

Transforming State Higher Education through PM-USHA: Access, Equity, Quality and Innovation

Name of Author - Mr. Nileshkumar Gohel

Assistant Professor

Shri.I.J. Patel M.Ed. Course, Mogri, Gujarat, India

Abstract

Higher education is central to the social, economic, intellectual and technological development of a nation. India has witnessed substantial expansion in its higher education system; however, disparities in access, institutional quality, infrastructure, research capacity, digital readiness and educational opportunities continue to present challenges, particularly within State higher education institutions. Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA), a Centrally Sponsored Scheme of the Government of India, seeks to strengthen State higher education in alignment with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The present paper undertakes a thematic examination of PM-USHA with particular reference to access, equity, quality, innovation, digital transformation, multidisciplinary education and research. The study follows a qualitative document-based approach using official PM-USHA guidelines, policy documents and related literature. Three major thematic areas are examined: (i) access, equity and quality; (ii) innovation, digital transformation, multidisciplinary education and research; and (iii) opportunities and implementation challenges. The analysis indicates that PM-USHA provides a broad framework for strengthening State universities and colleges through institutional development, targeted support, academic reforms and greater emphasis on research and multidisciplinary education. The paper argues that the transformative potential of PM-USHA depends on effective implementation, institutional capacity, faculty participation, equitable utilization of resources and systematic monitoring of educational outcomes.

Keywords: PM-USHA, Higher Education, Access, Equity, Quality, Innovation, Digital Transformation, Multidisciplinary Education, Research, NEP 2020

Introduction

Higher education contributes significantly to knowledge creation, human-resource development, social mobility, innovation, economic growth and national development. Universities and colleges are no longer expected only to provide degrees; they are increasingly expected to develop critical thinking, creativity, employability, research capabilities, technological competencies and socially responsible citizenship.

India possesses a large and diverse higher education system. The continuing expansion of higher education has increased educational opportunities for young people from different geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, expansion also raises important questions regarding quality, equity, institutional capacity, research, infrastructure and governance. State universities and colleges occupy an important position within this system because they provide higher education to large numbers of students across different regions. Consequently, improving the quality and capacity of State higher education institutions is essential for the wider transformation of Indian higher education.

Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) was introduced in 2013 as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme focusing on State higher education. Its second phase was launched in 2018. In the context of the National Education Policy 2020, the scheme subsequently took its present form as Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA).

PM-USHA seeks to strengthen State higher education through a combination of financial assistance, institutional reforms, quality improvement, equity-oriented interventions and performance-linked approaches. The scheme gives particular attention to access, equity and excellence while also supporting multidisciplinary education, research, accreditation and institutional development.

Therefore, PM-USHA can be examined not merely as a financial assistance scheme but as a policy mechanism intended to facilitate broader transformation within State higher education.

Objectives of the Study

The present paper has the following three objectives:

To examine the role of PM-USHA in promoting access, equity, and quality in State higher education institutions in India.

To analyse the contribution of PM-USHA towards innovation, digital transformation, multidisciplinary education, and research in higher education.

To identify the major challenges and opportunities associated with the implementation of PM-USHA in transforming State higher education institutions.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, document-based thematic analysis.

The analysis primarily draws upon official documents related to PM-USHA, including the PM-USHA Guidelines issued by the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Government of India, subsequent revisions to the guidelines, relevant NEP 2020 material and related government documents.

The documentary material was examined in relation to the three objectives of the paper. Recurring concepts were organized into three broad thematic clusters:

Theme I: Access, Equity and Quality

Theme II: Innovation, Digital Transformation, Multidisciplinary Education and Research

Theme III: Opportunities and Challenges in Implementation

The purpose of this approach is not to measure the impact of PM-USHA statistically but to interpret the scheme's policy framework and examine its potential contribution to the transformation of State higher education.

RUSA to PM-USHA

The development of PM-USHA needs to be understood within the broader evolution of higher education policy in India. USA was introduced in 2013 with an emphasis on improving State higher education. A second phase followed in 2018. Following the introduction of NEP 2020, the scheme was launched in its present form as PM-USHA.

This transition is significant because NEP 2020 emphasizes broad educational principles including access, equity, quality, multidisciplinary learning, institutional restructuring, research, innovation and appropriate use of technology. PM-USHA therefore provides a mechanism through which several of these broader policy directions can be connected with State higher education institutions. One important characteristic of the scheme is its attention to institutional development alongside reforms. Financial support is intended to strengthen universities and colleges, but institutional improvement is also associated with academic, administrative and governance changes. Thus, the transition from RUSA to PM-USHA can be interpreted as a movement towards a more integrated approach to higher education development.

Major Components of PM-USHA

PM-USHA contains several major components addressing different requirements of State higher education.

These include:

Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERU)

The MERU component focuses particularly on strengthening multidisciplinary education and research within universities.

Multidisciplinary institutions can provide opportunities for students and researchers to work across conventional disciplinary boundaries and address complex contemporary problems from multiple perspectives.

Grants to Strengthen Universities

This component provides support for strengthening eligible universities.

Institutional strengthening may involve academic facilities, infrastructure, equipment and other activities required for improving institutional capacity and educational quality.

Grants to Strengthen Colleges

Colleges are often the principal point of access to higher education for students, particularly outside major urban centres.

Strengthening colleges can therefore contribute both to expanding meaningful educational opportunities and improving the quality of the learning environment.

New Model Degree Colleges

The establishment of Model Degree Colleges can contribute to addressing geographical inequalities in the availability of higher education.

This component is particularly important when considered in relation to districts and regions where access to government higher education institutions is comparatively limited.

Gender Inclusion and Equity Initiatives

This component reflects the recognition that expansion of higher education does not automatically ensure equitable participation.

Gender and equity interventions can contribute to reducing barriers experienced by students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds.

Theme I: Access, Equity and Quality

Promoting Access to Higher Education

Access constitutes a fundamental dimension of higher education development.

Educational access involves more than simply increasing the number of institutions. Students must be able to reach institutions, obtain admission, afford participation and find programmes appropriate to their educational aspirations. PM-USHA gives priority to identified Focus Districts. The official guidelines indicate that factors used in identifying such districts include low Gross Enrolment Ratio, representation of women and disadvantaged social categories, gender parity and certain geographical or developmental considerations. This district-oriented approach has the potential to direct resources towards areas where higher education opportunities require additional strengthening. Establishing or strengthening institutions in underserved locations can reduce geographical disparities. However, expansion should be accompanied by faculty availability, appropriate infrastructure, student-support services and quality academic programmes. Thus, access and quality need to develop together.

Promoting Equity and Inclusion

Equity is closely related to access but extends beyond it. An institution may be physically accessible while social, economic, gender-related or other barriers continue to affect students' participation. An equitable higher education system should therefore consider admission, participation, retention, achievement and successful completion.

PM-USHA's focus on disadvantaged categories and its Gender Inclusion and Equity Initiative provide mechanisms for addressing some of these concerns. Equity-oriented institutional development may involve accessible facilities, safe campuses, student-support mechanisms and targeted interventions designed according to local needs.

Importantly, equity should eventually be assessed through outcomes rather than only through expenditure. Institutions need to determine whether interventions actually improve participation, retention and educational achievement among the intended groups.

Strengthening Quality

Quality represents another central concern within PM-USHA.

Quality in higher education is multidimensional and includes:

curriculum and teaching

faculty capacity

learning resources

infrastructure

assessment

research

student support

governance;

institutional quality assurance

The PM-USHA framework gives particular attention to accreditation and institutional improvement. Its scope includes helping institutions obtain or improve accreditation. This is important because accreditation can encourage institutions to systematically examine their academic and administrative processes. Nevertheless, quality improvement cannot be achieved only through infrastructure development. Modern classrooms, laboratories and digital equipment can create favourable conditions, but educational quality ultimately depends on how these resources are used by faculty members and students. PM-USHA therefore has greater transformative potential when infrastructure development is combined with academic reform, professional development, institutional leadership and continuous quality assurance.

Theme II: Innovation, Digital Transformation, Multidisciplinary Education and Research

Innovation in Higher Education

Innovation is essential for institutions responding to rapidly changing social, economic and technological environments. Innovation in universities should not be understood only in terms of technological inventions. It can also involve innovative pedagogy, interdisciplinary curricula, new research approaches, entrepreneurship, community engagement and improved institutional practices. PM-USHA creates opportunities for institutions to develop capacity for such innovation. Universities and colleges can use institutional strengthening to create environments where students move beyond passive learning towards inquiry, experimentation, collaboration and problem-solving.

Digital Transformation

Digital technologies have become increasingly important in higher education.

They can support teaching, learning, assessment, research, communication and institutional administration. However, genuine digital transformation is different from merely purchasing digital equipment. An institution may possess smart classrooms, computers and internet connectivity without fundamentally changing teaching and learning. Effective digital transformation requires integration of technology into pedagogy. For example, State HEIs can combine face-to-face teaching with digital resources, online discussions, digital assessment and independent learning. Such a blended-learning approach can provide flexibility while retaining the social and academic benefits of classroom interaction. Platforms such as SWAYAM can complement institutional courses by giving learners access to online learning resources. The Government describes SWAYAM around the principles of access, equity and quality and provides courses through combinations of video, reading materials, self-assessment and discussion forums. Digital transformation can consequently contribute to PM-USHA's broader objectives when technology is connected with teaching quality and student learning. At the same time, institutions must remain attentive to the digital divide. Students may differ considerably in access to devices, connectivity and digital skills. Digital transformation should therefore be accompanied by digital inclusion.

Multidisciplinary Education

Many contemporary problems cannot be effectively understood from the perspective of a single discipline. Climate change, artificial intelligence, public health, sustainable development, urbanization and social inequality, for example, involve knowledge from multiple fields. Multidisciplinary education allows students to develop broader perspectives and creates opportunities for interaction between different areas of knowledge. The MERU component of PM-USHA gives particular attention to multidisciplinary education and research. This orientation has implications for curriculum design, institutional structures and faculty collaboration. Universities may need to move from rigid disciplinary structures towards arrangements that enable students and faculty members to engage with multiple disciplines. Multidisciplinary education can also encourage creativity because students learn to connect concepts and methods that traditionally belong to different academic fields.

Strengthening Research Culture

Research is another important dimension of institutional quality. A strong higher education system should not only transmit existing knowledge but also generate new knowledge. State universities are particularly important in this regard because they can undertake research related to regional and local problems. For example, research may address agriculture, education, environment, health, industry, culture, technology, local governance or community development. Strengthening research therefore requires more than physical laboratories.

A sustainable research ecosystem requires:

Research infrastructure + trained faculty + mentorship + funding + collaboration + ethical research practices + dissemination

Multidisciplinary research can further enable institutions to address complex problems through collaboration across fields. The Ministry of Education's broader NEP implementation framework similarly emphasizes research focused on industrial and societal needs, research collaboration and development of a culture of research and innovation in HEIs.

Theme III: Opportunities and Challenges in Implementing PM-USHA

Opportunities

PM-USHA presents several potential opportunities for State higher education institutions.

Institutional Strengthening Financial support can enable universities and colleges to improve physical and academic infrastructure.

Greater Attention to Underserved Regions

Focus Districts and Model Degree Colleges provide mechanisms for directing attention towards geographical areas requiring additional higher education capacity.

Promotion of Equity

Gender and equity initiatives can help institutions identify and address barriers affecting participation.

Digital Transformation

Institutions can strengthen digital infrastructure and develop technology-enabled and blended-learning practices.

Multidisciplinary Development

MERU provides an opportunity to encourage broader academic structures and multidisciplinary research.

Research and Innovation

Institutional support can contribute to research infrastructure and environments conducive to innovation.

Alignment with NEP 2020

PM-USHA provides State HEIs with a policy and funding mechanism through which several higher education reforms associated with NEP 2020 can be pursued.

Challenges

The implementation of a national higher education scheme across a diverse system also presents challenges.

Differences in Institutional Capacity

State universities and colleges vary substantially in infrastructure, staffing, leadership, research culture and administrative capacity.

The same intervention may therefore produce different results in different institutions.

Effective Utilization of Infrastructure

Creating infrastructure is easier to measure than determining whether it improves education.

A laboratory, digital classroom or research facility produces meaningful outcomes only when it is regularly and appropriately used.

Faculty Capacity

Academic transformation ultimately depends heavily on faculty.

Digital learning, multidisciplinary curricula, innovative pedagogy and research development require continuing professional development.

Digital Divide

Students and institutions differ in connectivity, devices, digital literacy and technical support.

Consequently, digitalization can potentially reduce inequalities when implemented inclusively but may reinforce them when access is uneven.

Implementing Multidisciplinary Education

Moving towards multidisciplinary education may require changes in curriculum structures, departmental organization, credit systems and faculty collaboration.

Such changes require institutional planning and sustained academic leadership.

Building Research Culture

Research culture cannot be established immediately through funding.

Institutions require time, mentoring, collaboration, ethical research systems and opportunities for faculty and students to engage meaningfully in research.

Monitoring Outcomes

Another challenge is distinguishing expenditure from educational impact.

Successful utilization of funds does not necessarily demonstrate improved educational quality.

Monitoring should therefore examine outcomes such as participation, retention, accreditation, student learning, research activity, innovation and institutional capacity.

Discussion

The thematic analysis demonstrates that the three objectives of this paper are closely interconnected. The first objective concerns access, equity and quality. PM-USHA's focus on institutional strengthening, Focus Districts, accreditation and equity-related initiatives indicates an attempt to address these dimensions simultaneously. The second objective concerns innovation, digital transformation, multidisciplinary education and research. These dimensions indicate that institutional transformation requires more than physical expansion. State HEIs must also develop new forms of teaching, knowledge creation and interdisciplinary collaboration. The third objective concerns opportunities and challenges. PM-USHA creates opportunities for institutional development, but its eventual impact depends substantially on implementation. A central insight emerging from the thematic analysis is therefore that the dimensions of PM-USHA should not be treated separately. Access without quality may increase enrolment without ensuring meaningful education. Quality without equity may leave disadvantaged groups behind. Digitalization without pedagogy may create infrastructure without improving learning. Research funding without research culture may produce limited long-term outcomes. Multidisciplinary structures without meaningful academic collaboration may remain administrative rather than educational reforms. Therefore, successful transformation requires interaction among these dimensions.

Proposed PM-USHA Transformation Framework

Based on the three objectives and thematic analysis, the paper proposes the following conceptual framework:

PM-USHA Transformation Framework

Access



Equity



Quality and Institutional Capacity



Digital and Academic Innovation



Multidisciplinary Education



Research and Knowledge Creation



Institutional Transformation

The framework should not be interpreted as a strictly linear process. Instead, the components interact continuously. For example, digital transformation can improve access, while equitable access can broaden participation in research and innovation. Similarly, improved institutional quality can strengthen multidisciplinary education. The framework therefore positions institutional transformation as the cumulative outcome of interconnected reforms rather than a single intervention.

Suggestions

Based on the thematic analysis, several measures may strengthen implementation.

Institutional planning should connect PM-USHA expenditure with clearly defined academic outcomes.

faculty development should accompany investments in digital infrastructure, multidisciplinary programmes and research facilities.

institutions should develop blended-learning strategies rather than treating digitalization only as infrastructure acquisition.

equity indicators should monitor not only enrolment but also retention, achievement and completion.

State universities should be encouraged to develop multidisciplinary research addressing regional and community problems.

successful institutional practices should be documented and shared across States and universities.

monitoring mechanisms should increasingly examine educational impact, not merely financial utilization or physical completion of projects.

Conclusion

PM-USHA represents an important policy initiative for strengthening State higher education institutions in India. Its significance lies in its attempt to connect institutional development with broader concerns of access, equity, quality, innovation, multidisciplinary education and research. With respect to the first objective of the

paper, PM-USHA provides mechanisms that can contribute to access, equity and quality through Focus Districts, institutional strengthening, accreditation and targeted equity interventions. Regarding the second objective, its emphasis on multidisciplinary education, research and institutional capacity provides opportunities for State HEIs to strengthen innovation and digital transformation. However, meaningful digital transformation requires integration of technology with pedagogy rather than infrastructure alone. Regarding the third objective, PM-USHA presents considerable opportunities for institutional transformation while simultaneously facing challenges relating to institutional capacity, faculty preparedness, digital inequality, multidisciplinary implementation, research culture and outcome-based monitoring. The thematic analysis therefore suggests that the transformative potential of PM-USHA will depend on the relationship between policy, resources, institutional capacity and educational practice. The success of the scheme should ultimately be judged not simply by the amount of funding allocated or infrastructure created, but by whether State higher education institutions become more accessible, equitable, academically effective, innovative, research-oriented and responsive to the needs of students and society.

References

- Agarwal, P. (2009). *Indian higher education: Envisioning the future*. SAGE Publications.
- Government of India, Ministry of Education. (2020). *National education policy 2020*. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
- Government of India, Ministry of Education. (2023). *Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA): Guidelines*. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/pm-usha_guidelines.pdf
- Government of India, Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA): Transforming higher education*. <https://pmusha.education.gov.in/>
- Government of India, Ministry of Education, Department of Higher Education. (2024). *All India survey on higher education (AISHE) 2021–22*. <https://aishe.gov.in/document/aishe-final-report-2021-22/>
- Government of India, Press Information Bureau. (2024, January 25). *Ministry of Education releases All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–2022*. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1999713>
- Tilak, J. B. G. (2018). Higher education, public good and markets. In N. Kumar & J. Oosterheld (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of education in India* (pp. 290–305). Routledge.
- Varghese, N. V., & Malik, G. (Eds.). (2016). *India higher education report 2015*. Routledge.

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.