



Equity and Inclusion under NEP 2020 for Achieving SDG-4 in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper looks at how the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India is in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) in higher education, specifically the aspects of equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning. The paper evaluates the correlations between NEP-2020 provisions and SDG-4 targets, evaluates the structural issues of implementation, and determines the degree through which national reforms can support inclusive and equitable tertiary education by 2030, using policy analysis based on the use of qualitative data (supported by secondary data). Results show that NEP-2020 has both radical and gradual aspects, which provide a great opportunity to increase access and skills, but have limited opportunities regarding funds, digital inequalities, institutional capability, and socio-cultural limitations. The paper provides a conceptual gap between global development policies and national education reforms and offers evidence-based policies to enhance the pathway of India towards SDG-4 achievement.

Keywords: *NEP-2020, SDG-4, Higher Education, Equity, Inclusion, Policy Implementation, Lifelong Learning*

1. Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is considered to be one of the biggest milestones in the Indian history of higher education reform, which has traditionally been characterized by a path of development of commissions, committees, and national frameworks aimed at increasing accessibility, addressing quality, and updating the curriculum. Since the Radhakrishnan Commission (194849) and the Kothari Commission (196466), the reforms that occurred have attempted to democratize higher education and in the process expanded access to people of underrepresented groups. NEP-2020 develops this reform tradition as it suggests structural reforms, such as multidisciplinary universities, flexible learning pathways, Academic Bank of Credits, expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), integration of digital technologies, and regulatory consolidation to develop a holistic and learner-focused system in line with global standards.

Still in the same line as the domestic reform agenda in India, the global education agenda has been informed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and SDG-4 in particular which envisions that by 2030, it will have ensured that inclusive and equitable quality education is provided and that access to lifelong learning is made available to all. SDG-4 has several targets and indicators which are interconnected and which focus on the aspects of universal access, equitable participation, quality learning outcomes, gender parity, technical and vocational education, expansion of

higher education and adult learning. In the case of higher education, SDG-4 sees more people engaging in higher education, a fair system to reach the disadvantaged groups, quality assurance systems, and greater skill- employability alignment. India must have an SDG-4 architecture that can achieve a greater Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), provide financial and academic access, overcome the disparities in society and at the regional level, and allow lifelong learning via multiple delivery systems.

The main research problem comes out of the necessity to examine whether, and to what extent, NEP-2020 contributes to equity and inclusivity in higher education in the way that is normative and operational in the SDG-4 context. NEP-2020 as an indicator of ambitious reforms notwithstanding, inclusive higher education will be realized through implementation, institutional capacity, funding models, digital infrastructure, or social determinants of participation. It is imperative to know the convergence and differences between NEP-2020 and SDG-4 in order to assess the preparedness of India to meet the goals of 2030.

This analytic question requires the clarity of concepts in critical terms. Equity means equity in resource distribution, opportunities and results particularly among the socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Inclusion refers to institutional processes that eliminate discrimination barriers to participation among disadvantaged groups like women, Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes, OBC, Persons with Disabilities, linguistic minority and rural people. The access is linked to entry pathways, affordability and institutional availability whereas participation is associated with retention, progress and completion. Learning outcomes are the competencies, skills, and knowledge acquired in the higher education. Lifelong learning embraces the aspects of flexible and ongoing learning past the normality of age-structured learning. Combined, these notions define the assessive prism in the context of which the matching of NEP-2020 and SDG-4 can be logically analyzed.

2. Review of Literature

The international discourse of inclusive and equitable higher education has mainly been influenced by international bodies like UNESCO, the World Bank and the OECD that have made it clear that widening participation, equity in access and improvement of quality are key aspects of sustainable development. UNESCO perceives inclusive higher education as a normal obligation to break the structural limits to disadvantaged groups and supporting the policies to bridge the gaps in participation, learning disparities and affordability by multi-level reforms. World Bank inculcates the paradigms of inclusion in terms of human capital and skills as it connects tertiary education growth to labor market outcomes, productivity and social mobility. In the meantime, the OECD emphasizes equity in access as well as learning outcomes, completion rates, and lifelong learning opportunities and notes that tertiary education systems should include the flexibilities and digital learning opportunities and financial aid to prevent the socio-economic background that predestines educational achievement.

In India, the policy discussion of higher education has been transformed in a series of commissions and national frameworks aimed at bringing democracy in the educational provision and national development. The urgency of the need to modernize the education system in universities and encourage merit-based participation was first voiced by the Radhakrishnan Committee (194849). The values of equality, access, and social justice were codified in the Kothari Commission (196466) and it is imperative that the state should intervene in order to reduce socio-economic inequalities. These commitments were further advanced by the National Policy on Education (1986) which emphasized growth, equity, and excellence especially among the marginalized groups and women and rural population. Reforms initiated after liberalization such as Rashtriya Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) in 2013 were aimed at institutional governance, accreditation, and funding models to deal with regional inequalities and boost employability. The NEP-2020 is the most detailed modern reform, suggesting multidisciplinary universities, flexible curriculum, Academic Bank of Credits, digital learning, distance learning, and focused inclusion policies of socio-economically disadvantaged group- hence in accordance with the global discourses of inclusive higher education.

According to empirical literature on inequalities in Indian higher education suggests that there is still disparities among gender, caste, region, language, disability and socio-economic status. Research indicates that, in spite of the fact that Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has increased in the last few decades, access continues to be disproportionate, where Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, Persons with Disabilities and rural students are systematically disadvantaged in terms of admission, progression and completion. There is increased gender parity, which is marked by discipline and employment performance. Academic stratification is further promoted due to language barriers particularly between English-medium and vernacular-medium learners. Also, digital inequality, which was revealed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed urgent inequalities in access to digital devices, possession, and technology.

SDG-4 scholarship creates a conceptual interface between the national policy frameworks and global development goals. SDG-4 gives specific attention to inclusion and equitable quality education and lifelong learning and thus can align itself with NEP-2020 reforms including digital growth, flexible learning options, technical education, and providing specific services to disadvantaged groups. Nevertheless, SDG-4 also lacks indicators and timeframes, which must be quantifiable; they should be based on evidence concerning policy implementation, as opposed to normative commitments on their own.

Nevertheless, research gaps exist even with the increase of scholarship. Not many works are dedicated to the systematic analysis of NEP-2020 in the light of SDG-4 outcomes and especially with references to the equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning measures. Moreover, there is a limited empirical research on the possibility of having SDG-4 goals met by 2030 in the Indian context. This provokes the necessity of integrated policy analysis that will map NEP-2020 provisions with SDG-4 indicators and assess the probable obstacles and prospects in the attainment of inclusive higher education.

3. Conceptual Framework

The analytical framework of equity and inclusion under NEP-2020 in terms of SDG-4 is pegged on the systematic mapping policy provisions to global development goals and the identification of the social dimensions particular to expressing disparity in higher education. A number of reform provisions are present in NEP-2020, which correspond to the substantive aspects of SDG-4 (targets 4.1, 4.7), such as the growth of access to higher education, its quality, the promotion of lifelong learning, and the enhancement of technical and vocational opportunities. Target 4.3 is about making sure that there is equal access to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education. This is directly addressed by NEP-2020 in terms of multidisciplinary universities, flexible curricula, credit mobility and vocational integration. Target 4.5 touches upon the eradication of gender and social differences, which is echoed in NEP-2020 regarding the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), financial support sources, and equity in the region. Target 4.4 and 4.7 - concerning skills, employability, sustainable citizenship - are in line with NEP-2020 that focuses on skill-based curricula, research ecosystems, and holistic education.

Equity is fantasized in the socio-economic, gender, caste, regional, disability, linguistic, and digital levels. Such classifications define the access patterns, institutional experiences, learning outcomes and entry into labour markets. It consists of inclusion mechanisms in NEP-2020, which include the Gross Enrolment Ratio growth, introduction of multidisciplinary universities, expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and online, Academic Bank of Credits as a flexible learning environment, specific scholarships, inclusive pedagogy, socio-emotional learning, improvement of digital infrastructure, as identified mechanisms which will mitigate disparity and encourage lifelong learning.

The theoretical premises are based on the Human Capital Theory (which associates higher education with productivity and socio-economic mobility) and the Capability Approach (Amartya Sen), which places greater emphasis on the development of individual freedoms and functioning, and the Social Justice Framework developed by Nancy Fraser, which takes a combination of redistribution and recognition to assess equity. The difference between Equity-of-Access and Equity-of-Outcome paradigms also help to determine whether NEP-2020 will make a difference in the enrolment as opposed to a significant increase or reduction of the completion rates, learning outcomes, and employability. Taken as a whole, this framework allows completing an analytical evaluation of the alignment, gaps, and feasibility of achieving SDG-4 based on NEP-2020 reforms.

NEP-2020 Provisions	SDG-4 Target #	Relevant Indicators	Alignment Notes
Multidisciplinary universities and holistic curriculum	4.3, 4.4, 4.7	Participation in tertiary education; skill development; citizenship education	Enhances tertiary access, employability, and sustainable citizenship competencies
Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and flexible learning pathways	4.3, 4.5, 4.7	Equitable tertiary participation; lifelong learning	Supports mobility, lifelong learning, and diversified academic trajectories
Expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and online	4.3, 4.4	Affordable tertiary access; technical/vocational learning	Increases participation for working, rural, and non-

education			traditional learners
Digital education platforms and blended learning	4.3, 4.4, 4.5	Access to digital infrastructure; skill formation	Enhances access and learning but contingent on digital equity
Targeted support for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)	4.5	Gender, caste, disability, socio-economic parity indicators	Reinforces equity commitments for marginalized categories
Scholarships and financial aid mechanisms	4.3, 4.5	Financial support and affordability metrics	Reduces cost barriers and expands participation for disadvantaged groups
Vocational and skill-based programs	4.4	Youth with vocational/technical skills	Strengthens employability and labor-market readiness
Research and innovation ecosystem reforms (NRF, internationalization)	4.4, 4.7	Higher-order skills, innovation indicators, global competencies	Builds knowledge capacity and aligns with knowledge economy goals
Regional equity and institutional restructuring	4.5	Reduction in regional disparities in tertiary participation	Addresses spatial inequities in institutional access
Lifelong learning emphasis and modular learning formats	4.3, 4.7	Lifelong learning and adult education indicators	Aligns structural reforms with SDG-4 lifelong learning mandate

Table 1: Mapping NEP-2020 Provisions to SDG-4 Targets

The table maps the main NEP-2020 reform provisions to the SDG-4 targets and indicators in a structured manner and shows that both reforms converge at a conceptual level as far as India domestic education reforms relate to the global sustainable development agenda. The alignment shows that NEP-2020 is very concerned about the matter of raising tertiary participation (SDG-4.3), improving skills and employability (SDG-4.4), focusing on socio-economic and demographic inequalities (SDG-4.5), and advancing lifelong learning and sustainable citizenship (SDG-4.7). The inclusion and quality in higher education are operationalized in a multidisciplinary university, flexible learning opportunities, digital and ODL growth, financial assistance, and specific attention to socio-economically disadvantaged populations. Mechanisms, such as the Academic Bank of Credits, modular learning structure and ecosystem reforms at the same time reveal NEP-2020 orientation to the objectives of lifelong learning and knowledge economy. The mapping highlights that NEP-2020 is conceptually aligned with SDG-4 in several areas but also states that the institutional capacity, implementation fidelity, and digital and financial inclusion indicate that the fulfilment of these commitments is dependent on these factors which have persisted to be key determinants of the achievement of SDG-4 outcomes by 2030.

4. Research questions and objectives of the study

The aims and research questions of this investigation are derived out of the intersection of both the national education reforms and global development requirements with the connection between NEP-2020 and SDG-4 in the field of higher education. With India being strategically oriented to increasing access, improving quality and ensuring equitable participation, it turns out that it is necessary to determine whether provisions of NEP-2020 can change the intent of policy into the outcomes of inclusive education. The focus of human capital formation, social mobility, and national competitiveness is on higher education, therefore, studying equity and inclusion in NEP-2020 offers useful information on whether it is possible to meet SDG-4 objectives by 2030. The recognition of the barriers to implementation and institutional limitations are also important steps towards enhancing the effectiveness of a policy and promoting the support of disadvantaged populations.

Its main objectives are: (1) to examine how NEP-2020 focuses on the equity and inclusion issues of the UAE via access, affordability, participation, curriculum, pedagogy, scholarships, and infrastructure reforms; (2) to examine how NEP-2020 aligns with SDG-4 indicators of equal access, quality learning, skill development, gender parity, and

lifelong learning; (3) to examine the structural and socio-economic obstacles that will act as impediments to inclusive higher education by 2030, including funding

In line with this, the paper is informed by four research questions: (1) what does NEP-2020 suggest to prosecute equity and inclusion in higher education; (2) to what degree do these strategies align with SDG-4 goals and indicators; (3) what obstacles can impede an SDG-4 achievement by the year 2030; and, (4) what changes are required to strengthen an alignment between NEP and SDG policy agendas. All these goals and questions create a combined analytical framework with which the potential impact of NEP-2020 on inclusive and equitable higher education in India can be assessed.

5. Methodology

This research paper uses qualitative policy analysis, which is backed by secondary data, to analyze the compatibility of NEP-2020 and SDG-4 in the area of higher education. Qualitative approach allows a deeper grasp of the policy provisions, institutional processes, and normative commitments of equity and inclusion. These policy provisions are contextualized to the wider socio-economic and educational trends using secondary data.

The sources of data will be major policy texts, including the NEP-2020 text, University Grants Commission (UGC) guidelines, and Ministry of Education (MoE) reports, to be supplemented with the international frameworks and data on the same provided by the UNESCO, the World Bank, and the OECD. The empirical indicators on enrolment, participation and disparity will be based on All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), SDG-India Index, National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and the national statistical data bases. Research studies and academic articles are used to put the analysis in the scope of the current academic discussions about equity, inclusion, and higher education reform.

The study uses content analysis and document analysis analytically to determine the themes concerning access, inclusion, quality, and lifelong learning. The convergence between NEP-2020 stipulations and SDG-4 targets is evaluated through comparative alignment mapping, whereas the latter reduces the validity and minimizes the interpretive bias of the sources through triangulation. This study design enables making the full assessment of the opportunities of NEP-2020 to promote inclusive higher education in India.

6. Challenges and Constraints

Irrespective of the bold promises in NEP-2020 regarding equity and inclusion, there are a number of structural issues and limitations that might influence the achievement of SDG-4 goals in Indian higher education. One of the major issues is the existing implementation disjuncture between policy intent and institutional implementation. The process of translating the provisions of reforms into operational frameworks assumes the coordination of ministries, regulatory bodies, universities, and state governments, the heterogeneous capabilities of which often have heterogeneous priorities. Financial restraints represent additional limitations because providing access, digital infrastructure, scholarships, and multidisciplinary institutions can only be sustained by continuous government funding, and privatization trends are likely to increase disparities among socio-economically disadvantaged populations.

The disparity of digital infrastructure is a significant obstacle, especially in rural and remote areas where the lack of connectivity, the possession of devices, and digital literacy are still low. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the existence of these disparities, and the necessity to have inclusive digital ecosystems. Other problems like poor faculty strength, regulatory fragmentation and lack of quality assurance are also institutional capacity and governance issues that can also prevent inclusive reforms. Formal policy provisions are still influenced by social-cultural limitations associated with caste, gender, language and regional identities which influence participation patterns and learning outcomes.

Lastly, a measurement of equity is still problematic, with the existing measures largely concerned with access and enrolment and less about the completion rates, learning outcomes, employability or lifelong learning. In the absence of sound monitoring and data-based assessment, it is hard to measure the actual impact of NEP-2020 on the SDG-4 progress.

7. Discussion

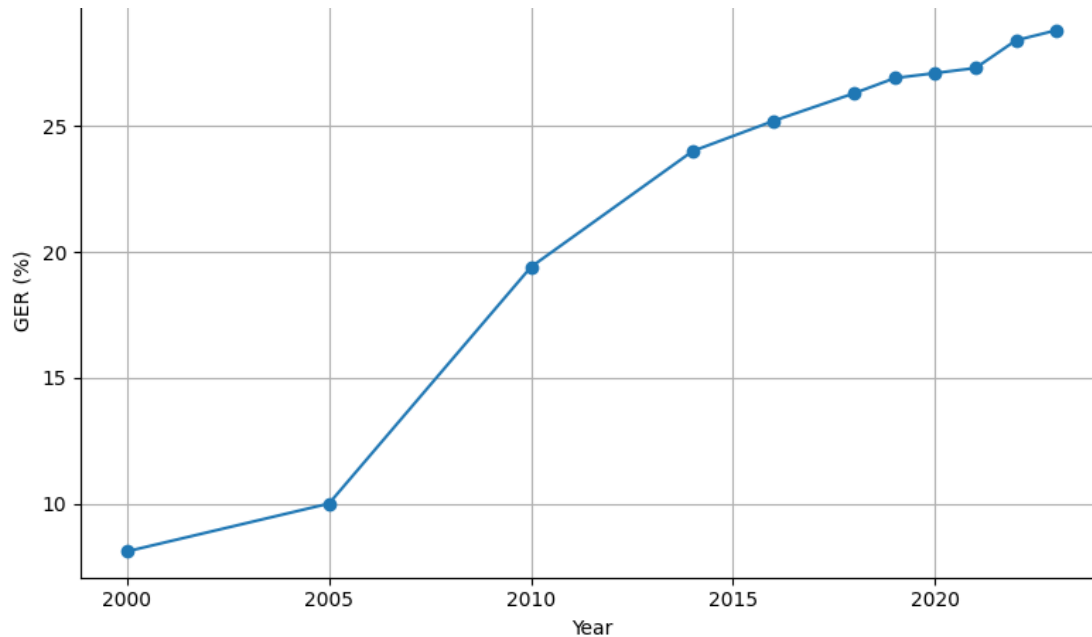
The prospects of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 to help fast-track development towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) lies in its ability to reinstate inclusiveness, quality, and lifelong learning in the Indian higher education ecosystem. Theoretically, NEP-2020 is aligned with SDG-4 agenda because it focuses on equitable access, multidisciplinary learning, digital integration, skills, and flexible academic routes. Multidisciplinary universities, the Academic Bank of Credits, the growth of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), holistic curriculum reforms, and a specific focus on socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) are all pointers towards a policy vision that is focused on expanding the participation base and democratizing educational access. These provisions can raise Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), better learning outcomes, and better employability, which are important indicators that are engrained in SDG-4.

Nevertheless, the transformative potential of NEP-2020 should be investigated in relation to the underlying contradictions and policy tensions, which can impact its implementation. One of the main contradictions is expansion and privatization. Although NEP-2020 prioritizes universal access and inclusion, higher education in India has been experiencing an increasing role of the privatized institutions that can strengthen socio-economic stratification based on the difference in fee structures and quality difference. The inclusive aim of the policy might be compromised by the absence of proper regulation between privatization and supporting systems. There is another conflict between regulation and flexibility. NEP-2020 encourages flexible curricula, academic mobility, and lifelong learning, but these changes have to be tightly connected with the harmonization of regulations on the university, accreditation institutions, and the state authorities. Over regulation can result in stagnation to innovation, and under regulation can lead to quality assurance.

Digital learning is one of the third contradictions. Although digital platforms, online degrees, and blended learning have the potential of expanding access and lifelong learning that are aligned with SDG, digital inequality remains the primary factor that marginalizes rural, low-income, and female learners. It is not possible without concomitant investment in digital infrastructure and literacy to badge that digitalization will expand instead of close educational disparities. Equally, the internationalization and research excellence drive can lead to quality and global competitiveness, however, at the expense of elite institutions and mass education inclusivity.

In order to evaluate potential future conclusions by 2030, one will need a realistic picture of the Indian socio-economic environment, institutional ability, and governance infrastructures. Positively, NEP-2020 can lead to an increase in GER, the role of better skills development, and the diversification of academic opportunities, which are in line with SDG-4 objectives on tertiary engagement, vocational education, and lifelong learning. When put into practice in an effective manner, the policy framework might empower human capital, social mobility, and increase the positioning of the global knowledge economy in India.

Nonetheless, there are a number of limitations that can limit the complete implementation of SDG-4. The gaps on funding are also paramount, where inclusive growth should be supported by persistent government funding in the form of scholarships, digital learning and capacity building in rural institutions. Reform in an institution is often slow, and fragmentation in governance particularly between the center and the states may slow adoption. Cascade, gender, disability, language and regional socio-cultural inequalities may continue to play out, influencing the participation and learning outcomes regardless of policy. The indicator SDG-4 requires well-built data systems to record the completion, learning outcomes, and employability and not the access; India is yet to develop such systems.



Bar Graph 1: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Indian Higher Education, 2000–2023.

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), Ministry of Education, Government of India (Various Years).

The figure above shows how India has long-term growth in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education between 2000 and 2023, depicting a consistent change to a mass higher education system. GER grew as it expanded about 8.1 percent in 2000 to almost 28.8 percent in 2023, which showed both structural growth and expanded access. This growth trend is in line with national reform agenda and international undertakings on SDG-4 to expand tertiary enrolment and enhance equal opportunity to access quality education by 2030. But despite positive steps in the entire enrolment growth in general, this does not necessarily result in equal participation or better learning outcomes. The existing disparities in gender, caste, socio-economic status, and regional divide are still high to imply that GER gains cannot be made to effect substantive inclusion. Thus, the trend gives a favorable yet imprecise picture of the transformation in higher education in India, which is why the additional equity-oriented interventions highlighted in NEP-2020 should be prioritized.

Challenge	Description	Proposed Intervention	Expected Outcome
Funding Limitations	Insufficient public spending to support expansion, scholarships, digital access, and capacity-building	Strengthen equity-linked funding models; targeted grants for state universities; need-based aid	Improved affordability, enhanced capacity for inclusion, and reduced socio-economic disparities
Digital Infrastructure Gaps	Unequal access to devices, connectivity, and digital literacy, disproportionately affecting rural and marginalized groups	Invest in digital infrastructure; provide devices; vernacular content; digital literacy programs	Enhanced digital participation and reduced digital divide in ODL and blended learning
Institutional Capacity Constraints	Weak governance, limited faculty strength, fragmented accreditation, and uneven institutional capabilities	Governance reforms; faculty development; unified accreditation; institutional autonomy with accountability	Higher institutional performance, improved quality, and effective policy implementation
Socio-cultural Barriers	Caste, gender, disability, language, and regional norms restricting access and participation	Inclusion initiatives targeting SEDGs and PwDs; counselling; sensitization; bridge courses	Increased enrolment, completion, and participation among marginalized groups
Privatization	Market-based models risk exclusion due to cost barriers and	Regulated PPP frameworks; fee transparency; subsidy	Balanced expansion with affordability, accountability,

Pressures	uneven quality	mechanisms; accreditation standards	and quality assurance
Monitoring and Evaluation Gaps	Limited data on learning outcomes, completion rates, employability, and lifelong learning indicators	Develop SDG-aligned monitoring dashboards; disaggregated data systems	Evidence-based policymaking, improved outcome tracking, and higher system transparency

Table 2 Challenges in NEP–SDG Alignment and Required Intervention

The table summarizes significant structural issues that influence the correspondence between NEP-2020 reforms and SDG-4 goals, but also the specific interventions and anticipated results that can create a course of action leading to inclusive and equitable higher education. Funding gaps, digital inequalities, institutional constraints, socio-cultural obstacles, privatization pressures, and poor monitoring systems are also identified as essential constraints that could negatively affect the responsibility of policy intent to inclusive results. The table offers a well-organised intermediary between diagnostic examination and reform action through matching every challenge with strategic interventions, including, but not limited to, increasing equity financing and investing in digital infrastructure, developing new faculty, holding regulatory agencies accountable, and using data to monitor the program. The anticipated results suggest that the mitigation of the noted constraints can reinforce the affordability, gain participation among the marginalized population, institutional capacity, and evidence-based policymaking. The table is placed above the section of policy recommendations, and, therefore, it can be considered a logical fulcrum that flips the discussion on the issue of problem identification to prospective solutions aligned with the SDG-4 promises and NEP-2020 expectations.

Combined, NEP-2020 offers an effective normative framework to support SDG-4, yet the presence of the latter in 2030 will depend on the fidelity of its implementation, its financial interest, the combination coherence of the regulations, and its inclusion-sensitive monitoring. In case these enabling conditions are dealt with, NEP-2020 has the potential to become a driving force of inclusive higher education reform. Otherwise, development will continue to favor some over others. Therefore, although the policy is transformative in nature, its effectiveness in hastening SDG-4 will rely on the capacity to maintain the state, inter-sectoral cooperation and a clear emphasis on social equity.

8. Findings

The results of the present work suggest that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a reform document that includes transformative and incremental features concerning Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) and, at the same time, has areas of weakness that can limit the achievement of inclusive and equitable higher education by 2030. Its transformative potential is chiefly its structural proposals, including multidisciplinary universities, flexible curricula, Academic Bank of Credits and development of Open and Distance Learning, digital platforms, integration of skills, internationalization, and lifelong learning paths, all of which have substantial correspondence to SDG-4 commitments on access, quality, equity and employability. These initiatives indicate the transition of the inflexible, disciplinary, and divisive systems to the more vibrant and learner-focused model of higher education, which is quite a contrast to the former policy frameworks.

Some aspects of incrementality are also seen since NEP-2020 does not propose a radically new set of mechanisms to combat deep-rooted structural inequalities in terms of caste, gender, reservation-based inclusion, and regional parity. Even though the policy takes into consideration socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs), they are still generalized and need more operational and funding plans. Equally, the policy restates the inclusion goals stated in its predecessors including NPE-1986 or RUSA (2013), indicating evolutionary changes of many spheres as opposed to revolutionary.

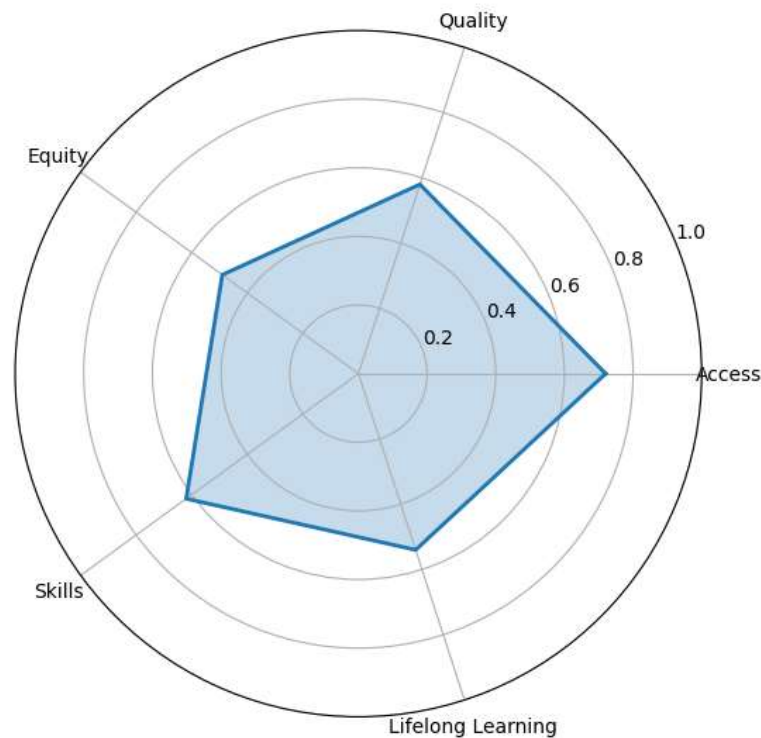


Figure: Performance Across SDG-4 Sub-Indicators. Source: Based on SDG-4 conceptual framework and UNESCO/SDG indicator categories).

In order to capture the multidimensional nature of higher education transformation, the figure above visualizes SDG-4 performance between five core sub-indicators that include: Access, Quality, Equity, Skills, and Lifelong Learning. The radar chart shows better results in the dimensions of access and skills-related aspects, showing the advancement in the growth of tertiary enrolment and policy reforms oriented at employability constitute the NEP-2020. In the meantime, the equity and lifelong learning scores are relatively lower, which suggests that there are still many discrepancies between gender, caste, socio-economic, and regional backgrounds and the lack of mechanisms of adult and continuing education in institutions. Its quality is also placed at a middle ground as per the current anxieties about learning outcomes, faculty capacity and research ecosystems regardless of the structural ambitions of NEP-2020. The image highlights that SDG-4 should be attained through a balanced development in all aspects and not by making access to education gains in a vacuum. This way, it emphasizes the necessity of specific measures to enhance inclusion, digital equity, and lifelong learning journeys that will continue to be the priorities of NEP-2020 and SDG-4 convergence.

The lack of areas is most evident in three aspects, namely financing, digital infrastructure, and socio-cultural barriers. To fulfill SDG-4 a significant amount of public investment in scholarships, institutional capacities, and digital ecosystems is necessary, but NEP-2020 takes in part a form of reliance on the involvement of the private sector and self-financing paradigms that may tend to commercialize access. There is a digital divide in rural and marginalized communities, which digital learning, the core of NEP-2020, has to overcome despite the gaps in connectivity, device access, and literacy levels. The participation and outcomes are still influenced by socio-cultural limitations such as gender norms, caste hierarchies, language barriers, and regional imbalances, and such problems cannot be addressed through institutional changes only. In this way, although NEP-2020 provides a consistent policy framework in line with SDG-4, its transformational effectiveness is conditional and will depend on the implementation faithfulness, inter-governmental integration, and socio-economic reforms outside the education sector itself.

Policy Recommendations

In order to achieve the SDG-4 agenda with the effective implementation of NEP-2020, there is a need to have several policy measures. First, the models of equity funding should be reinforced. Higher education should be inclusive, which implies predictable state funding on scholarships, fee waivers, and digital access as well as building capacity in underserved areas. This may include increasing the number of equity-based grants, creating outcome-based incentives of inclusion to the institutions, and increasing the funding of the state universities and colleges serving the populations, which are marginalized.

Second, inclusion monitoring based on data needs to be enhanced. At present, equity is quantified at a large extent in terms of measures at the input level like enrolment. Monitoring in line with SDGs needs to be done in a granular manner based on completion rates, learning outcomes and employability, digital participation, and lifelong learning that is disaggregated by caste, gender, disability, socio-economic status and geography. Enhancement of AISHE, incorporation of NEP monitoring dashboards and connecting data systems between ministries may increase transparency and accountability.

Third, the inclusion of digital needs should be given importance. In addition to the provision of devices and connection, digital inclusion necessitates the investments in digital literacy and vernacular digital content, adaptive technology to support persons with disabilities (PwDs), and strong ODL infrastructure. Through collaborations with telecommunication companies, education technology platforms, and government agencies, scalable digital ecosystems that are in line with equity objectives can be achieved.

Fourth, the public-private partnerships (PPP) are to be promoted but under strict accountability systems. Capacity, innovation, and employability can be widened by the involvement of the private sector, but unregulated privatization may push the weak to the sidelines. Tuition control, need-based subsidies and inclusion-related accreditation standards would make sure that PPPs make a positive contribution to SDG-4.

Fifth, specific assistance to SEDGs and PwDs should be an institutionalized one. This involves the expansion of scholarships, bridge programs, mentoring, learning resources, assistive technologies and socio-emotional support. The appreciation of SEDGs in the policy must be complemented with working roadmaps and quantifiable standards of measurement of the progress.

Sixth, the empowerment of the faculty, as well as inclusive pedagogies are essential in transforming policy desires to reality educational experiences. The inclusion and learning outcomes in classrooms can be improved by faculty capacity building, by providing constant professional development, training in digital pedagogy, and diversity sensitization. The promotion of the pedagogical innovation, equity-oriented research, and scholarly global networks can reinforce quality and outcome-based equity.

Overall, all these recommendations highlight the idea that NEP-2020 will have the potential to boost SDG-4 advancement provided it is supported by effective funding, high-quality regulation, data-based monitoring, and purposeful socio-economic intervention. With the lack of these facilitating conditions, the transformative nature of NEP-2020 can stay beyond actualisation or imbalanced between regions and social groups. In this way, the SDG-4 roadmap requires an integrated perspective of the education policy that is rooted in more comprehensive national development policies and social justice obligations.

9. Conclusion

Overall, this research can be viewed as a possibility to contribute to the current discussion on whether NEP-2020 aligns with SDG-4 by analyzing the level of national policy reforms in higher education to promote international aspirations of inclusive, equitable, and quality lifelong learning. The analysis of NEP-2020 as a part of a wider Indian reform agenda and the comparison of the policies with the SDG-4 goals confirm both transformative potentialities of the policy and its practical constraints. The study emphasizes that, although NEP-2020 presents structural innovations, including multidisciplinary universities, online learning pathways, and more flexible credit systems, it is based on the principle of gradual measures to eliminate old inequalities, and is limited in its design by funding, governance, digital inclusion, and socio-cultural inequalities.

In the context of the course of the Indian state to achieve the SDG-4 by 2030, the results revealed pessimistic optimism. Advancements in Gross Enrolment Ratio, skill building and lifelong learning processes indicate the possibility of quickening down, although institutional capacity and digital infrastructure lag, as well as socio-economic disadvantages, could cause a slowdown or unequal distribution of the benefits of change. In order to meet SDG-4, therefore, there is a need to maintain the public investment, high regulatory responsibility, and explicit equity-based interventions to enable the expanded access to translate into relevant participation, better learning results, and employability among the disadvantaged groups.

The issue of empirical aspects that go beyond policy text, such as longitudinal research on the learning outcomes, online engagement, and achievement rates should be addressed in future research in socio-demographic groups. Institutional case studies and comparative regional analysis would also provide insight into how the implementation takes place. Also, disability inclusion, digital pedagogy, and equity financing research would help to make evidence-

based reforms and empower the Indian higher education framework to support the progression of the higher education system towards the 2030 agenda.

10. Expected Contribution

This study is expected to impact the world in a threefold way, including policy relevance, concept development, and practice-based recommendations to enhance inclusive higher education in India in the SDG-4 framework. To begin with, the research offers policy-relevant information regarding the application of NEP-2020, especially in the context of its equity and inclusion goals. Although NEP-2020 presents a transformative vision, the success of this vision lies in the governmental schemes, financial processes, institutional abilities, regulatory consistency, and social-cultural settings. The analysis of these dimensions will make the study a subtle perspective of the interaction between policy design and on-ground realities as this will allow policymakers and regulators, as well as academic institutions, to anticipate more the implementation issues and the enabling conditions to reform.

Second, the paper provides a normative and analytical gap between the global education agendas and national policy frames. SDG-4 is one of the international commitments to equal, inclusive and quality education but the interpretation of this commitment must be situationally adjusted by national systems. Placing NEP-2020 provisions in the context of SDG-4 targets and indicators, the study places the research on the Indian reforms in the framework of the global discussion of sustainable development, human capital, and social justice. This alignment helps to address theoretical discussions on the institutionalization of global norms in the education systems of a country and the role of developmental agendas in higher education governance.

Third, the research moves the evidence-based proposals of inclusive higher education reform in India. All these recommendations are aimed at enhancing equity financing models, enhancing data-based monitoring, narrowing down digital divides, benefiting socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) and people with disabilities (PwDs), faculties capacity, and accountable public-private engagement. These strategies, combined, will help cover structural gaps that can limit the achievement of SDG-4 and point to effective measures that can be taken by policymakers and institutions of higher education.

On the whole, the study is a contribution by way of more than descriptive analysis in order to inform policy design, and the implementation strategies, as well as academic discussions about the equity-oriented reform. It, therefore, serves a significant purpose in not only academic literature but also policy practice at an opportune time when the India higher education system is going through a transformation process that is, at the same time, moving towards the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

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