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EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF

HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA POST 2014





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Abstract

The education sector plays a crucial role in a nation's overall development, especially in driving economic growth. As India strives to become the world's third-largest economy, a strong and equitable higher education system centered on research and innovation is imperative. With the largest youth population globally, India has tremendous potential to emerge as a leading Knowledge Hub. However, a decade ago, Indian education system was grappled with significant challenges, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and an outdated curriculum. However, a significant shift witnessed since 2014 along with the change of government. Based on this context, this paper explores the transformative decade of India's higher education landscape, arguing that focused government initiatives in funding, innovation, and skilling have significantly elevated its global stature. It further argues that this evolving educational ecosystem not only re-establishes India as a "Knowledge Hub" but also makes Indian youth ready for new age changes by adopting skill as a crucial element.

Keywords: Higher Education, Policy, Research, Skill

Introduction

The education sector is the key to the overall development of a nation. A well-developed and equitable higher education system with a focus on research and innovation is needed for the futuristic development of a nation. It is a widely accepted phenomenon that education has an immense role to play in furthering a nation's economy. As India is on the cusp of becoming the third-largest economy in the world, the education system has to play a greater role in achieving this target.

India as the nation with the highest youth population worldwide has immense potential to emerge as the Knowledge Hub of the world. However, a decade ago the overall education system of India was reeling under major crises including inadequate funds, poor infrastructure, outdated curriculum, and a complete miss of Indian higher education institutions on the global landscape. A pressing need was felt by the government in 2014 to revamp higher education in India along with a complete overhaul of the pedagogy and curriculum.

While realising the potential of youth, the current government has undergone a remarkable shift since 2014 guided by decisive initiatives and policy reforms. Based on this context, this paper attempts to grasp the decade-long transformation of the higher education ecosystem in India. It argues that the curated efforts of the government in terms of funding or introducing innovation have made the Indian education system globally known and this thriving higher education system of India is going to lead the Viksit Bharat journey. It further argues that India is not only re-establishing its position as a knowledge hub but also equipping its youth with the skills needed to thrive both nationally and globally.

The study is divided into three major sections. The first part deals with providing a historical overview of the Indian education system since independence to highlight the key issues grappling with India's higher education system. The next section briefly touches upon the methodology used in the study. The last part of the paper discusses the key findings of the research. Here, the idea is to discuss the initiatives that enhanced the quality and accessibility of higher education and the tangible and intangible impact witnessed.

Brief Overview of Higher Education: Key Challenges Pre-2014

Higher education is seen as a Public Good or as a Quasi-public Good (CABE, 2005). Hence, the state has more to play in ensuring a better quality of higher education in terms of funding as well. However, owing to several factors, mostly after adopting new economic policies in 1991, state funding for higher education declined. Moreover, access to higher and technical education remained abysmally low. The representation of SC, ST, and women was limited (Prakash, 2007).

The higher education scenario of India evolved significantly since independence. From ancient times, India is known for great centers of higher learning, including Nalanda, Vikramshila, and many others. However, colonial rule and inadequate government efforts since independence stifled this rich tradition, resulting in a challenging educational environment. This section will explore the key factors that impeded the growth of higher education in India.

Compromised Quality of Education

The landscape of higher education in India grappled with many challenges. The most remarkable one is the deteriorating quality of higher education in India. The **ASER Report 2014** painted a concerning picture of the quality of education in government schools. Despite implementing a tax to fund education and a law aimed at ensuring access for all children aged 6 to 14, the government has struggled to enhance learning outcomes in Indian schools. The survey, conducted across 550 rural districts, revealed that even the Right to Education (RTE) Act has not led to improved educational results. Instead, it appears that the Act has prioritised enrollment over the quality of education.

Similarly, the declining quality of higher education has also been reported. A **Parliamentary Panel on Education 2013**, chaired by Francisco Sardinha, also reported major problems in higher education. The report stated that "Significant problems exist in the quality of education provided. There is a need for expansion, upgradation and quality improvement in state higher educational institutions."

Outdated Curriculum

The curriculum forms the fulcrum of the education system. However, one can imagine the plight of the education system if the curriculum is not updated to meet the changing needs of time. Many reports highlighted the drawbacks of the curriculum as well. For instance, a senior official of the Planning Commission reported that the curriculum is outdated for most courses and also irrelevant since universities were not interested in keeping the curricula up to date. It was also stated that teaching-learning practices are mostly examination-oriented with a focus on rote learning and memorisation. Along similar lines, the **Parliamentary Panel on Higher Education in 2013** stated that the higher education system in the country is faced with problems such as poor quality of curriculum, instruction, teacher quality, and research.

Skewed Student-Teacher Ratio

Another key component of quality education also relies on the availability of teacher/educators. This issue was continuously neglected before 2014. According to **FICCI Higher Education Summit Report 2014**, around 35% of faculty positions in state universities and 40% in central universities remain unfilled. While enrollment in higher education has increased sixfold over the past 30 years, faculty numbers have only grown fourfold, resulting in a rising student-faculty ratio.

Highlighting the problems in the higher education sector, the report said state universities are bogged down with affiliation and governance issues and faculty shortages. In its May 2013 report, a parliamentary standing committee revealed data regarding faculty vacancies. Of the 16,324 sanctioned teaching positions in central universities, 6,254 posts were unfilled which means 38% of posts were unfilled. Additionally, information was available for only 47 out of 297 state universities, indicating that of the 11,645 sanctioned positions, 4,710 which means 40% of vacant posts.

Limited Access to Education

Ensuring access to education should be a key priority of any government, but a decade ago due to unsupportive educational structures,

people from marginalised communities and women had limited access to higher education. In this regard, a Parliamentary Panel in 2013 noted that there are no special incentive schemes for the promotion of higher education among women except for a few infrastructural benefits like hostels. In terms of access to higher education by SC/ST communities, a report by UGC in 2006 also highlighted the limited access of the SC/ST population to higher education.

In addition to the issues previously mentioned, several other factors have affected India's higher education ecosystem. A lack of adequate integration of technology in education has hindered both access and quality. Furthermore, the absence of foreign higher education institutions (HEIs) in India presents another challenge. The FICCI 2014 Report noted that foreign universities have been reluctant to establish branch campuses in India due to the difficult regulatory environment in the country.

From the above discussion, it is evident that gaining access to higher education was a distant dream for many. Moreover, not having employable skills led to unemployability and hence discouraged students from opting for higher education.

Methodology

This study provides an analytical and empirical examination of the Indian Government's strategies for future-proofing the higher education ecosystem in India. It utilises both primary and secondary sources to offer a comprehensive overview. Primary sources include reports from major policy groups and think tanks, newspaper reporting, and data from various government ministries related to higher education-related schemes and allotments. Secondary sources comprise opinion pieces and academic journal articles. By synthesising these diverse sources, the paper aims to deliver a broad and cohesive interpretation of the government's approach to higher education in India. To reduce error, the study will focus on presenting consistent results and outcomes across both primary and secondary data sources.

Key Findings and Discussion

The key findings of the study are divided into six major subsections, each of which deals with key aspects of the current government's efforts to bring educational advancements along with addressing the prolonged loopholes present in higher education. From bringing policy reforms to expanding the horizons of higher education, the government, since 2014 has been persistently working towards expanding access and enhancing the quality of higher education.

1. Policy and Regulatory Changes: Setting the Base

As discussed in the earlier section, Indian higher education faced major challenges due to policy and regulatory issues. The current government has adopted the New Education Policy 2020 to curb this issue. This represents a significant step toward aligning education in India with its cultural values and addressing the nation's emerging needs. Following the 1986 education policy overdue by over three decades, the new policy introduced vital reforms that render education holistic, flexible, inclusive, multidisciplinary, and technology-driven. The NEP 2020 establishes a single regulator for higher educational institutions (excluding medical and legal education), thereby transforming the regulatory framework to empower teachers and grant them the autonomy to innovate. This increased flexibility in higher education under NEP 2020 is empowering students, especially by introducing a flexible entry and exit system for undergraduate programs. Students can now enter and exit degree programs at various stages, receiving recognition for the years of study completed. This is beneficial for students who need to leave the course due to unforeseen circumstances or want to explore diverse educational opportunities. Moreover, incorporating elements of holistic education, flexibility, skill development, technological integration, language diversity, and global collaboration, the NEP establishes a strong foundation for a prosperous educational journey for youth in India.

To handle funding-related issues, the **Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) formed in 2017** was a crucial move by the central government. It is intended to promote the development of world-class infrastructure in universities and colleges through loans

and grants. By providing financial assistance for capital projects, HEFA seeks to enhance the physical and academic environment of institutions, ultimately improving the overall quality of education.

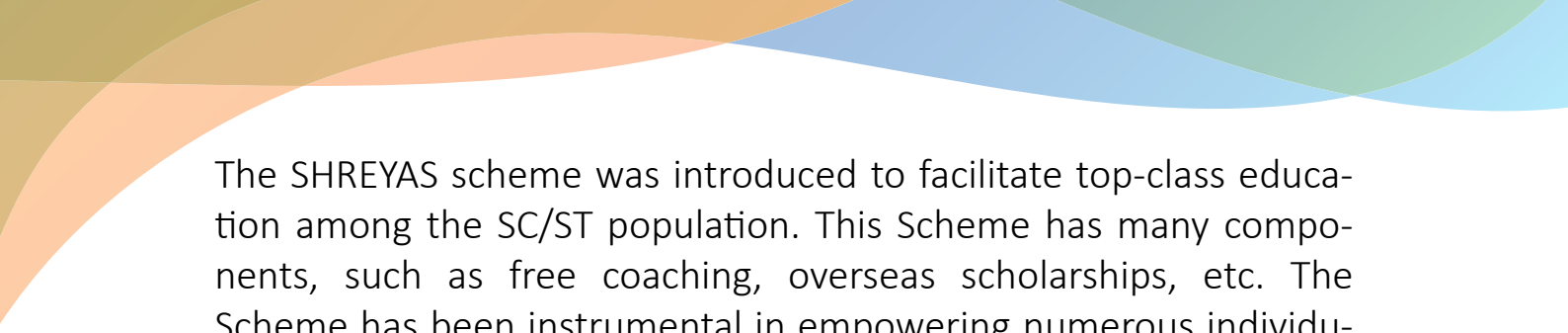
To boost the competitive mindset among institutions and encourage them to perform better, the government introduced the **NIRF ranking in 2015**. This ranking, based on various criteria, including teaching, learning, research, and outreach, has promoted a culture of excellence and accountability in HEIs of India. This initiative has encouraged institutions to elevate their standards and has offered students valuable guidance in making informed decisions about their educational choices.

A significant boost for higher education has come from increased budgetary allocations. In the 2014 Union Budget, Rs. 68,728 crore was earmarked for education, rising to Rs. 73,498 crore in the 2024-25 budget highlighting a nearly 7 percent increase in the last decade. This enhanced funding underscores the government's commitment to strengthening the education sector.

From increased budgetary allocation to introducing a framework accessing the quality of higher education, the government introduced a revolutionary shift in higher education.

2. Initiatives for Inclusive Higher Education

The government introduced target scholarship programs to increase enrolment in higher education, especially from marginalised communities and women. For instance, the University Grants Commission implemented the "Ishan Uday" Special Scholarship Scheme for the North Eastern Region to promote Higher Education in the North Eastern Region by providing financial assistance to students of the region in 2014-15. The Scheme provides 10,000 new scholarships yearly for general degree, technical, and medical and paramedical courses. The scholarship amount is Rs 5,400 per month for general degree courses and Rs 7,800 per month for technical, medical, professional, and paramedical courses.



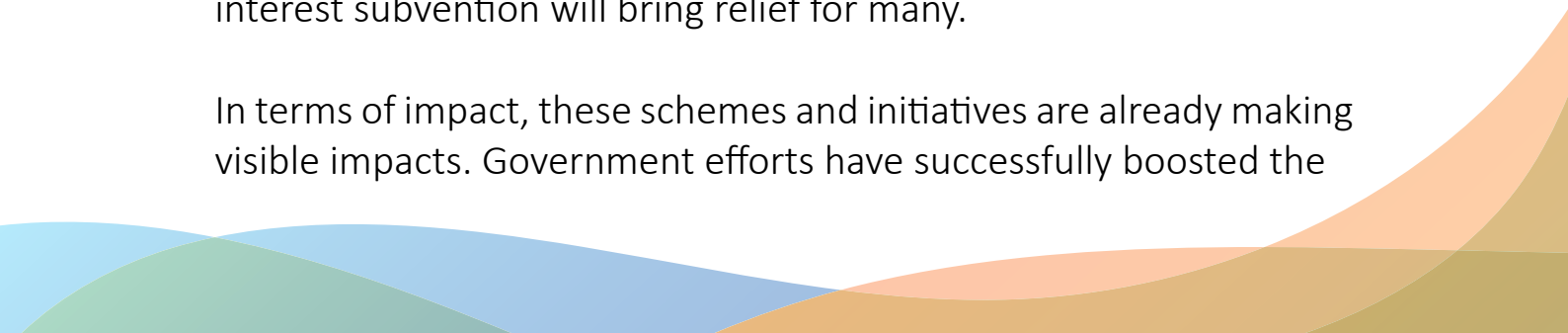
The SHREYAS scheme was introduced to facilitate top-class education among the SC/ST population. This Scheme has many components, such as free coaching, overseas scholarships, etc. The Scheme has been instrumental in empowering numerous individuals, with over Rs. 2708.64 crore benefitting 97,928 students since 2014. The OBC component of the Scheme benefitted 38,011 students amounting to Rs. 585.02 crore since 2014. To increase the GER in higher education among SCs, a total of Rs. 1623.42 crore from the central government has been disbursed through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) to 13.56 lakh beneficiaries under the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme for SC students in FY 2023-24.

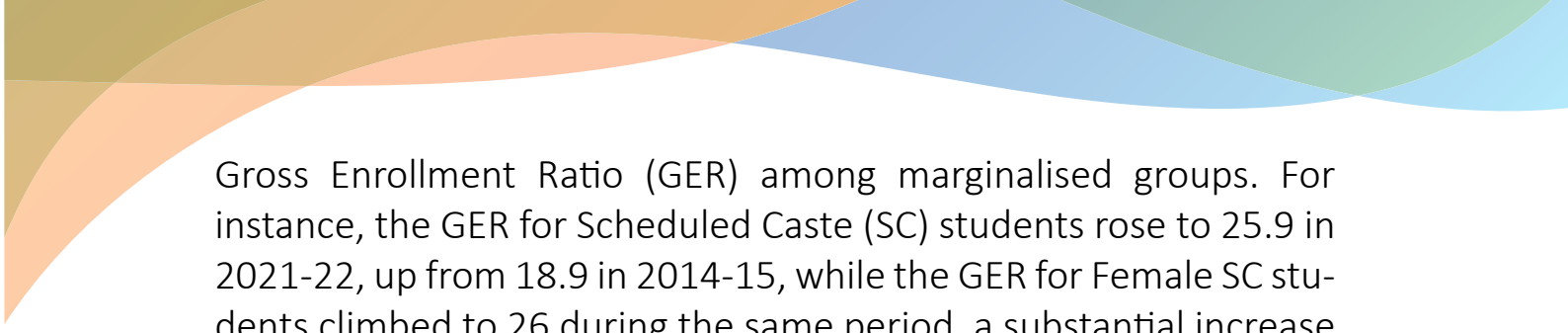
To ensure access to education among tribal students, many fellowships and scholarships introduced by the current government. This includes 750 fellowships yearly under the National Fellowship for ST students that facilitate ST students to pursue higher studies in India (M.Phil. and PhD). Similarly, the government created a conducive environment for ST students at the school level by establishing more Eklavya Model Residential schools. There are 405 EMRSs functional across the country with more than 1.23 lakh students enrolled.

The government is also enabling students from minority communities with scholarships for different levels of education. Along similar lines, higher education has become a reality for many divyangjans due to the handholding support of the government. From special allowances to equipment allowance, the government is covering every aspect of their lives to make the higher education an equitable experience for divyangjans.

A progressive budget is key to a thriving education system. This year's budget also allocated financial support for students has been significantly enhanced, with up to Rs. 7.5 lakh annually for 25,000 students and up to Rs. 10 lakh for higher education in domestic institutions for one lakh students each year, along with a 3% annual interest subvention will bring relief for many.

In terms of impact, these schemes and initiatives are already making visible impacts. Government efforts have successfully boosted the






Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) among marginalised groups. For instance, the GER for Scheduled Caste (SC) students rose to 25.9 in 2021-22, up from 18.9 in 2014-15, while the GER for Female SC students climbed to 26 during the same period, a substantial increase from 18.1.

Scheduled Tribe (ST) students have also seen remarkable growth, with their GER rising to 21.2 in 2021-22, up from 13.5 in 2014-15. Female ST students experienced an even more impressive surge, reaching 20.9 compared to just 12.2.

In the North East States, total student enrolment surged to 12.02 lakh in 2021-22, a notable increase from 9.36 lakh in 2014-15. Interestingly, female enrolment in this region surpassed male enrolment, with 6.07 lakh female students compared to 5.95 lakh male students.

The trend extends to advanced studies as well; Ph.D. enrolment skyrocketed by 81.2%, reaching 2.12 lakh in 2021-22, compared to 1.17 lakh in 2014-15. Female Ph.D. enrolment has doubled to 99,000, up from 48,000, marking an annual growth of 10.4%. In 2021-22, out of the total enrolment across undergraduate, post-graduate, Ph.D., and M.Phil. levels, 57.2 lakh students were in the Science stream, with female students (29.8 lakh) outnumbering their male counterparts (27.4 lakh). These figures reflect a vibrant and evolving higher education landscape, brimming with potential and opportunities for all.

These trends not only reflect an increased Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) but also play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion. From a time when higher education was accessible only to a select few, particularly among SC and ST populations, we have now moved to a more equitable system that ensures broader access to higher education. This transformation has uplifted many individuals, addressing the generational discrimination faced by numerous communities.



3. Infrastructure Push

In terms of improving and expanding the opportunities for higher education, the current government adopted a **two-pronged approach**. First, a major impetus came in the form of evolving infrastructure of existing institutions and secondly, setting up more institutions of educational excellence. A total of 1,168 universities and university-level institutions are registered, alongside 45,473 colleges and 12,002 standalone institutions. Notably, 341 universities and university-level institutions have been established since 2014-15.

India as a nation with the world's highest population also needed a robust healthcare ecosystem. In this direction, the government has expanded the medical education capacity in India. This serves a two-fold purpose- one it is generating more healthcare professionals in the nation and secondly, it also helps the youth by increasing the number of seats and colleges. There is an increase of 88% in medical colleges from 387 before 2014 to 731 in 2024. Further, there is an increase of 118% in MBBS seats from 51,348 before 2014 to 1,12,112 in 2024. There is also an increase of 133% in PG seats from 31,185 before 2014 to 72,627 in 2024. Similarly, the no. of AIIMS has increased from 7 before 2014 to 23 in 2024.

Such a rise in medical education significantly improved the doctor-patient ratio. As of June 2022, India has 13.08 lakh registered allopathic doctors and 5.65 lakh AYUSH doctors, leading to a combined doctor population ratio of 1:834, better than the OECD region average of 1 per 1000. This has led to better availability of doctors and better quality of treatment for people. Moreover, the increased number of medical seats led to more jobs for today's aspirational youths of India.

In terms of technological and management education, the government has set up a record number of IIMs and IITs. The number of IIMs increased from 13 in 2014 to 21 in 2023. The number of IITs increased from 16 in 2014 to 23 in 2023. This shift will facilitate youth with world-class education opportunities.

The quality of higher education in India has improved significantly since 2014. Now, it is making a remarkable presence in the global landscape.



As shown above, the number of Indian Institutions in the QS World University Ranking rose from 11 in 2015 edition to 46 in 2025 edition. This exponential increase, amounting to a 318 percent rise in terms of representation, not only underscores India's expanding footprint but also positions it as a frontrunner among G20 nations in terms of academic advancement and institutional excellence. In the 2025 ranking, 11 Indian institutions have secured positions among the top 500, with 2 institutions ranking among the top 150. Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (IITB) has ranked topmost among the Indian institutions and has significantly improved its ranking, climbing from 149th position in the 2024 to 118th in the 2025 QS World University Rankings.

4. Technology & Research

As the vision of Digital India transforms the nation into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy, technology plays a crucial role in reshaping educational processes and outcomes. The current government is committed to investing in cutting-edge digital

infrastructure and harnessing emerging technologies such as AI, and blockchain to enhance the outcome of education.

The incorporation of technology in education and e-learning platforms like **SWAYAM and DIKSHA** empower both students and faculty. Educational software is being developed in all major Indian languages and extended to reach underserved populations, including individuals with disabilities and students in remote areas. Additionally, the government has established the National Educational Technology Forum as a part of NEP 2020 to facilitate the free exchange of ideas on effectively leveraging technology to enhance planning, assessment, learning, and overall educational administration in India. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to integrate e-content into their teaching methods, fostering interactive and engaging learning experiences for students. In the SWAYAM portal, more than 13,000 courses were imparted with a cumulative enrolment of 4.6 crore+. Such courses facilitate students to learn multiple courses at the same time along with certification also.

India Making Significant Strides in Innovation

Since 2014, the government has enabled the research and innovation atmosphere at the school education level. The base is set at the school level through 10,000 **Atal Tinkering Labs** spreading across 722 districts in 34 states and UTs. In terms of facilitating an innovative environment in HEIs, the establishment of **Research Parks** in IITs greatly helps to foster scientific and technological advancement in the country. In this context, the government has approved setting up 9 Research Parks one each at IIT Madras, IIT Kharagpur, IIT Bombay, IIT Gandhinagar, IIT Delhi, IIT Guwahati, IIT Kanpur, IIT Hyderabad, and IISc Bangalore. The main objectives of these Research Parks include fostering collaboration with leading industries, promoting student entrepreneurship and incubation, strengthening academic partnerships, and enhancing the industry's contribution to academic programs. Typically, Research Parks are established at higher educational institutions to achieve these goals.

Within a few years of its setting up, these research parks are showing remarkable success in terms of innovation. **In August 2024,**

IIT-Madras Research Park (IITMRP) opened an indigenously designed and developed battery energy storage system (BESS) with a capacity of 1 MWh, highlighting a significant contribution to India's shift to renewable energy solutions.

Apart from the above initiatives, the government has launched schemes to promote research and development in the HEIs of the country including Prime Minister's Research Fellowship Scheme (PMRFs), Uchhatar Avishkar Yojna (UAY), Impacting Research Innovation and Technology (IMPRINT), Scheme for promotion of Research and Academic Collaboration (SPARC), Scheme for Transformational and Advanced Research in Sciences (STARS), etc.

As a result of these efforts, India is making many strides at the global level. For instance, the Economic Survey 2023-24 highlighted that the number of patents granted skyrocketed seventeen-fold, rising from 5,978 in 2014-15 to 103,057 in 2023-24. The survey also noted an increase in registered designs, which grew from 7,147 in 2014-15 to 30,672 in 2023-24. According to **WIPO**, India experienced the highest growth in patent filings in 2022, with an impressive increase of 31.6%. Additionally, India has steadily climbed the Global Innovation Index (GII) ranks, moving from 81st place in 2015 to 40th in 2023.

In terms of human resources, total Ph.D. enrollment in India rose to 81.2% in FY22, reaching 213,000, up from 117,000 in FY15. Reflecting India's growing prominence in high-quality research, the country ascended **9th place in the Nature Index 2023**, surpassing Australia and Switzerland. Additionally, India's contribution to high-quality research articles grew by 44% within four years, increasing from 1,039.7 in 2019 to 1,494.7 in 2023. Additionally, India ranks 3rd in the number of PhD degrees awarded in Science and Engineering (S&E), according to the **"Research and Development Statistics at a Glance 2022-23"** report.

Further, India has established its own National Research Foundation, named 'Anusandhan,' which is operated by the Department of Science and Technology under the **Anusandhan National Research Foundation Act of 2023**. This foundation will serve as a central authority to

enhance and promote the research and development ecosystem. In the interim budget for FY25, the government also allocated a fund of ₹1 lakh crore to support research and innovation in the country.

All these initiatives, in a way, enabled a conducive environment in India for the growth of startups. Now, proudly India is recognised as the world's third largest startup ecosystem.

Bridging Gender Gap in Technical Education

Women's access to education has always been a grappling issue for earlier governments. However, with focused efforts, the current government has introduced major initiatives to improve women's enrolment in technological education, bridging the gender gap in technological education. To promote higher education and research among female students, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) has launched the Pragati Scholarship and the TechSaksham Program (TSP) for women. The government also introduced the Women Scientist Program (WISE-KIRAN). Since its inception in 2018, approximately 1962 women scientists have benefitted under this Scheme.

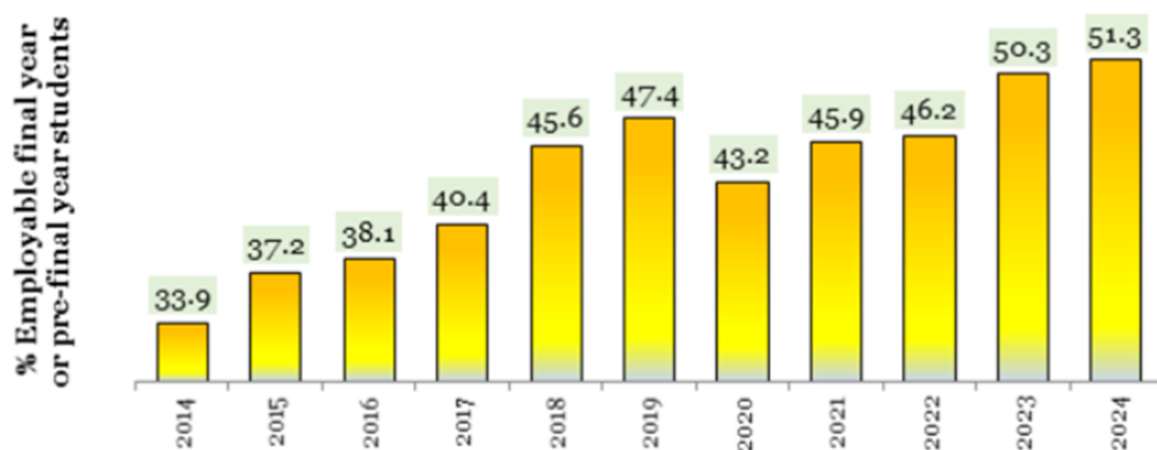
In terms of impact, there has been a rise in female participation from 8% in 2018-19 to 20% in 2020-21 in IITs. According to the **All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE)** 2021-22, female enrollment in STEM courses grew from 38.4% in 2014-15 to 42.6% in 2021-22. Moreover, as of 2023 World Bank data, India's share of female graduates in STEM reached 42.7% in 2018, surpassing the US (34% in 2016), UK (38.1% in 2016), Australia (32.1% in 2017), and Germany (27.6% in 2017).

5. Expanding Horizons: Skilling the Education

The government has significantly expanded the vision of higher education in India. The most common critique the Indian education system used to face is the absence of skill-based courses across all levels of education programs, which led to a lack of employable skills. The government has taken up this issue as a priority and introduced skilled-based training as part of NEP 2020. In this regard, **Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)** is significant as it

has trained more than 1.42 crore and certified 1.13 crore since inception in 2015. Over 1,000 educational institutions across the nation have been integrated as **Skill India Centers**. Notably, female participation under the Scheme has surged from 42.7% in FY16 to 52.3% in FY24, highlighting its commitment to gender inclusivity. In addition, over 15,000 ITIs functioning across the country providing training in skills.

As a result, a shift has been witnessed in terms of employment. As reported in **India Skill Report, Wheebox** the percentage of employable students has improved from around 34 percent to 51.3 percent in the last decade.



Source: India Skills Report, Wheebox

While considering the need for skilling today's youth, this year's budget also makes specific allocations and provisions. The **2024-25 budget** introduces groundbreaking provisions for internships, offering opportunities for one crore youth to work with leading companies to gain industry-ready skills and practical experience.

Apart from skilling, the government has expanded its international footing by enhancing collaborative ventures with foreign HEIs. Initiatives like the **Study in India program** aim to attract international students to Indian institutions and promote cultural exchange, hence enhancing India's global standing in education and regaining India's once-acclaimed position as Knowledge Hub. Additionally, partnerships with foreign universities for joint research, faculty exchange, and student mobility have been encouraged to broaden educational horizons.


In this direction, significant progress has been witnessed. Global universities are starting to come to India. For instance, **Deakin University** became the first Foreign Institution to establish an International Branch Campus in India's GIFT City, Gujarat. Similarly, Indian universities are also setting up their campuses in foreign countries. **IIT Madras** set up the first abroad campus **in Zanzibar, Tanzania**. IIT Delhi also set-up their first abroad campus in Abu Dhabi, extending India's high standard of education abroad as well.

The futuristic approach of government towards education broadens the horizons of higher education in India. Additionally, a shift in mindset is evident, as today's youth increasingly aspire to be job creators rather than just job seekers.

6. Transparency

A transparent assessment system is key to maintaining ethical standards in education. The government has made many changes to ensure a fair examination process for students in higher education. NEP2020 suggested that NTA be an autonomous testing organisation that conducts entrance exams for undergraduates. Along similar lines, the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) is being implemented for admissions to all UG programs at Central Universities. This initiative creates a unified platform, offering equal opportunities to candidates nationwide, particularly those from rural and remote areas, and fosters stronger connections with the universities.


After attaining educational qualifications, Indian youth often face the critical challenge of employment. Since there has been a wider preference for government jobs among Indian youth, making the public examination free from unfair means has always been a key concern. In this direction, the government adopted the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, which was enacted in June 2024. This landmark legislation aims to eliminate organised malpractices and exam leaks, thereby upholding the integrity of the examination process. By ensuring fairness, it is doing justice to the merit of students and job seekers.



After analysing the key findings of the study, it has become evident that the higher education landscape of India is evolving rapidly and started showing tangible results in terms of outcome.

Conclusion

The concerted efforts of the government in the last decade have completely overhauled the higher education system in India. The efforts are coming in many forms, including an infrastructure push and the incorporation of technology and innovation to revive India's ancient educational hub of India. In this direction, the Nalanda University Campus in Rajgir is not a mere recollection of India's past; it is an academic heritage that will emerge as a prominent educational hub in Asia. From a phase of impoverished higher education to a renewed education system, India is establishing its position as a hub of academic brilliance. While considering the populace of India, higher education still faces certain issues in terms of penetration to rural areas. However, significant improvements have been made by diversifying the higher education paradigm.



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