

INCLUSIVE AND QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL: CONTRIBUTION OF INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION TOWARDS SDG-4

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Abstract

In order to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to guarantee inclusive, equitable, and quality education and also to provide opportunities for lifelong learning for every student, an attempt has been made in this paper to find out how Indian higher education institutions (HEIs) contribute to achieve this goal. It also studies about how SDG 4 is addressed by the Indian HEIs in relation to various aspects of the education system like faculty development, curricular reform, equity, access, and digital learning. Secondary sources of data are used to conduct this study. The various research reports, reports of institutional initiatives, various policies and most importantly National Education Policy (2020) are analysed in this regard. The results of the study reveal that there are numerous issues like geographical inequalities, digital divides, and quality assurance which may act as obstacles in achieving the goal of SDG-4. Recommendations regarding institutional practices have been made in this paper to accelerate the contribution of India's higher education towards achieving the goal of SDG-4 by 2030.

Key words:

Indian Higher Education, Sustainable Development Goals, Quality Education, Inclusive Education, NEP (2020)

Reference to this paper should

be made as follows:

Received: 30/11/25

Approved: 15/12/25

Dr. Devika Phukan

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RJPSSs 2025, Vol. LI,

No. 2, pg. 339-351

Article No. 40

Similarity Check: 14%

Online available at:

*[https://anubooks.com/journal-
volume/rjpss-vol-li-no2-dec-2025](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/rjpss-vol-li-no2-dec-2025)*

DOI: *[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2025v51i02.40](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2025v51i02.40)*

Introduction:

The United Nations General Assembly, during its 70th Session held on September 25, 2015, approved the document “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” It has introduced 17 Sustainable Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets associated with it. Goal 4 (SDG 4) is one of these 17 SDGs, which aims to guarantee inclusive, equitable, high-quality education and to encourage opportunities for lifelong learning for everyone. These 10 targets set for achieving Goal -4 are stated below:

Target 4.1: Free Primary and Secondary Schooling

By 2030, this target ensures that every child—boys and girls alike—has access to free, fair, and excellent primary and secondary education that yields significant and useful learning outcomes.

Target 4.2: Access to High-Quality Pre-Primary Education for All

By 2030, it will ensure that every child has access to early childhood development, care, and high-quality pre-primary education to help prepare them for primary school.

Target 4.3: Equal Access to Reasonably Priced Higher, Technical, and Vocational Education

This aim makes sure that all people, irrespective of gender, have equal access to reasonably priced, excellent technical, vocational, and postsecondary education—including university education—by 2030.

Target 4.4: Develop Useful Skills for Financial Achievement

By 2030, it will substantially increase the number of adults and young people who possess the technical and vocational skills necessary for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship.

Target 4.5: To Remove Discrimination in Schools

It aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination in education by 2030, guarantee gender equality, and give vulnerable groups—such as people with disabilities, indigenous communities, and underprivileged children—equal access to all educational and vocational training levels.

Target 4.6: Make Universal Numeracy and Literacy a Reality

It aims to make sure that all children and a significant percentage of adults, both male and female, are proficient in reading and numeracy by 2030.

Target 4.7: Teaching for Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development

By 2030, it guarantees that every student has the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development. This involves education that

encourages gender equality, human rights, a culture of nonviolence and peace, global citizenship, sustainable lifestyles, and an understanding of cultural diversity and its impact on sustainable development.

Target 4.8: Construct and Improve Safe and Inclusive Schools

It aims to create and improve learning environments that are inclusive and considerate of the needs of children, those with disabilities, and people of all genders. Give everyone access to secure, peaceful, and productive learning settings.

Target 4.9: Increase Scholarships for Higher Education in Developing Nations

It aims to increase the number of scholarships available for pupils from underdeveloped countries to enrol in higher education programs by 2020. This includes students from Small Island Developing States, the least developed countries, and African countries. In both developed and other emerging nations, these programs provide technical, engineering, scientific, and vocational training as well as information and communications technology.

Target 4.10: Expand the Availability of Skilled Teachers in Developing Nations

It aims to enhance worldwide cooperation for the training of teachers, particularly in developing nations, such as the least developed nations and small island developing states, to significantly increase the number of trained teachers by 2030.

Considering India's enormous population and wide range of socio-economic circumstances, achieving these objectives is not only crucial but also urgently required. In India, the primary advisory body, NITI Aayog, is in charge of coordinating and bringing government policies and initiatives into line with the SDGs. SDG-4's main goal in India is "to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

Status of Higher Education in India

Given the number of institutions and enrolment in these institutions, India has one of the largest higher education systems (AISHE, 2021-2022). It is also a complex one. There are mainly three types of higher educational institutions in India: universities, colleges, and standalone institutions¹. According to the AISHE portal, as of June 2025, there were 70,018 higher education institutions in India, up from 51,534 in 2014–2015. There are 1338 universities as of June 2025, which was only 760 in 2014-2015. Likewise, the number of colleges has increased from 38,498 (2014-15) to 52,081 by June 2025. The number of Indian Institutes of Technology

1. Stand-alone institutions are outside the purview of university and college. These institutions generally run Diploma / PG Diploma Level Programs for which they require recognition from one or the other Statutory Bodies. [Joshi et al. (2019)]

has increased to 23 as of June 2025, in place of the previous 16 (2014-15). (*PIB Headquarters*, n.d.). India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) increased from 24.1 in 2016–17 to 27.3 in 2020–21. Despite an increase in the number of educational institutions, worries about the quality of education persist (Yadav, 2023).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was introduced with the vision of transforming and revitalizing India's education system. This policy embraces a broad and inclusive vision for the education system, with a key focus on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to help achieve SDG 4, i.e., quality education, that seeks to guarantee inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all. The NEP 2020 is well integrated with the purpose of SDG-4. It aims to advance education in a way that will provide sustainable livelihoods and strengthen the national economy. It proposes transformative reforms in the field of higher education. It is a significant step in Indian education reform, by expanding its influence beyond the classroom to higher education, promoting a more comprehensive, adaptable, and interdisciplinary method of education. It strongly emphasises ensuring that learning is more accessible and inclusive for everyone, leaving no one behind (Dr. Khedkar).

Objectives of the study

- To study the implementation of inclusive and equitable practices in higher education in India
- To find out the challenges in achieving SDG-4 in this regard and also suggest measures for the same.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative research approach has been adopted by focusing on policy analysis to examine the implementation, progress, and challenges of achieving SDG-4 in the field of higher education in India. It is mainly based on secondary sources of data like government reports, research articles, policy documents, institutional publications, and other government websites. A descriptive and interpretive analysis method is used to assess the relation between the various policies (NEP 2020 and others) with SDG-4 and higher education in India.

Higher Education in the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4

In India, several measures have been taken to develop the education system, including increasing enrolment, enhancing the quality of teachers, and promoting equal access to education. Efforts have also been made to reduce gender disparities and promote lifelong learning opportunities.

Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education

Target 4.5 of SDG-4 emphasizes removing gender gaps in education and

ensuring that everyone has equal access to education, including vulnerable persons and persons with disabilities. In India, gender sensitization programs are initiated in educational institutions as well as in communities to develop awareness among people regarding gender equality in education. To foster a secure and welcoming atmosphere for all employees and students on campus, the University Grants Commission (UGC) mandates gender sensitization initiatives in colleges and universities. These initiatives seek to prevent sexual harassment, increase awareness of gender equality, and guarantee adherence to the Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Act (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH Act). (Prasad, 2024)

Through a number of policies and initiatives, the University Grants Commission (UGC) is actively promoting equity and inclusion for underrepresented groups in higher education. For instance, the UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2025, address issues like gender bias and caste-based discrimination to establish a non-discriminatory atmosphere in higher education institutions. This applies to all HEIs in India, including universities and colleges. It is mandatory in each institution to implement anti-discrimination policies and support disadvantaged students. The institutions must conduct regular campaigns, workshops, and orientation programmes etc, for faculty, students as well and parents.

Numerous central and state-level programs have been put in place to encourage female enrolment in higher education in an effort to advance gender equity in education. These initiatives seek to remove socio-economic obstacles and establish a more welcoming learning environment for women and girls nationwide. The UGC's **Indira Gandhi Scholarship for Single Girl Child** provides **1 36,200 per year for two years to support single girl children (up to 30 years) pursuing non-professional postgraduate courses** in recognized institutions, aiming to promote higher education among women. In Assam, on August 8, 2024, the State Government had initiated Mukhya Mantrir Nijut Moina (MMNM) Scheme to empower female students, increase enrolment in higher education, and curb child marriage in the State. It includes all unmarried girls enrolled in government and government-aided schools and colleges from Class XI through postgraduate studies. With a budget of about ¹ 1,500 crore, the program is expected to help about 1 million (10 lakh) females for four years. (TodayNE, 2024b)

Quality Enhancement in Higher Education

In India, quality enhancement in higher education is pursued through several initiatives. Through NEP 2020, curriculum reform has been done by promoting

competency-based learning, vocational education, and integrating Indian values with international standards.

The necessity for qualified and quality-driven professors in higher education is emphasized in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.² In higher education, faculty training has benefited greatly from the initiatives of the UGC's Human Resource Development Centers (HRDCs) and the PMMMNMTT, or Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Teaching Centers. The **Malaviya Mission Teacher Training Programme (MMTTP)** has been **re-launched** with a restructured framework to **enhance teacher and faculty capacity**. By integrating Indian values and ethos into courses of study, the creation of patents, and institutional development, it aims to transform higher education. Apart from this, a variety of in-service training courses are available for teachers on online platforms such as Swayam and others. (*Swayam Central*, n.d.) Moreover, digital initiatives have also been taken to provide quality content and promote online learning with the help of platforms like the National Digital Library, e-Pathshala, Swayam, etc. (Shetty, 2025).

Organizations like the **National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)** and the **National Board of Accreditation (NBA)** are vital for ensuring **quality enhancement in higher education**. They conduct **regular assessments and accreditations**, helping institutions identify areas for improvement and promote **continuous quality enhancement**, ultimately leading to **better educational outcomes**.

To boost research, several initiatives, such as IMPRINT and SPARC, have been implemented in India. IMPRINT (Impacting Research Innovation and Technology) is a joint venture between IITs and IISc, aiming to create a roadmap for research addressing national challenges.

In India, steps have been taken to integrate skill development into higher education with several initiatives like Skill India Mission, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, etc. These are meant for the promotion of vocational education and training. With this same purpose, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also emphasized multidisciplinary as well as skill-based education in higher education, aligned with industry needs.

Achievement of SDG-4 (Inclusive and Quality Education) in Higher Education in India

Regarding access to higher education: The total enrolment in higher education in India has increased from 4.14 crore in 2020-2021 to nearly 4.33 crore

2. (Chhabria Talreja et al., 2024)

in 2021-2022. The female enrolment in higher education has increased from 2.01 crore in 2020-2021 to 2.07 crore in 2021-2022. Approximately 78.9% of all students are enrolled in undergraduate courses, while 12.1% are enrolled in postgraduate courses, according to the AISHE 2021–22 report.

Regrading inclusion of the Marginalized Section of students in Higher Education

There has been a significant growth in enrolment across all social groups between 2014-2015 to 2021-2022. In the case of Scheduled Caste students, enrolment increased from 46.07 to 66.23 lakhs (44%). In the case of SC female students, a rise 51% has been noticed, from 21.02 lakh to 31.71 lakh. Scheduled Tribe Students' enrolment increased by 65.2% (from 16.41 lakh to 27.1 lakh). Enrolment of ST female students in higher education also noticed an increase of 80%, i.e., from 7.47 lakh to 13.46 lakh. In the case of the Other Backward Classes (OBC), student enrolment increased from 1.13 crore to 1.63 crore, i.e., a 45% increase. Enrolment of OBC female students increased from 52.36 lakh to 78.19 lakh. In the case of the minority communities, their 38% enrolment in higher education has increased by 38%, i.e., from 21.8 lakh to 30.1 lakh. The female minority students also have witnessed a growth of 42.3% (from 10.7 lakh to 15.2 lakh) in their enrolment in higher education. *In the North Eastern states of India, total student enrolment increased from 9.36 lakh in 2014-15 to 12.02 lakh in 2021-22. Notably, female enrolment (6.07 lakh) in 2021-22 surpassed male enrolment (5.95 lakh), reflecting progress in gender parity in the region's higher education.*

Regarding Enhancement of Quality and Quity

Ph.D. enrolment in India has seen a significant rise of **81.2%**, growing from **1.17 lakh in 2014-15 to 2.12 lakh in 2021-22**. Notably, **female Ph.D. enrolment has doubled**, increasing from **0.48 lakh to 0.99 lakh** during the same period, reflecting an **average annual growth rate of 10.4%**. This indicates a strong upward trend in advanced research participation, especially among women.

Higher education's Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) is 26:1, suggesting room for growth in both teaching effectiveness and student involvement. As of 2021-22, the total number of faculty/teachers in higher education stands at **15.98 lakh**, with **56.6% being male** and **43.4% female**, indicating a gradually improving gender balance in the academic workforce.

In the case of accreditation of higher educational institutions in India by NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council), till 16/01/2025, there are a total of 991 universities and 18992 colleges that have been accredited by NAAC.

In the world ranking also, India's higher education institutions have recorded their **best-ever performance** in the **QS World University Rankings 2026**, with **54 universities featured**, including **12 Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)**. Remarkably, **eight institutions have entered the rankings for the first time**. India now ranks as the **fourth most represented country**, following the **United States, the United Kingdom, and China**. These eight institutions are (*PIB Headquarters, n.d.*)-

1. IIT Gandhi Nagar
2. Lovely Professional University (LPU)
3. Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology
4. Galgotias University
5. Ashoka University
6. Shiv Nadar University
7. CHRIST (deemed to be a university), Bangalore
8. Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies (MRIIRS)

These trends highlight a positive shift towards greater inclusivity and gender equity in India's higher education landscape.

Challenges faced in achieving Inclusive and Quality education for all in Higher Education

Some of the obstacles or challenges faced by the higher education system in India can be briefly stated below:

- **Equity and Inclusion Gaps:** Socioeconomic disparities still exist even if minority, SC, ST, and OBC enrolment has improved. Access to high-quality higher education is a challenge for students from economically disadvantaged groups, rural locations, and marginalized communities because of low financial resources, poor infrastructure, and restricted internet access.
- **Education Quality:** Many institutes of higher learning have difficulty upholding academic standards. The provision of high-quality education is hampered by problems like out-of-date curricula, a lack of innovative teaching, a lack of skilled faculty, and inadequate research facilities.
- **Gender Disparities:** Although the number of female students has increased, there are still gender differences in leadership positions, professor positions, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields.
- **Regional Disparities:** Opportunities for higher education are not equally spread among regions. Students in isolated locations, tribal belts, and the north-eastern states frequently lack access to adequate institutions and resources.

- **Insufficient Attention Paid to Lifelong Learning:** Although SDG 4 places a strong emphasis on lifetime learning, India's higher education system currently lacks strong frameworks for continuing education, skill development, and adult education programs, particularly for the workforce.
- **Technological Gaps and the Digital Divide:** The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the digital divide in higher education, which mostly affects students who lack access to dependable internet and electronic equipment. In many universities, e-learning resources and digital infrastructure are still insufficient.
- **Inadequate Investment and support:** Infrastructure, research output, and general academic quality are all impacted by the lack of public support for higher education. Despite their growing numbers, private institutions frequently put profit ahead of cost and inclusion.
- **Lack of Global Competitiveness:** Despite India's recent improvements in university rankings, the majority of its institutions continue to trail behind in terms of internationalization, research output, and foreign partnerships.

Suggestions

To achieve SDG-4, it will require India's higher education system to require a multifaceted, inclusive, and quality-focused approach. Some of the suggestions in this regard will include the following:

- Improving fairness by supporting underprivileged groups, implementing inclusive policies, and offering scholarships.
- Enhancing faculty strength, encouraging research and innovation, and modernizing curricula to improve the quality of education.
- Encouraging lifelong learning through adult education programs that are adaptable and skill-based.
- Reducing regional disparities by developing infrastructure and institutions in neglected areas.
- Reducing the digital divide by providing access to e-learning resources and better digital infrastructure.
- Boosting public investment, fostering commercial collaborations, and fortifying funding and governance.
- Incorporating SDG awareness and sustainability into academic programs and campus operations.

Conclusion

India's higher education system has benefited from the implementation of SDG 4, becoming more accessible, inclusive, and globally aligned. This achievement

is seen in the reforms implemented under NEP 2020 as well as the increased enrolment of women and marginalized communities.

Nonetheless, issues including inadequate funding, regional disparities, and digital inequality continue to exist. It is necessary for India to make investments in high-quality education, guarantee equity across regions and groups, and promote innovation and digital inclusion if it is to fully achieve the objectives of SDG 4.

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