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**National Education Policy–2020 Driven Institutional Autonomy as a Strategy to Intensify  
Eligible Enrollment Ratio (EER) in Higher Education**

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**Abstract**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduced a transformative framework for India's higher-education sector by positioning institutional autonomy as a central element for improving quality, inclusivity, and accessibility. This study investigates how NEP-driven autonomy can strengthen the Eligible Enrollment Ratio (EER)—a refined indicator that measures participation among students who meet formal eligibility criteria for higher education. Drawing upon secondary data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) and official government reports, the paper analyses enrollment patterns and institutional developments before and after NEP 2020. It further explores how academic, administrative, and financial autonomy supports curricular innovation, flexible entry and exit systems, and community-oriented learning. The findings indicate that greater institutional freedom enhances adaptability, equity, and participation. The study concludes that effectively implemented autonomy, as envisioned by NEP 2020, can substantially advance equitable and sustainable access to higher education in India.

*keywords:* NEP 2020, institutional autonomy, innovation, eligible enrollment ratio, gross enrollment ratio, higher education access

## **Introduction**

Higher education plays a pivotal role in developing a nation's human-resource potential and driving socioeconomic progress. In India, despite substantial growth in the number of higher-education institutions, ensuring equitable access continues to be a pressing challenge (Ministry of Education, 2022). Traditionally, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) has been used to evaluate participation; however, this measure does not account for whether enrolled students meet the eligibility criteria, potentially overestimating true accessibility (Abhipedia, 2023).

To address these limitations, researchers and policymakers have proposed the Eligible Enrollment Ratio (EER)—a more precise measure that reflects the proportion of qualified students who successfully transition into higher education. Enhancing EER requires not only expanding institutional capacity but also strengthening quality and governance structures to make programs inclusive and flexible (MoE, 2020).

The NEP 2020 places autonomy at the heart of higher-education transformation, encouraging self-reliant and innovative institutions responsive to local and global needs. This paper examines how NEP 2020-driven autonomy has influenced access and inclusivity through the lens of GER and EER trends, supported by national data such as AISHE and UGC reports.

## **Trends in Higher Education across India**

India's higher-education system is one of the world's largest, consisting of universities, colleges, and standalone institutions. As per AISHE 2020–21, the country hosts 1,168 universities, 45,473 colleges, and 12,002 standalone institutions, showing a steady increase from

2019–20 (MoE, 2022). Between these years, around 70 universities and 1,453 colleges were added, demonstrating significant expansion.

Total higher-education enrollment reached 4.33 crore students, signaling substantial progress since independence (Education21.in, 2023). The growth of private and deemed universities since 2000 has also diversified institutional offerings. With 140 deemed universities and 513 state private universities currently operating, India’s educational landscape is broad and competitive.

The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for the 18–23 age group improved to 28.4% in 2020–21, compared with 23.7% in 2014–15 (MoE, 2022). While this demonstrates consistent growth, the challenge remains to ensure that such progress benefits all eligible learners—precisely what the concept of EER seeks to measure.

Major University Type	Number of University				
	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
State Public University	351	371	386	403	423
State Private University	262	304	327	365	391
Deemed University-Private	80	80	80	80	81
Institute of National Importance	101	127	135	149	153
Central University	45	46	48	51	53
Deemed University-Government	33	34	36	34	33

Cumulative number of colleges registered in AISHE

Source: AISHE 2020-21 report

### **Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) and Eligible Enrollment Ratio (EER): Measures of Access**

The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) measures the total number of students enrolled in higher education—regardless of age—as a percentage of the population aged 18–23 years (Ministry of Education, 2022). In 2020–21, India’s GER reached 28.4%, reflecting

improvements in participation and access. However, because GER includes overaged or under aged learners, it may overstate inclusivity, offering a broader rather than precise picture of access.

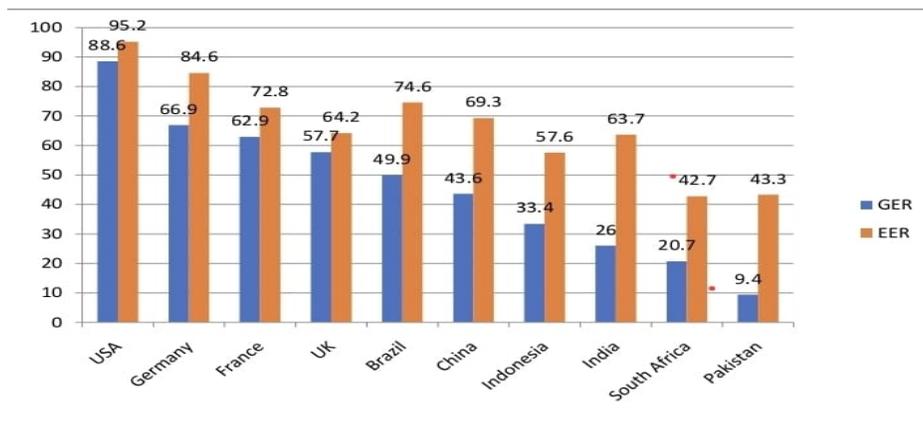
$$GER = \frac{\text{total enrollment in higher education}}{\text{population in the 18 – 23 age group}} \times 100$$

$$EER = \frac{\text{Number of students enrolled in higher education}}{\text{number of students eligible for higher education}} \times 100$$

The Eligible Enrollment Ratio (EER), by contrast, provides a refined perspective by considering only those students who both qualify academically and fall within the target age range. This measure reveals how effectively the education system serves its intended population. A higher EER signifies improved transition from secondary to higher education and better alignment with NEP 2020’s inclusivity goals.

Differences	GER	EER
Definition	Measures the total enrollment in HE, regardless of age, as a percentage of the population in the age group 18-23	Measures the enrollment of eligible students those meet the required qualifications and fall within the age group to percentage of the total eligible population.
Focus	Focuses on the overall participation rate in HE	Focuses on the actual accessibility and inclusion of eligible learners in HE
Inclusion criteria	Includes all students enrolled, even if they are older, younger,	Incudes only those who are educationally and age wise eligible for HE

	or not meeting the eligibility norms	
Indicator type	A qualitative and broad indicator showing the expansion of HE	A qualitative and precise indicator showing equitable and effective access
Accuracy level	May over estimate participation due to inclusion of non-eligible students	More accurate reflection of how effectively the system serves the target group
Usefulness	Useful for measuring overall growth and comparison with global education systems	Useful for assessing inclusivity, fairness, and efficiency in enrollment policies.
Policy relevance	Helps to understand the size and expansion of higher education.	Helps evaluate whether NEP 2020 goals of equitable access and inclusion are being met.



Average GER & EER trends of different countries (2013-17)

Source: AISHE 2020-21 report

### NEP 2020–Driven Institutional Autonomy

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 established autonomy as a foundation for transforming Indian higher education. The policy advocates for decentralized governance,

allowing institutions to make independent decisions on curriculum, pedagogy, and financial management while maintaining accountability (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Autonomous institutions are encouraged to:

- Develop context-relevant curricula;
- Offer multidisciplinary programs promoting creativity and critical thinking;
- Adopt modern pedagogies and technology-based learning;
- Enable flexible entry and exit options;
- Recruit and develop qualified faculty; and
- Strengthen research and innovation ecosystems.

This autonomy allows institutions to address regional needs, adapt to changing labour-market dynamics, and expand opportunities for eligible learners. The creation of Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs) and the proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) reflect NEP's commitment to simplifying regulation while ensuring accountability (UGC, 2023).

### **Institutional Autonomy as a Strategy to Intensify the EER**

Institutional autonomy functions as a strategic mechanism for widening access, enhancing inclusivity, and promoting academic innovation. By allowing colleges and universities to design flexible learning models and vocationally oriented programs, autonomy helps attract more eligible learners into higher education (MoE, 2020).

Evidence from AISHE (2020–21) shows that autonomous colleges have grown from fewer than 1,000 before NEP 2020 to over 1,200 after its introduction (Careers360, 2024). This

increase coincides with a rise in GER from 23.7% in 2014–15 to 28.4% in 2020–21, suggesting a positive relationship between autonomy and enrollment (Ministry of Education, 2022).

States with larger clusters of autonomous colleges—such as Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Karnataka—also report higher participation rates (Times of India, 2025). However, only about 2% of India’s 47,000 colleges currently enjoy autonomous status (Times of India, 2024). Expanding autonomy, therefore, remains key to improving both GER and EER outcomes nationwide.

### **Findings**

- **Growth in Autonomy:** The number of autonomous colleges increased from 747 (2019) to over 1,200 (2025), reflecting the policy’s success (Careers360, 2024).
- **Enrollment Expansion:** GER rose from 23.7% (2014–15) to 28.4% (2020–21), suggesting increased access (MoE, 2022).
- **Academic Flexibility:** Autonomous institutions introduced choice-based credit systems, multidisciplinary curricula, and online courses that align with local needs.
- **Regional Variation:** States with more autonomous colleges show higher GER and EER.
- **Equity Gains:** Female GER (28.5%) now exceeds male GER (28.3%), with higher participation among SC and ST groups.
- **Ongoing Challenges:** Only about 2% of institutions are autonomous, and many face structural barriers such as limited infrastructure and awareness gaps.

### **Suggestions**

- **Accelerate Autonomy Implementation:** Simplify UGC approval procedures and create transparent evaluation systems (UGC, 2023).

- **Introduce EER as a National Indicator:** Include EER in AISHE reports to track access among eligible learners (MoE, 2022).
- **Leverage Digital Learning:** Use autonomy to promote online and hybrid models, expanding reach to rural areas (EducationWorld, 2025)
- **Increase Financial Support:** Provide grants for infrastructure, research, and faculty development in autonomous institutions.
- **Maintain Quality with Flexibility:** Employ performance-based academic audits instead of rigid regulation.
- **Enhance Inclusivity:** Implement scholarships, outreach, and equitable admission policies.
- **Create State-Level EER Mechanisms:** Develop systems to monitor and use EER data for planning and funding decisions.

### **Conclusion**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 redefines Indian higher education by linking institutional autonomy with accountability, quality, and inclusion. The policy's outcomes—such as an increase in autonomous colleges and steady improvement in GER—indicate clear progress toward equitable participation.

While data on EER are still emerging, the evidence suggests that autonomy-driven reforms are already contributing to improved access among eligible learners. Continued emphasis on capacity building, infrastructure, and transparent governance will be essential for sustaining this momentum.

When autonomy is balanced with accountability, it becomes a powerful tool for

transforming Indian higher education into an inclusive, innovative, and globally competitive system. NEP 2020 thus offers a pathway toward realizing India's vision of equitable and expanded participation by 2035.

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