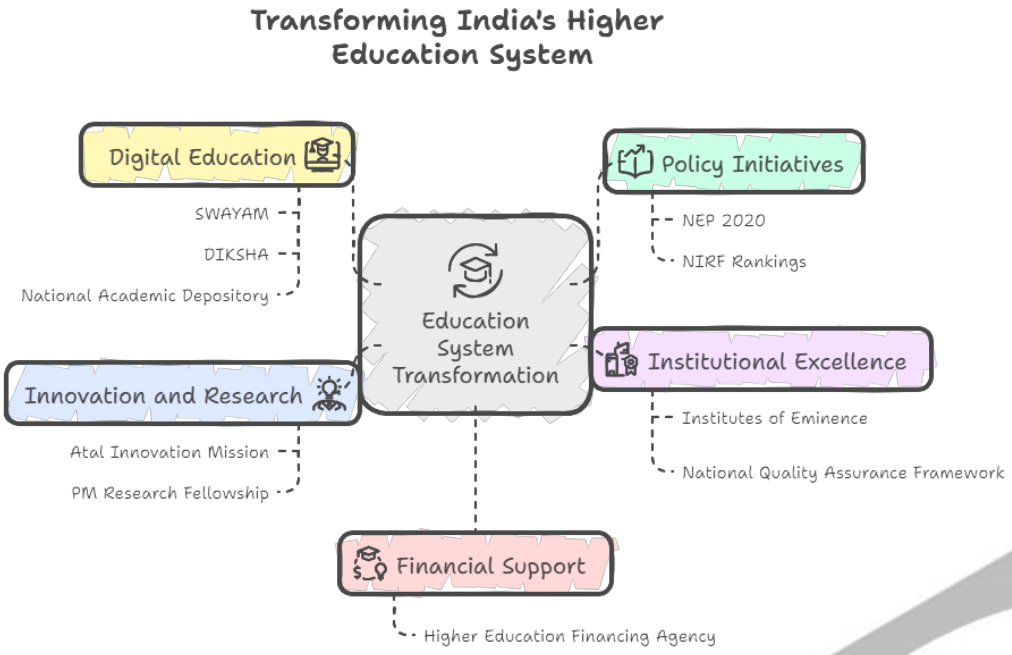
- **Expansion of State Public Universities (SPUs) and Inclusive Access**: India's commitment to expanding its higher education network has been significantly demonstrated through the growth of **State Public Universities (SPUs),** which have become central to making education more accessible, particularly in underserved and rural areas.
    - The SPUs, **accounting for 81% of total student enrollments,** are crucial in improving higher education access, providing millions of students, especially from disadvantaged communities.
    - These **universities now serve over 3.25 crore students**, reflecting an inclusive approach that aligns with the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020’s ambitious target of doubling enrollments by 2035**.
- **Substantial Growth in Research Output and Global Recognition:** India's research ecosystem has seen a transformative rise, with the **nation's contribution to global research increasing from 3.5% in 2017 to 5.2% in 2024.**
    - This leap in research output is largely attributed to institutions like IITs, which contribute over **24% of the country’s research publications.**
- **Internationalization and Global Collaborations:** India is making significant strides towards

internationalizing its higher education system, as evidenced by initiatives like the **"Institutes of Eminence" scheme**, which provides increased autonomy and funding to select institutions.
    - This initiative aims to bring Indian universities into the global elite, thereby raising their rankings and enhancing academic collaborations.
    - Additionally, **India's increasing partnerships with leading international universities, through faculty exchanges, joint research programs,** and student collaborations, are fostering an environment of cross-border knowledge-sharing.
    - Initiatives like **IIT Madras Zanzibar Campus** have the potential to position India as a prominent player in the global education and research arena.
- **Digitalization and Online Education:** The surge in digital education, propelled by initiatives like **DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing)** and the **National Digital Library**, marks a pivotal development in India's higher education.
    - These digital platforms have enabled millions of students to access quality learning resources, particularly during the pandemic, and have bridged gaps in physical infrastructure.
    - The **move towards hybrid learning models is helping students gain knowledge at their own pace,** improving the quality and reach of education.
- **Progress in Gender Parity and Inclusivity:** India has made remarkable strides in achieving gender parity in higher education, with the **Gender Parity Index (GPI) rising from 0.87 in 2011-12 to 1.01 in 2021-22.**
    - This achievement reflects concerted efforts to encourage the participation of women in higher education, with more women enrolling in traditionally male-dominated fields like **engineering and technology. (43% of India's STEM graduates are women)**
    - Moreover, marginalized communities, including **Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), have seen significant enrollment growth**, improving the inclusivity of India's higher education system.
- **Surge in Private Universities:** Private universities in India have witnessed a significant expansion, with enrollments growing by **497% between 2011-12 and 2021-22.**
    - This surge in private institutions is helping **alleviate pressure on public universities** and offers students a wider range of educational opportunities.
    - This development is crucial in diversifying India's higher education landscape and catering to the growing demand for tertiary education. However, this growth is also accompanied by concerns regarding the affordability and quality of education.
- **Financial Investments and Infrastructure Upgrades:** India's increasing investments in higher education infrastructure, as seen through initiatives like the **Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA),** are vital for improving campus facilities and academic resources.
    - These investments are aimed at upgrading laboratories, libraries, and digital infrastructure to support the growing student population.
    - In 2021, **India allocated 1.57% of its GDP to higher education (tertiary),** a step towards meeting the NEP 2020's call to boost public investment.
        - However, sustained investment in infrastructure remains crucial for sustaining growth in this sector.

What are the Key Issues Associated with India's Higher Education System?

- **Quality vs. Quantity Dilemma in Expansion:** India's higher education system has expanded rapidly, but this has often come at the expense of quality.
    - The pressure to accommodate a growing student population has led to overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of qualified faculty, and declining academic standards.
    - For instance, in 2021, **600 out of 1,043 universities and 25,000 of over 40,000 colleges were not accredited**.
        - While **enrollments have surged by 21%,** infrastructure and faculty development have lagged behind, undermining the true potential of higher education.
- **Faculty Shortages and Inadequate Professional Development:** India continues to face significant faculty shortages across most academic institutions, hindering the quality of education and research output.
    - Leading institutions like **IITs and IIMs have vacancies of 40% and 31%,** respectively,

reflecting a systemic problem.
    - Faculty recruitment is delayed due to **bureaucratic hurdles, while many positions remain unfilled**, forcing universities to rely on part-time or contract staff **(as seen in University of Delhi).**
        - This shortage stifles innovation, research, and personalized mentoring, thus affecting the quality of student outcomes.
- **Inequality in Access and Regional Disparities:** Access to quality higher education in India remains unequal, with stark regional and socio-economic disparities.
    - Despite **a rise in Gross Enrollment Ratio to 28.4% in 2021-22**, students in rural areas, economically disadvantaged groups, and certain states still struggle with limited opportunities.
    - For instance**, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu account for the highest number of enrollments**, leaving states like **Bihar and Odisha behind.**
        - This disparity in access not only affects enrollment rates but also limits equitable participation in national development.
- **Outdated Curriculum and Lack of Industry Alignment:** India's higher education curriculum is often criticized for being outdated and not aligned with the rapidly evolving job market.
    - A significant gap exists between what is taught in institutions and the skills required by the industry.
    - Only **51.25% of the country's youth is deemed employable (Economic Survey 2023-24),** indicating a mismatch between academic output and market demands.
        - The growing emphasis on **AI, ML, and Data Science** needs to be reflected in curriculum revisions, yet only a few institutions have implemented industry-oriented programs effectively.
- **Research Gaps and Lack of Innovation:** India has made progress in research output, but the country still **lags behind global standards in terms of research quality and innovation.**
    - India's research contribution to global publications grew from 3.5% in 2017 to 5.2% in 2024, however, **research spending is just 0.7% of GDP,** far below the **2-3% benchmark seen in countries like the U.S. and South Korea.**
    - Research at many institutions is fragmented, and the **focus often remains on quantity (publications) rather than quality or societal impact,** limiting India's potential as a global leader in innovation.
- **Bureaucratic Interference and Governance Issues:** Excessive government control and bureaucratic interference have weakened the autonomy of India’s higher education institutions.
    - Despite the NEP 2020 calling for more autonomy, **many institutions remain heavily influenced by political appointments** and administrative red tape.
    - Recent issues, such as the **controversial appointment process for vice-chancellors and faculty**, highlight systemic governance flaws.
        - The centralization of power often leads to inefficiency and stifles innovation and academic freedom.
- **Inadequate Internationalization and Outflow of Talent:** India’s higher education system has struggled to attract international students.
    - While the number of Indian students studying abroad has reached a massive 1.8 million in 2025, **only 46,000 foreign students are enrolled in India.**
    - This reflects a significant gap in the global appeal of Indian institutions, which often fail to compete with international counterparts in terms of faculty quality, infrastructure, and academic reputation.
        - This **outflow of talent also contributes to a "brain drain," as Indian students seek better opportunities abroad**, further depleting the country’s human capital.
- **Mental Health and Student Stress:** The high-stakes nature of India's entrance exams has led to a surge in student stress and mental health issues.
    - **Over 35% of recorded suicides in India occur in the 15-24 age group,** with academic pressure being a leading cause.
    - The system’s focus on rote learning and intense competition exacerbates this issue, leading to burnout among students.
        - Efforts to reform academic assessments and provide better mental health support are essential to create a healthier educational environment.



What Measures can India Adopt to Enhance the Higher Education System?

- **Strengthening Faculty Recruitment and Development Programs:** India must prioritize the **recruitment of high-quality faculty across all universities and institutes.**
    - This involves not only reducing bureaucratic delays in hiring but also ensuring that faculty development programs are robust, including regular workshops, international fellowships, and research collaboration opportunities.
    - A **national centralized recruitment body for higher education could standardize the process,** ensuring transparency and meritocracy.
        - Additionally, incentives for faculty to engage in cutting-edge research and innovation will foster an ecosystem of academic excellence.
- **Industry-Academia Collaboration for Skill Development:** Establishing deeper, more **structured partnerships between higher education institutions and industries is crucial for bridging the skill gap.**
    - Universities should integrate hands-on industry internships, apprenticeships, and live project work into curricula.
    - Creating **dedicated innovation hubs or "industry-collaboration cells"** within campuses would ensure that students are trained with relevant, real-world skills.
        - Regular consultations with industry experts can help align course content with evolving market needs, making graduates more employable.
- **Revamping the Curriculum to Foster Critical Thinking:** Higher education curricula need a fundamental shift toward **fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and interdisciplinary learning.**
    - The rigid, discipline-specific approach should be replaced with **flexibility, allowing students to choose courses from various fields, blending humanities, sciences, and technical disciplines as envisioned by NEP 2020.**
    - By encouraging collaborative learning across disciplines, students can approach problems holistically and gain skills that are adaptable across industries and sectors.
- **Promoting Research-Driven Education and Funding:** The government must increase investments in research and development within universities and offer grants that **incentivize faculty and students to engage in innovative and impactful research.**
    - Establishing more university-industry partnerships for joint research projects can address

national and global challenges, enhancing the relevance of research outputs.
    - Additionally, **creating a clear pathway for commercialization of research, such as setting up research parks and incubators**, will allow for greater innovation and knowledge transfer to industries.
- **Enhancing Digital Infrastructure and Hybrid Learning Models:** To meet the demands of the digital age, universities should invest in state-of-the-art digital infrastructure that supports online learning, research, and collaboration.
    - A **hybrid learning model, combining traditional face-to-face education with online resources,** should be the norm, allowing students from diverse backgrounds, including remote areas, to access high-quality education.
    - **Investments in digital literacy for both students and faculty** are essential to ensure that technology integration is effective and inclusive.
- **Incentivizing Global Collaborations and Internationalization:** India must actively foster international collaborations with top global universities, allowing for dual-degree programs, faculty exchange initiatives, and research partnerships.
    - Incentivizing **foreign faculty and researchers to engage with Indian institutions** will enhance academic rigor and internationalize the curriculum.
    - This international exposure will not only enhance the academic reputation of Indian universities but also help students gain a global perspective, improving their employability and competitiveness.
- **Enhancing Inclusivity and Equity in Access to Education:** To ensure that higher education becomes truly inclusive, India must adopt a comprehensive approach to support students from **marginalized communities, women, and differently-abled individuals.**
    - This includes scholarship schemes, mentorship programs, and better infrastructure to accommodate students with disabilities.
    - Universities should also focus on increasing the representation of underprivileged groups in **STEM fields by offering targeted support systems,** ensuring equitable access to quality education for all socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Fostering Entrepreneurial Mindsets and Startup Ecosystem:** Creating an ecosystem that encourages entrepreneurship within **higher education institutions can help students translate their ideas into startups.**
    - **Universities should establish incubation centers**, offer seed funding, and provide mentorship programs to foster a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship.
        - Students must be made aware of the initiatives like **Jagriti Yatra.**
    - By integrating entrepreneurship as part of the curriculum, along with dedicated resources for business development, institutions can produce graduates who are not just job seekers but job creators, contributing to the economy in a more substantial way.
- **Expanding Financial Support and Affordable Education Models:** Addressing the high cost of higher education is crucial for ensuring access for all segments of society.
    - The government and private sector should collaborate to create financial aid systems, such as **income-based loan repayment schemes.**
    - In addition, **universities should explore innovative models like “study now, pay later” schemes,** making quality education more affordable and accessible to all.

Conclusion:

To truly transform India's higher education landscape, reforms must go beyond expansion and focus on quality, inclusivity, and relevance. As the ***Kothari Commission rightly emphasized, education must be "a powerful instrument of social, economic, and cultural transformation."*** Reviving this vision through skilled faculty, research excellence, industry linkages, and ethical governance will ensure that higher education becomes a driver of national progress and global competitiveness.

Drishti Mains Question:

Despite significant expansion and policy reforms like the NEP 2020, India’s higher education system continues to grapple with issues of quality, equity, and global competitiveness. Examine the key challenges and suggest a roadmap for transforming higher education into a catalyst for national development.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Which of the following provisions of the Constitution does India have a bearing on Education? (2012)

1. Directive Principles of State Policy
2. Rural and Urban Local Bodies
3. Fifth Schedule
4. Sixth Schedule
5. Seventh Schedule

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 3, 4 and 5 only

(c) 1, 2 and 5 only

(d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

Ans- (d)

Mains

Q1. How have digital initiatives in India contributed to the functioning of the education system in the country? Elaborate on your answer. (2020)

Q2. Discuss the main objectives of Population Education and point out the measures to achieve them in India in detail. (2021)