

From Expansion to Reform Readiness: An Evaluation of Higher Education Reforms in India

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Abstract:

Higher education system in India entered a critical reform phase during the mid-2010s, shaped by policy initiatives aimed at expanding access, strengthening accountability, and improving institutional performance. This paper examines the reform trajectory between 2015 and 2017, focusing on initiatives such as the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), and the early introduction of digital learning platforms. Using secondary data from national surveys and official policy documents, the study analyses trends in enrolment, gender participation, regional disparities, institutional quality, research performance, and funding patterns. The findings indicate that while reforms contributed to incremental gains in access and enhanced the visibility of quality assurance mechanisms, progress remained uneven across regions and institution types. Improvements in gender participation were accompanied by persistent regional imbalances, limited accreditation coverage, and a concentration of research capacity within a small set of elite institutions. Moreover, digital learning initiatives remained largely supplementary due to infrastructural constraints and inadequate faculty preparedness. Overall, the reform phase was characterised by an emphasis on quantitative expansion rather than systemic quality enhancement. By treating this period as a baseline preceding more comprehensive policy restructuring, the paper argues for a shift towards integrated reforms that align expansion with equity, governance capacity, research development, and digital readiness. Such an approach is essential for ensuring sustainable and inclusive transformation of India's higher education system.

Keywords: Higher Education Reforms, RUSA, Gross Enrolment Ratio, Accreditation, Regional Disparities, Digital Learning, India

1. Introduction

Higher education plays a central role in nurturing social mobility, economic competitiveness, and democratic participation. In India, the demand for higher education has intensified due to a young population, expanding middle class, and the growing relevance of knowledge-intensive sectors. By the mid-2010s, India had emerged as one of the largest higher education systems in the world, encompassing universities, colleges, and standalone institutions across diverse disciplines.

Despite its scale, the system has historically been characterised by uneven access, variable quality, and limited research capacity. Recognising these challenges, the Government of India initiated a series of reforms from 2015 onwards. The Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) aimed to strengthen state higher education institutions through outcome-based funding, infrastructure development, and governance reforms. The National Institutional

Ranking Framework (NIRF) was introduced to promote transparency, accountability, and competition among institutions. In parallel, early digital learning initiatives, including pilot massive open online courses (MOOCs), sought to enhance flexibility and outreach.

While these measures signalled an important policy shift, the reform phase between 2015 and 2017 remained largely expansion-oriented. Enrolment growth and institutional proliferation outpaced improvements in faculty strength, research ecosystems, and quality assurance. This study examines the condition of Indian higher education prior to 2018, assessing how reforms during this period shaped access, quality, and institutional preparedness for deeper transformation.

2. Literature Review

The literature on Indian higher education consistently highlights the tension between expansion and quality. Tilak (2015) notes that while enrolment growth has been substantial, public expenditure on higher education has not kept pace, resulting in infrastructural and faculty constraints. Agarwal (2016) emphasises that state universities, which cater to the majority of students, remain under-resourced and administratively constrained.

Studies on RUSA identify its potential to introduce performance-linked funding and strengthen state-level planning, but also point to uneven implementation due to variations in state capacity (MHRD, 2016). Early assessments of NIRF suggest that rankings have enhanced institutional visibility but tend to favour already well-established institutions with stronger research profiles (Altbach & Salmi, 2017).

Digital learning initiatives are viewed as promising instruments for widening access, particularly for non-traditional learners. However, scholars caution that digital inequality, limited broadband penetration, and insufficient faculty training restrict their effectiveness, especially in rural and remote regions (MHRD, 2017).

Overall, the literature underscores the need for an integrated reform approach that balances quantitative expansion with sustained investments in quality assurance, research capacity, and equity.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine the condition of higher education in India during the period 2015–2017 by analysing trends in access, enrolment, and gender participation. It explores regional disparities in higher education participation and assesses the status of institutional quality through accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms. The study also evaluates patterns in research output and funding support, and identifies key systemic challenges that limited the effectiveness of expansion-oriented reforms during this period.

4. Research Methodology

A mixed-methods approach is adopted, drawing primarily on secondary data sources available up to early 2018. Quantitative data were collected from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), University Grants Commission (UGC) reports, and official publications of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). Descriptive statistics were used to analyse trends in enrolment, gender participation, accreditation, and regional distribution.

Qualitative insights were derived from policy documents, committee reports, and existing academic literature to contextualise quantitative findings. Although the study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, triangulation across multiple sources enhances the robustness of analysis.

5. Findings

Building on the methodological framework outlined above, the analysis now turns to the empirical evidence generated from the selected datasets. By examining key indicators related to access, regional participation, institutional quality, research performance, funding, and digital initiatives, the following section presents a structured account of the major trends and patterns observed in Indian higher education during the period 2015–2017.

5.1 Trends in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)

During the period under study, India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education showed a gradual upward movement, reflecting expansion under RUSA and increased institutional capacity.

Table 1

Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education by Gender

Academic Year	Overall, GER (%)	Male GER (%)	Female GER (%)
2015–2016	24.5	25.4	23.5
2016–2017	25.2	25.9	24.5
2017–2018	24.6	25.4	23.8

Note. GER = Gross Enrolment Ratio.

Source. All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), MHRD.

However, growth remained modest and uneven, with signs of stagnation by 2017–18. Female participation improved steadily, narrowing the gender gap, though parity was not uniformly achieved across states.

5.2 Regional Disparities in Higher Education

Significant regional disparities persisted prior to 2018, with southern states outperforming northern ones due to superior infrastructure, governance, and private sector involvement. To quantify this, the disparity ratio (maximum to minimum state GER) stood at 3.45 in 2017–18, while the average GER for southern states (38.93%) was nearly twice that of northern states (19.77%), with an overall standard deviation of 11.97% indicating high variability.

Table 2

Regional Distribution of Gross Enrolment Ratio in Selected States

Region	State	Overall, GER (%)	Male GER (%)	Female GER (%)
Southern	Tamil Nadu	46.9	46.2	47.6
Southern	Kerala	37.4	34.0	40.8
Southern	Karnataka	32.5	33.1	31.8
Northern	Uttar Pradesh	23.6	24.1	23.1
Northern	Rajasthan	22.1	22.5	21.7

Northern	Bihar	13.6	14.3	12.8
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Source. AISHE 2017–18.

Southern states benefited from higher literacy rates and economic development, correlating with elevated GER (e.g., Tamil Nadu's 46.9% linked to stronger socio-economic indicators). In contrast, northern states faced barriers such as poverty and lower secondary completion rates, constraining institutional density and access.

5.3 Institutional Quality and Accreditation

Accreditation coverage expanded gradually during the study period, indicating growing awareness of quality assurance mechanisms.

Table 3

Accredited Higher Education Institutions in India

Year	Accredited Universities	Accredited Colleges	Accredited HEIs (%)
2015	300	6,000	25
2016	320	6,500	26
2017	350	7,000	28

Source. National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC).

However, the overall share of accredited institutions remained limited relative to system size, and outcomes varied widely across states and institution types.

5.4 Research Performance Trends

Research output increased steadily during the period, positioning India among the leading countries globally by publication volume.

Table 4

Research Output Indicators in Indian Higher Education

Indicator	2015	2016	2017
Total publications (approx.)	120,000	130,000	145,000
Global rank (by output)	5th	5th	4th
Average citations per paper	4.8	4.9	5.0

Source. UGC and Scopus-indexed statistics (reported up to 2017).

Nevertheless, citation impact and research quality remained concentrated in a limited number of elite institutions, underscoring the need for broader research capacity-building.

5.5 Funding Support under RUSA

Funding under RUSA increased steadily during Phase I and early Phase II, supporting infrastructure development and governance reforms.

Table 5

RUSA Funding Allocation in India (Phase I and Early Phase II)

Financial Year	Allocation (₹ crore)	Major Focus Areas
2013–2014	1,500	Infrastructure, governance reforms

2015–2016	2,000	Faculty positions, equity measures
2016–2017	2,500	State universities and colleges

Source. MHRD, RUSA Reports.

However, fund utilisation varied across states, reflecting differences in administrative preparedness and planning capacity.

5.6 Status of Digital Learning Initiatives

Digital learning initiatives remained in a pilot or supplementary stage, hampered by infrastructural gaps. Platforms like early MOOCs (e.g., NPTEL pilots) reached limited audiences, with adoption constrained by low broadband (20% national penetration in 2017, dropping to 30–35% in rural areas). Faculty training was inadequate, with only low levels of proficiency in digital tools, further limiting scalability.

Table 6

Status of Digital Learning in Higher Education

Indicator	Status (2017)
MOOC adoption	Pilot / limited
Rural internet penetration	Approximately 30–35%
Faculty trained in digital tools	Low
Role of digital platforms	Supplementary

Source. MHRD ICT in Education Reports (2016–17).

These constraints highlight how digital efforts were supplementary at best, failing to bridge access gaps for rural or non-traditional learners without targeted investments in connectivity and skills development.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that reforms between 2015 and 2017 succeeded in expanding access—e.g., modest GER growth from 24.5% to 25.2% and 28% accreditation coverage but fell short of addressing deeper structural challenges like quality concentration and regional imbalances. Expansion without commensurate investment in faculty and digital infrastructure resulted in uneven outcomes, raising equity and sustainability concerns.

To frame this critically, a SWOT analysis of the reforms is grounded exclusively in the findings reveals

Strengths:

- Quantitative gains in enrolment (GER up 0.7% overall, with female GER rising 1%; and gender participation, building a broader base for the knowledge economy.
- Funding model of RUSA promoted infrastructure and reforms, with allocations escalating to ₹2,500 crore by 2016–17.
- Research volume growth, with publications increasing 20.83% to 145,000 and global rank improving to 4th

Weaknesses:

- Persistent regional disparities, with northern states' average GER at 19.77% vs. southern at 38.93% (disparity ratio of 3.45), tied to socio-economic and infrastructural factors.
- Quality silos in research, where citations grew minimally (2% annually) and output remained concentrated in elite institutions.
- Digital lag, with pilot-stage MOOC adoption, rural internet penetration at 30–35%, and low faculty training limiting transformative potential.

Opportunities:

- Leverage momentum of RUSA for targeted equity measures, such as needs-based allocations to reduce north-south divides.
- Enhance research quality through broader capacity-building in state institutions, extending volume gains to improve citation impacts.
- Scale digital initiatives via investments in infrastructure and training, potentially widening access in underserved regions and supporting enrolment growth.

Threats:

- Funding volatility, as uneven RUSA utilization across states risks stalling infrastructure and equity progress.
- Quality erosion in research from publication pressures, with stagnant citations potentially undermining global positioning.
- Widening digital divide, where low rural penetration and supplementary platform roles could exclude non-traditional learners, exacerbate disparities and limit overall GER gains.

The findings demonstrate that reforms between 2015 and 2017 succeeded in expanding access but fell short of addressing deeper structural challenges. Expansion without commensurate investment in faculty development, governance reform, and digital infrastructure resulted in uneven outcomes. Regional imbalances and quality differentials persisted, raising concerns about equity and sustainability. The reform experience highlights the limitations of fragmented interventions and underscores the need for a coherent, long-term policy vision capable of integrating access, quality, and innovation.

7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Higher education system in India achieved significant numerical expansion by the end of the study period, yet remained constrained by uneven quality, regional disparities, and limited innovation capacity. As the SWOT analysis illustrates, these strengths were undermined by weaknesses such as pronounced regional imbalances and digital constraints, alongside threats like funding volatility and quality erosion. This study provides a critical baseline assessment of the system at a pivotal juncture, prior to comprehensive policy restructuring, revealing that expansion-oriented reforms bolstered scale but perpetuated inequities and limited innovation capacity.

Policy implications, informed by the SWOT, emphasize transitioning from fragmented expansion to holistic transformation. To capitalize on opportunities, future reforms should prioritize needs-based funding and equity measures, allocating resources differentially to address regional imbalances, such as increased grants for underperforming states to boost

institutional density and enrolment parity, thereby mitigating threats of uneven utilization. Additionally, investing in faculty recruitment and development is crucial to improve teaching ratios and digital proficiency, enabling broader research dissemination beyond elite institutions and countering quality silos.

Furthermore, strengthening accreditation and quality assurance mechanisms through expanded coverage with mandatory benchmarks, incorporating impact metrics, will elevate research quality and global competitiveness. Scaling digital infrastructure by advancing online courses and platforms via targeted broadband investments in rural areas will leverage opportunities for non-traditional learner access and support gender gains. Finally, developing an integrated governance framework that links funding models with ranking systems and digital initiatives will foster innovation and sustainability, averting threats like the digital divide and ensuring alignment with India's demographic and economic aspirations.

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