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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Enrolled but Underserved: What the AISHE Numbers Hide

 **THE HINDU**

11 July 2026

SOCIAL ISSUES

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THE LIFT LINE

Getting a student through the college gate is an achievement of access; getting them out with a real education is an achievement of quality, and the two are not the same thing.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The All India Survey on Higher Education reports that enrolment has crossed a record 4.5 crore and the Gross Enrolment Ratio has climbed to about 30, with women's participation now exceeding men's on the Gender Parity Index. These are genuine gains. But an enrolment figure measures how many entered, not what they received. Behind the headline sit chronic faculty shortages, uneven quality, thin research output and stubborn equity gaps across regions and social groups. For your exam this is a classic development question: access is necessary but not sufficient, and the state's job is to convert enrolment into capability.

GS Paper 2: issues relating to the development and management of the education sector; government policies and interventions for human-resource development.

GS Paper 1: salient features of Indian society; social empowerment and the role of education in it.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: AISHE is conducted by the Ministry of Education; the Gross Enrolment Ratio measures enrolment in higher education as a share of the 18-23 age group; the Gender Parity Index above 1 means female participation exceeds male; the National Education Policy, 2020, targets a GER of 50 per cent by 2035. For **Mains**, argue that the next phase of reform must shift from expanding seats to raising quality, filling faculty vacancies and closing equity gaps for disadvantaged groups.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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For a decade the direction of travel in Indian higher education has been expansion. The Gross Enrolment Ratio has risen from the low twenties around 2014-15 to roughly 30 in the latest survey, total enrolment has touched a record 4.5 crore, and the Gender Parity Index has stayed above 1 for several consecutive years, meaning proportionally more women than men now enter higher education relative to their populations. Women's share in science and technology streams has also risen. On the metric of getting people in, the system has delivered.

The unfinished agenda is what happens after admission. The National Education Policy of 2020 set an ambitious target of a 50 per cent GER by 2035, but it paired that quantitative goal with a quality and equity [mandate](https://ujjayari.com/vocab/mandate/) (<https://ujjayari.com/vocab/mandate/>): multidisciplinary institutions, better faculty, stronger research and inclusion of under-represented groups. The AISHE headline captures the first half of that vision. The second half, quality and equity, is where the harder work remains, because a degree that does not confer employable skills or genuine learning converts access into disappointment rather than mobility.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Enrolment is an input, not an outcome

A rising GER tells you the system is admitting more students; it does not tell you whether those students are being taught well, by enough qualified faculty, in institutions with functioning laboratories and libraries. Persistent faculty vacancies, especially in state universities and colleges, mean many of the newly enrolled are taught in stretched, under-resourced settings. Counting entrants is easy; ensuring they emerge with capability is the real test.

Equity gaps survive behind the average

Aggregate enrolment can rise while specific groups lag. Gender parity at the all-India level can coexist with regional, caste, tribal and rural-urban gaps, and with women concentrated in some disciplines and absent from others. An average GER of 30 masks states and communities far below it. Genuine social empowerment through education requires closing these distributional gaps, not just lifting the mean.

HEADLINE GAIN	WHAT IT SHOWS	WHAT IT HIDES
Enrolment ~4.5 crore	Expanding access	Quality and learning outcomes
GER ~30	Rising participation	Distance from the 50% NEP target and equity gaps
GPI above 1	Women outnumber men proportionally	Discipline-wise and regional imbalances
More women in STEM	Narrowing the gender-science gap	Faculty shortages and research thinness

Quality and research are the binding constraint

The leap from 30 to 50 per cent GER cannot be a leap in numbers alone. Without a matching investment in faculty recruitment, teaching quality, research funding and institutional autonomy, expansion risks producing more graduates chasing the same thin opportunities. Quality, not quantity, is now the binding constraint on higher education delivering mobility.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Frame the AISHE data as a distinction between access and capability. The transferable rule: a social indicator that measures entry is only the first stage of a policy chain that must end in capability and outcome; celebrate the input, but judge the system by the output. Education empowers only when enrolment is matched by teaching quality, [equitable](https://ujiyari.com/vocab/equitable/) reach and research depth. Measure success not by the GER alone but by faculty adequacy, learning outcomes and how far the gains reach the least-served groups.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Rising enrolment (~4.5 crore) + GER ~30 + GPI above 1 -> headline of access won -> look beneath -> faculty vacancies + uneven quality + thin research + regional and social equity gaps -> access without capability -> fix: fill faculty + fund research + close equity gaps + NEP 2020 quality mandate -> enrolment converts into real opportunity and 50% GER by 2035

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Fill the faculty gap.** Prioritise time-bound recruitment against sanctioned vacancies, especially in state universities and colleges, so rising enrolment is matched by teaching capacity.

- 2 **Shift the metric to outcomes.** Track learning outcomes, employability and research output alongside GER, so quality drives policy rather than seat numbers alone.
- 3 **Target the equity gaps.** Direct resources to lagging regions, disadvantaged social groups and under-represented disciplines so gender and social parity become real, not merely averaged.
- 4 **Invest in research and autonomy.** Fund research and grant genuine institutional autonomy so that the push toward the NEP 2020 target of 50 per cent GER by 2035 raises capability, not just headcount.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about the quality of higher education, the goals of the National Education Policy, and the role of education in social empowerment. This editorial connects those themes to the latest AISHE findings.

Practice question: “Rising enrolment ratios in Indian higher education mask persistent gaps in quality and equity.” Examine, and suggest measures to align expansion with the goals of the National Education Policy, 2020. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/>), *All India Survey on Higher Education, Ministry of Education* (<https://aishe.gov.in/>)

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