



Social inclusion and equity in India: An analysis of the National Education Policy 2020 with special reference to higher education in Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

Social inclusion and equity have become central priorities in India's higher education policy, particularly with the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The policy seeks to transform higher education by ensuring equitable access, participation, and learning outcomes for all learners, especially those belonging to Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state and home to one of the largest higher education systems, presents a significant context for examining the implementation of these policy objectives. This paper critically analyzes the provisions of NEP 2020 related to social inclusion and equity and evaluates their relevance to higher education in Uttar Pradesh. Drawing upon policy documents, government reports, and empirical literature, the paper examines initiatives relating to access, equity, financial assistance, gender inclusion, digital learning, institutional governance, and quality enhancement. It also discusses persistent challenges, including regional disparities, socio-economic inequalities, digital exclusion, gender gaps, inadequate institutional infrastructure, and uneven implementation across higher education institutions. The paper argues that although NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive policy framework for inclusive higher education, achieving its objectives requires coordinated efforts among governments, universities, regulatory agencies, and local communities. The study concludes with policy recommendations to strengthen equitable participation and improve educational outcomes in Uttar Pradesh while contributing to India's broader agenda of inclusive and sustainable development.

Keywords: Social inclusion, equity, National Education Policy 2020, higher education, Uttar Pradesh, inclusive education, educational access, educational equity

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as an important instrument for advancing social justice, widening opportunities, and reducing persistent social and economic inequalities. In a pluralistic and democratic society, higher education has an additional role because it contributes to human resource development while creating pathways for social mobility. Education is widely recognized as an important instrument for advancing social justice, widening opportunities, and reducing persistent social and economic inequalities. In a pluralistic and democratic society, higher education plays an important role by contributing to human resource development while creating pathways for social mobility. Access to quality higher education, however, is not experienced in the same way by all learners. Differences related to caste, religion, gender, disability, geography, and socio-economic background continue to influence who enters higher education and who is able to benefit from it. Recent empirical evidence on Muslim student enrolment in higher education indicates that expansion of the higher education system has not eliminated the participation deficit experienced by Muslim students. Ahmad *et al.* (2026) ^[1] highlight the persistence of this minority participation deficit in the context of policy shifts and the post-pandemic period, underscoring the continuing importance of examining equity and inclusion beyond aggregate enrollment growth.

India has developed a large and diverse higher education system comprising universities, colleges, institutions of

national importance, and professional and technical institutions. The system has expanded substantially in terms of enrolment, institutional capacity, and the range of programmes available. Yet expansion by itself has not removed disparities in educational opportunity. Learners belonging to Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) may encounter difficulties at different stages, including admission, continuation, academic progress, and completion (Government of India, 2020) ^[15]. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020^[15] was introduced against this background of continuing inequality. It presents a broad reform agenda that connects equity and inclusion with quality, multidisciplinary learning, flexibility, research, digital education, and institutional development. One of its major objectives is to raise the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50 percent by 2035. The policy gives particular attention to SEDGs, including women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), minority communities, persons with disabilities, transgender learners, economically weaker sections, and people living in geographically disadvantaged areas (Government of India, 2020) ^[15].

Several measures proposed in NEP 2020 are intended to reduce barriers faced by these groups. They include scholarships and financial assistance, Gender Inclusion Funds, Special Education Zones, multilingual and culturally responsive approaches, open and distance learning, technology-enabled education, accessible infrastructure, and student-support mechanisms. The policy perspective is

therefore broader than simply bringing disadvantaged learners into higher education. Meaningful inclusion also requires conditions that enable students to participate, continue their studies, complete their programmes, and progress towards employment or further education.

Uttar Pradesh offers an important context for examining these policy commitments. The state has a large and socially diverse population and an extensive network of public and private universities, affiliated colleges, professional institutions, technical institutions, and teacher education institutions. At the same time, opportunities vary across districts and between rural and urban locations. Financial hardship, uneven institutional facilities, limited digital connectivity, transportation and accommodation difficulties, and inadequate awareness of available support can shape students' educational experiences. The present paper therefore examines NEP 2020^[21] from the perspective of social inclusion and educational equity in higher education, with special reference to Uttar Pradesh, its implementation challenges, and possible policy responses.

Research Questions

1. How does the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020)^[15] promote social equity and inclusion in higher education, in the context of Uttar Pradesh?
2. What policy measures can enhance equitable access, participation, and educational outcomes in higher education institutions in Uttar Pradesh?

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to:

1. Examine provisions under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020^[15] reflecting on equity and social inclusion in higher education.
2. Analyze opportunities associated with implementing NEP 2020 for promoting inclusive and equitable higher education in Uttar Pradesh.
3. Address the challenges associated with implementing NEP 2020^[21] for promoting inclusive and equitable higher education in Uttar Pradesh.
4. Propose policy recommendations for social inclusion and educational equity in higher education in Uttar Pradesh.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the discussion on educational equity and social inclusion by examining NEP 2020^[21] within the higher education context of Uttar Pradesh. By connecting policy intentions with state-level realities, it highlights the opportunities and challenges involved in translating inclusive policy into practice. The study offers useful insights for policymakers, educational administrators, researchers, and institutional leaders seeking to strengthen equitable access, participation, and student success. Its findings may support informed policy formulation, institutional planning, and evidence-based interventions aimed at creating a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable higher education system.

Review of Related Literature

Social inclusion and educational equity have become important themes in higher education research because formal access does not necessarily produce equal educational experiences or outcomes. The Government of

India (2020)^[15] places equity and inclusion within the central reform agenda of NEP 2020^[15] and identifies SEDGs as priority beneficiaries. The policy proposes financial assistance, Special Education Zones, gender-focused measures, technology-supported education, and student services. At the same time, the broad national character of the policy means that its translation into practice can vary according to state and institutional conditions.

Recent national statistics indicate a gradual in expanding higher education opportunities in India. According to the Ministry of Education (2023) the AISHE (2021^[11, 22]-22) reports, there is significant growth in enrolment, improvements in the Gross Enrolment Ratio, and increased participation of women. Despite these positive trends, disparities continue to exist across regions and socially disadvantaged communities, suggesting that increased enrolment alone does not ensure educational equity. Similar concerns are reflected in UNESCO's policy reports (2020, 2023)^[11, 15], which argue that inclusive higher education requires not only wider access but also supportive institutional environments, equitable governance, inclusive teaching practices, and adequate financial support to ensure meaningful participation and success of all learners. Recent empirical research has drawn particular attention to the participation of Muslim students in Indian higher education. Ahmad *et al.* (2026)^[1] examined Muslim student enrolment in the context of policy shifts and the post-pandemic period and found that the expansion of higher education has not translated into proportionate participation for the Muslim population. Their analysis highlights the importance of examining enrolment trends alongside broader structural factors, including the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in educational support and policy mechanisms. This evidence is particularly relevant to the present study because it demonstrates that aggregate expansion in higher education does not necessarily guarantee equitable participation among religious minority groups.

Comparative research further reinforces the importance of targeted policy interventions for promoting inclusion. Salmo and D'Addio (2021)^[35] emphasize that affirmative action, student financial assistance, and academic support systems significantly improve educational participation among disadvantaged groups. Likewise, Reinders, Dekker, and Falisse (2021)^[22] identify socio-economic inequalities as persistent barriers to higher education participation across low-and middle-income countries, while noting the limited availability of evidence regarding the implementation of recent policy reforms such as NEP 2020^[15] in India.

Studies focusing on the Indian context consistently highlight the structural inequalities affecting marginalized communities. The Sachar Committee Report (2006)^[13] documented the educational disadvantages and underrepresentation of Muslims in higher education, whereas the Ranganath Misra Commission Report (2007)^[14] recommended affirmative policy measures to improve educational opportunities for religious minorities. Conceptual contributions by André Béteille (2012)^[7] emphasize that educational equity extends beyond equal access and requires fairness in institutional processes and outcomes. Similarly, Thorat and Attewell (2012) and Thorat and Sen (2017)^[38] demonstrate that social exclusion and institutional discrimination continue to influence educational participation and academic achievement,

indicating that policy reforms must address both structural and institutional barriers.

Many recent studies have examined the implications and effectiveness of NEP 2020^[52] for higher education reforms. Tilak (2021), Varghese (2022), and Bairwa (2022)^[22, 23] acknowledge that the policy has considerable potential to strengthen equity, quality, and inclusion through comprehensive institutional reforms. However, they also argue that successful implementation depends on effective governance, adequate financial resources, institutional preparedness, and continuous policy monitoring. The systematic review reported in *Frontiers in Education* (2026)^[1], as cited in the original paper, similarly indicates that NEP 2020^[21] has potential to improve inclusion, educational quality, and employability, while noting the limited empirical evidence concerning its longer-term effects.

Overall, the literature establishes the importance of inclusive and equitable higher education but leaves a clear need for context-specific analysis. Much of the existing discussion is national in scope, whereas comparatively less attention is given to how NEP 2020^[6] is being translated into institutional practice in individual states. This issue is particularly relevant to Uttar Pradesh because of its demographic diversity, extensive higher education network, and regional and socio-economic variation.

Research Gap

The review points to three principal gaps. First, although NEP 2020^[52] has been widely discussed, much of the literature considers it from a national rather than state-specific perspective. Second, there is limited evidence concerning the manner in which equity and inclusion provisions are being implemented within higher education institutions in Uttar Pradesh. Third, relatively little attention has been given to whether policy measures influence not only enrolment but also retention, academic progress, completion, and opportunities after graduation for SEDGs. These gaps provide the basis for a focused examination of NEP 2020^[52] in the Uttar Pradesh context. Although Ahmad *et al.* (2026)^[1] provide recent empirical evidence of the continuing participation deficit among Muslim students in Indian higher education, their analysis does not replace the need to examine the broader policy framework of social inclusion and educational equity under NEP 2020^[21] at the state level. The present study therefore extends the discussion by focusing specifically on Uttar Pradesh and examining the policy provisions, implementation challenges, and institutional conditions relevant to equitable participation in higher education.

Conceptual Framework

Concept of Social Inclusion

Social inclusion refers to the conditions that allow individuals and groups to participate meaningfully in social, economic, political, and educational life. In higher education, the concept goes beyond admission and includes continued participation, academic progress, involvement in campus life, completion of programmes, and transition to employment or further study. These possibilities can be affected by caste, gender, religion, disability, language, socio-economic circumstances, and geographical location.

UNESCO (2020) treats inclusive education as an ongoing process through which barriers to participation and learning are identified and reduced. Applied to higher education, this

perspective requires institutions to recognise differences among learners and provide appropriate support instead of assuming that all students face the same circumstances. Scholarships, accessible facilities, academic assistance, counselling, digital connectivity, and fair institutional practices can therefore form part of an inclusive environment.

NEP 2020 places SEDGs at the center of its inclusion agenda. The policy recognizes that disadvantage may be overlapping: a student may experience financial hardship together with geographical isolation, limited digital access, social discrimination, or inadequate prior educational preparation. Inclusive higher education consequently requires a combination of institutional responses rather than a single intervention.

Concept of Educational Equity

Educational equity reflects the idea of equal opportunity in access, processes, and outcomes in Education. Equality, which implies identical treatment for all learners, equity acknowledges that students begin from different social and economic circumstances and therefore require differentiated support to achieve comparable educational outcomes. Equity emphasizes the allocation of resources according to individual and group needs rather than providing uniform opportunities.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states that equity in education is about fairness and inclusion. Fairness requires that personal and social characteristics—such as gender, family background, ethnicity, disability, or religion—should not become barriers to educational achievement. Inclusion implies ensuring a minimum standard of education for every learner regardless of background (OECD, 2018)^[9]. In the Indian context, educational equity has historically been promoted through constitutional guarantees, reservation policies, scholarships, financial assistance, and targeted educational programmes for disadvantaged communities. NEP 2020^[21] further strengthens this commitment by proposing institutional reforms that address disparities in access, participation, learning outcomes, and graduate employability.

Relationship between Social Inclusion and Equity

Social inclusion and educational equity are related but distinct ideas. Equity focuses on ensuring fairness in educational opportunities, whereas social inclusion emphasizes active participation, belongingness, and representation within educational institutions. An equitable higher education system provides financial assistance, academic support, and institutional flexibility, while an inclusive system ensures that students experience respect, dignity, safety, and equal participation throughout their educational journey. Higher education institutions must simultaneously address structural inequalities, financial barriers, discrimination, digital exclusion, and institutional culture to achieve genuine social inclusion.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020^[15] and Inclusive Higher Education

Chapter 14 of NEP 2020 places equity and inclusion within the higher education reform agenda and emphasizes the removal of barriers that restrict disadvantaged learners from accessing quality education. The policy identifies SEDGs as priority beneficiaries and proposes measures that combine financial, academic, technological, institutional, and social support.

- Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) are recognized as priority beneficiaries.
- Scholarships and financial assistance programmes are proposed to reduce economic barriers.
- Special Education Zones are intended for educationally disadvantaged regions.
- Gender Inclusion Funds are proposed to strengthen female participation.
- Multilingual education and culturally responsive teaching are encouraged.
- Open, distance, online, and blended learning are promoted.
- Barrier-free infrastructure is emphasized for persons with disabilities.
- The National Education Technology Forum is intended to support technology-enabled learning.
- Academic and psychological counselling can contribute to student retention.
- Greater participation of disadvantaged learners in postgraduate education and research is encouraged.

Together, these measures support the broader objective of increasing higher education participation, including the target of a 50 percent GER by 2035. The policy also links participation with quality, retention, completion, and employability rather than treating enrolment as the final measure of success.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The study assumes that implementation of NEP 2020^[52] can influence educational equity and social inclusion through several institutional mechanisms. The independent variable is NEP 2020^[52], while the outcome dimensions include access to higher education, student enrolment, equity in participation, retention, academic success, graduate outcomes, and social inclusion. Factors that may shape these outcomes include scholarships and financial assistance, reservation and affirmative action, institutional governance, digital infrastructure, inclusive curriculum, student-support services, faculty development, and gender-sensitive policies. The framework assumes that these mechanisms are interdependent. Improvements in participation and outcomes are more likely when financial support, institutional practices, academic assistance, infrastructure, and student services operate together. This is particularly relevant in Uttar Pradesh, where institutional capacity and regional conditions differ considerably.

Relevance to Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh has a large and diverse higher education system with considerable variation in social, economic, and geographical conditions. The state has expanded its universities and colleges, but differences in access and educational outcomes remain visible among rural populations, women, economically weaker households, minority communities, and other disadvantaged groups. Examining these dimensions is important for understanding how national policy commitments are translated into state-level educational realities.

National Education Policy 2020^[15] and Social Inclusion in Higher Education

NEP 2020 places equity, inclusion, quality, and accessibility within a common framework for educational development. NEP 2020^[21] is more flexible, affordable, multidisciplinary, and responsive to the various needs of learners in

comparison to the previous National Education Policy. It recognizes that educational participation can be affected by socio-economic conditions, gender, caste, religion, disability, geographical location, language, and unequal access to technology (Government of India, 2020). An important feature of NEP 2020^[15] is its emphasis on Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). The policy recognizes that disadvantage is not experienced uniformly and that some learners may face several barriers simultaneously. NEP 2020 recommends measures such as scholarships and fee support, academic mentoring, counselling, accessible infrastructure, language assistance, and inclusive institutional practices. These provisions are important because inclusion involves not only entering higher education but also remaining in the system and participating successfully.

Increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to 50% by 2035 by is one of the major aims of NEP 2020^[52] for higher education. To make higher education more accessible, NEP-2020^[21] suggests many initiatives such as expansion of higher education institutions, open and distance learning, online and blended education, multiple entry and exit options, flexible academic pathways, and the Academic Bank of Credits, etc. Improved hostel, transportation, and student-support facilities are particularly relevant for learners who face geographical or financial barriers. Such measures can be helpful in decreasing disparity between students which comes from different socio-economic, rural and urban backgrounds.

Financial and gender-related barriers receive particular attention. Scholarships and need-based financial support can reduce the direct cost of participation, while transparent delivery systems are important for ensuring that eligible learners receive assistance. The Gender Inclusion Fund, together with safe campuses, hostel facilities, gender-sensitive institutional practices, and safeguards against discrimination and harassment, is intended to create more supportive conditions for women in higher education.

Digital access has become an important dimension of educational inclusion, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic exposed differences in internet connectivity, device ownership, electricity supply, and digital skills. Online education can broaden opportunities where the necessary infrastructure is available, but unequal access can also reproduce existing disparities. NEP 2020 therefore supports digital learning and educational technology alongside the need to strengthen digital infrastructure and literacy, particularly for rural and economically disadvantaged learners.

The policy further promotes multidisciplinary and inclusive learning through flexible curricula, choice-based learning, Indian knowledge Systems, constitutional values, critical thinking, creativity, and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity. Such an approach can contribute to social inclusion by providing opportunities for students from different backgrounds to interact, learn from one another, and develop a sense of belonging. At the institutional level, effective governance is equally important. Universities and colleges need transparent admission practices, grievance-redressal mechanisms, barrier-free infrastructure, counselling, student-support services, and mechanisms such as Equal Opportunity Cells to ensure that disadvantaged students receive appropriate support.

Despite this comprehensive framework, the implementation of NEP 2020^[52] faces challenges such as regional

disparities, inadequate infrastructure, financial constraints, shortage of trained faculty, digital inequality, limited institutional capacity, and uneven implementation across states and institutions. Lack of awareness about available scholarships and support schemes may also prevent eligible students from benefiting from them. Therefore, policy provisions alone cannot ensure inclusion; their effectiveness depends on adequate resources, institutional commitment, monitoring, and coordination among different stakeholders. The relevance of NEP 2020^[52] is particularly significant for Uttar Pradesh. It has a diverse and large student population and variation in educational opportunities across different social groups. Meaningful implementation areas, financial assistance and scholarships, digital infrastructure, hostel and transportation facilities, inclusive teaching practices, and proper monitoring of equity indicators. Particular attention is also required for students from marginalized and religious minority communities facing multiple barriers and challenges to participation in higher education.

For Uttar Pradesh, the implementation question is especially important because of the size and diversity of its student population. Financial assistance, scholarships, digital infrastructure, hostel and transportation facilities, inclusive teaching practices, and systematic monitoring of equity indicators need to be considered together. Particular attention is required for learners who face multiple barriers, including students from economically disadvantaged and minority communities.

Status of higher education and Social Inclusion in Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh occupies an important position in India's higher education system. Over the past several decades, the state has expanded its universities, colleges, and professional institutions, increasing the overall availability of higher education. Nevertheless, greater institutional capacity has not automatically produced equal opportunities for all sections of society. Differences in access, participation, quality, and educational outcomes remain visible across regions and social groups, making social inclusion an important concern.

The state's higher education system includes central and state universities, private and deemed universities, institutions of national importance, technical and professional institutions, and teacher education institutions. Their distribution is uneven. For students from rural and economically weaker families, distance from an institution may bring additional costs related to travel, accommodation, food, and other living expenses. Consequently, the physical expansion of institutions does not necessarily mean that all learners can use those opportunities on equal terms.

The Gross Enrolment Ratio remains an important indicator of participation in higher education. Uttar Pradesh has experienced improvement in enrolment through institutional expansion and government interventions, but participation continues to vary across districts and social groups. Students from disadvantaged communities may face difficulties not only in entering higher education but also in progressing to advanced levels of study. Enrolment figures should therefore be considered alongside retention, completion, and educational outcomes.

Social inclusion in Uttar Pradesh also needs to be understood in relation to caste, economic position, gender, religion, and geographical locations. Reservation,

scholarships, hostels, and other forms of assistance are not equally helpful because students differ in their family income, parental education, previous educational preparation, and access to institutional support. The situation of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, deserves specific attention. Muslim students in several parts of the state continue to encounter financial difficulties, educational disadvantage, limited awareness of opportunities, and socio-cultural barriers that may influence their enrolment and progression in higher education.

Gender and locality further affect educational opportunities. Women's participation has increased, but safety, household responsibilities, transportation, financial constraints, hostel availability, and social expectations can continue to influence higher education decisions. Rural students have less access to colleges, internet, transportation, academic guidance, and other educational resources than their urban counterparts. These differences can influence not only admission but also student's academic performance, continuation, and transition to postgraduate and research-level education. The digital divide is one of the main dimensions of educational inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic made differences in internet connectivity, availability of digital devices, electricity supply, and digital literacy particularly visible among students in rural and economically weaker communities. Although digital education has expanded, unequal access to technology can still limit meaningful participation. Strengthening digital infrastructure, institutional ICT facilities, affordable connectivity, digital resources, and student's digital skills is therefore essential for making technology-based education genuinely inclusive in Uttar Pradesh.

Government interventions such as reservation, scholarships, hostel facilities, free coaching, digital learning, skill development, and career support have created opportunities for disadvantaged learners. However, economic hardship, uneven institutional infrastructure, limited academic support, inadequate awareness of schemes, and social or cultural constraints can reduce their benefits. A state-specific approach should therefore combine expansion of higher education with systematic monitoring of participation, retention, completion, and academic outcomes across social groups and regions.

Uttar Pradesh has made considerable progress in expanding higher education, but disparities remain across social groups, genders, rural-urban locations, and economic backgrounds. Strengthening institutional capacity, improving support systems, increasing awareness of available provisions, and regularly assessing policy implementation are necessary for building a more inclusive higher education system in the state.

National Education Policy 2020^[15] in Uttar Pradesh: Achievements, Challenges and Future Directions

Implementation of NEP 2020 involves the Central Government, State Government, higher education institutions, regulatory bodies, and other stakeholders. Although the policy establishes a national framework, its practical success depends substantially on state-level planning and institutional execution. Uttar Pradesh has undertaken reforms aligned with NEP 2020, but the size and diversity of its higher education sector require continuous monitoring and adjustment.

Progress in Implementing NEP 2020

Implementation in Uttar Pradesh has brought changes in curriculum, digital learning, and student-support practices. Universities have increasingly introduced multidisciplinary and outcome-oriented curricula, skill-based courses, internships, environmental education, value-added programmes, and Indian Knowledge Systems. The National Credit Framework has also provided greater flexibility for interdisciplinary study and credit mobility. Digital teaching has expanded through learning management systems, virtual classrooms, online assessment, digital libraries, and blended learning, although students do not benefit equally because connectivity, device access, and digital literacy vary.

Institutions have also strengthened mentoring, counselling, career guidance, entrepreneurship, and placement-related services. Mechanisms such as Equal Opportunity Cells, Internal Complaints Committees, and grievance redressal systems can contribute to a more supportive environment when they are adequately staffed and effectively used.

Major Challenges in Implementation

Despite the progress made under NEP 2020^[52], its effective implementation in Uttar Pradesh continues to be constrained by financial, institutional, and regional disparities. Limited funding in many public universities and colleges affects infrastructure, laboratories, digital resources, faculty recruitment, and research facilities. Faculty shortages further increase workload and reduce opportunities for student interaction, mentoring, and research guidance. Institutional infrastructure differences are evident, especially between urban and rural areas. Some colleges still lack adequate classrooms, laboratories, hostels, internet facilities, etc. Access to higher education is similarly uneven across regions, with better opportunities concentrated in major urban centers, while students in remote districts often face limited institutional choices. In addition, the digital divide remains a major concern, as students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may lack affordable devices, internet connectivity, and online learning resources. These interconnected challenges indicate the need for sustained financial support, timely faculty recruitment, and infrastructure development.

SWOT Analysis of NEP 2020 Implementation in Higher Education of Uttar Pradesh

Strengths	Weaknesses
Comprehensive policy framework	Unequal institutional infrastructure
Strong emphasis on equity and inclusion	Faculty shortages
Flexible multidisciplinary curriculum	Digital divide in rural areas
Expansion of scholarships	Limited financial resources
Promotion of research and innovation	Uneven institutional capacity
Opportunities	Threats
Increment of GER up to 50% by 2035	Persistent socio-economic inequalities
Expansion of digital education	Regional disparities
Improved industry collaboration	Rising educational costs
Internationalization of higher education	Slow pace of institutional reforms
Better employability and skill development	Resistance to organizational change

The SWOT analysis indicates that NEP 2020^[52] offers a substantial basis for transforming higher education in Uttar Pradesh, particularly through its emphasis on equity, inclusion, flexibility, research, and multidisciplinary learning. At the same time, financial limitations, uneven infrastructure, faculty shortages, digital inequality, and differences in institutional capacity may restrict implementation. Expansion of digital education, industry collaboration, internationalization, and skill development create opportunities, while persistent socio-economic and regional disparities remain significant risks.

Policy Recommendations

To strengthen social inclusion and educational equity in Uttar Pradesh, implementation of NEP 2020^[21] should focus on the following measures:

- Increase public investment in infrastructure, laboratories, libraries, hostels, digital facilities, accessibility provisions, and student services, with priority given to under-resourced institutions and districts.
- Expand scholarship and financial-assistance programmes and simplify their application and disbursement procedures so that eligible learners receive timely support.
- Improve digital inclusion through reliable connectivity, institutional Wi-Fi, affordable devices and data, accessible digital resources, and digital-literacy initiatives.
- Address faculty shortages through timely recruitment and continuous professional development in inclusive education, digital pedagogy, mentoring, counselling, and interdisciplinary teaching.
- Require institutions to prepare equity plans that identify disadvantaged groups and monitor their participation, retention, completion, and progression.
- Strengthen mentoring, counselling, remedial education, language support, career guidance, and placement services, especially for first-generation and otherwise disadvantaged learners.
- Improve district-level planning so that institutional location and capacity respond more closely to regional differences in demand and access.
- Use indicators such as GER, transition, retention, graduation, employability, and representation of disadvantaged groups to monitor progress over time.

Proposed Framework for Inclusive Higher Education in Uttar Pradesh

The present study proposes a five-dimensional framework for strengthening social inclusion in higher education. The dimensions are Access, Equity, Quality, Inclusion, and Employability.

Dimension	Major Components	Expected Outcomes
Access	Scholarships, institutional expansion, reservations	Increased enrolment
Equity	Financial assistance, inclusive admissions	Reduced disparities
Quality	Faculty development, curriculum reform, research	Improved learning outcomes
Inclusion	Mentoring, counselling, accessible infrastructure	Higher retention and belongingness
Employability	Skill development, internships, industry collaboration	Better employment outcomes

This framework brings the main equity and inclusion concerns together in a single structure. Access concerns the opportunity to enter higher education; equity addresses fairness in the support and opportunities provided; quality relates to learning and institutional capacity; inclusion concerns participation, retention, and belonging; and employability links higher education with opportunities after graduation. Together, these dimensions provide a practical basis for institutional planning and monitoring in Uttar Pradesh.

Conclusion

NEP 2020 places equity and social inclusion alongside quality, flexibility, and multidisciplinary learning within the wider reform of higher education. For Uttar Pradesh, the policy offers a valuable opportunity to reduce long-standing disparities in access and participation while enhancing educational quality and graduate employability. The state has made notable progress in expanding higher education institutions, implementing digital learning, and strengthening student support services, substantial challenges remain. Financial limitations, regional inequalities, digital exclusion, infrastructure deficits, faculty shortages, and uneven institutional capacity continue to hinder equitable educational outcomes.

The success of NEP 2020^[52] will depend on political commitment, adequate financial investment, evidence-based planning, institutional accountability, and active participation by universities, civil society, and communities. The study highlights that social inclusion is not merely a policy objective but a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable development, democratic participation, and national progress. Continued evaluation supported by reliable educational data and empirical research will be important for determining how effectively the policy's vision is being translated into practice, particularly at the state and institutional levels.

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