

Higher education: The quantity vs quality debate

India needs a two-pronged approach, like in the US—one that values excellence as much as expansion.

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India's higher education system has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past seven decades. From a mere 20 universities in 1947, the country now boasts around 1,200 universities and 45,000 colleges, with nearly four crore students enrolled in full-time and part-time programmes.

Despite this significant push towards ensuring access to education for everyone, India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), i.e., the percentage of individuals aged 18-23 enrolled in higher education (a globally recognised key indicator of access to education), currently stands close to 28%.

In comparison, the GER in the United States and China are at 70% and 55%, respectively, which underscores the glaring gap between India and more advanced nations. To bridge this gap and transform India's demographic advantage into a skilled workforce, the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 sets an ambitious target of achieving a minimum GER of 50% by 2035.

To achieve this ambitious GER target of 50%, India would need to double its capacity, i.e., open twice as many universities/colleges and enrol twice as many students, as compared to its current levels by 2035.

To improve GER rapidly, one option is to lean on the country's top institutions and push them towards ever-increasing enrolments. Given the sense of urgency, this can only be done via an "online degree" mechanism. Consequently, some of these offerings are already sprouting from such elite institutions.

This brings us to the quality aspect of higher education in India. For India to truly become 'atma nirbhar', we must push the research envelope and uplift higher education institutions to global standards.

In the QS World University Rankings 2026, only six Indian institutions feature in the global top 250, with IIT Delhi and IIT Kanpur being ranked 123rd and 222nd, respectively. In programme-wise rankings, only IIM Bangalore has broken into the top 30 with its flagship PGP (2-year full time MBA) programme. Central and state universities are nowhere to be found, either at the university-level or even in programme-wise rankings.

In contrast, China's Peking University ranks 14th globally, and multiple Chinese universities consistently appear in the top 50. The US dominates the top 10 with MIT, Stanford, and Harvard leading the list.

This disparity underscores the challenge: India has to rapidly expand its footprint to provide increased access to education ("quantity") while also enabling its elite institutions to catch up to their international peers in global reputation ("quality").

It is unreasonable to expect the top-tier institutions in the country to educate the vast swathe of students while simultaneously rising in global rankings that are heavily influenced by research. The task of achieving quality and quantity must be a shared responsibility between institutions of eminence as well as central/state universities and affiliated colleges.

To address these twin challenges, we must look towards the United States and learn from their educational successes over the last century. In the US, a "dual-branch" system that differentiates universities based on their research or teaching focus becomes evident.

For example, undergraduate programmes in state universities such as Texas A&M University or The Ohio State University cater to nearly 70,000 students each and provide a good quality education to all these students. These state universities serve as the backbone of America, fuelling an educated workforce into the economy and moving people up the socioeconomic mobility ladder.

Conversely, the US also has universities, such as Caltech and Princeton, which take the best students in the world, provide extremely high-quality education, and push the boundaries of scientific research.

For India to achieve quantity and quality simultaneously, the blueprint is clear: Create a dual-branch system that: (i) mandates a relentless pursuit of research excellence for the top-tier institutions in the country, unencumbered by governmental guidelines, and an ability to chart their own path towards scientific excellence in their chosen fields ("small and elite"); and (ii) identifies central/state universities and their affiliate colleges as vehicles responsible for primarily teaching the large swathe of students that in turn enables movement up the socioeconomic ladder and develops a skilled workforce required for our industry to compete globally ("large and qualified").

This dual-branch system recognises that not every lecturer in the country needs to do research; and not every college in the country is equipped for world-class research. Removing research expectations from these faculty gives the necessary clarity to be exclusively teaching oriented.

As the mandates of universities/colleges across this dual-branch system are different, so are the resources required for them to succeed. India needs to allocate 6% of its GDP towards education (as recommended in NEP 2020), and alongside this must come the academic freedom and governance, defined as broadly as possible, required for our top universities to scale research peaks.

For central or state universities and their affiliate colleges, mandated with only teaching responsibilities, the faculty to student ratio must be close to 1:18 (as recommended by global standards). Stringent accreditation is another key building block, which ensures that the minimum quality teaching standards are met and a system of checks-and-balances is set in place.

India's higher education system stands at a critical juncture. Expanding access to education is vital for social and economic progress but ignoring parallel improvements in quality risks producing graduates with limited competence.

Achieving the vision outlined in the National Education Policy requires a two-pronged approach, one that values excellence as much as expansion. By creating the dual-branch system advocated in this article, India can transform its higher education landscape into a globally competitive system that empowers its youth and drives national development.

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