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HIGHER EDUCATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

TRENDS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES



**TETSO
COLLEGE**
STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE

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Chapter One

Higher Education in North East India: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges

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**Education is the most powerful weapon which can change the world.
(Nelson Mandela)**

Introduction

Higher education plays a very crucial role for the socio-economic development of the country. According to the UNESCO Report in the 21st century "higher education is the mandate to bridge the knowledge gap between countries and communities, enriching dialogues between people, culture, international living and networking of ideas, research and technologies." Higher education comprises all post-secondary education, training, and research guidance at educational institutions such as universities that are authorized as institutions of higher education by the state authorities. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan said that the function of universities is not merely to send out technically skilled and professionally competent persons but is their duty to produce in them the quality of compassion, the quality which enables the individuals to treat one another in a truly democratic spirit.

Objectives of Higher education

- The primary objective is to enhance the learning potential, seeking and advancing knowledge and wisdom, research, experimentation and employability.
- The secondary objective of Higher education is to attain mental and spiritual growth, engaging in a quest for the

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unknown, facilitating better life style, and developing scientific outlook.

North-East India Perspective

With regard to the North Eastern region of India, higher educational institutions were set up late in the region. To provide an example, the first college, Cotton College in Guwahati was established in 1901 and the first university, Guwahati University was set up in 1948 in Assam. This is much later in cities like Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, where universities were established in 1857, nearly a century earlier (Singh & Ahmad 2012). Despite the fact that higher education touched the soil of the region very late, the literacy rate in many of these states is above the rest of the country. As of 2020, India has over 1000 universities, with a break up of 54 central universities, 416 state universities, 125 deemed universities, 361 private universities, 7 institutes under State Legislature Act, and 159 Institutes of National importance which include IIMs, AIIMS, IITs, IIITs, IISERs and NITs among others. Sikkim is recorded as the highest availability of Higher Educational Institutes and Meghalaya is the next state followed by Nagaland, Manipur and so on and the lowest is Arunachal Pradesh.

Challenges of Higher Education in North-East India

We are in our 73rd year of independence and our education system has not been developed fully. We are not able to list a single university in the top 100 universities of the world. Various governments changed during these seven decades. Governments have tried to boost the education system and implemented various educational policies but the results are yet to be seen. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is continuously working and focusing on quality education in the higher education sector, yet the higher education system continues to face several challenges.

To put this discourse in context, some of the basic challenges in the higher education system in North-East region can be noted:

1. **Inadequate physical infrastructure and sustainability of financial support:** In the North-Eastern region, the

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prospective grants are curtailed because those colleges which are accredited by NAAC get a lower grade due to poor quality input, inadequate teacher-student ratio, lack of communication, etc. and hence quality education has been hampered. As per the June 2010 data provided by the NAAC, "not even 25% of the total higher education institutions in the country were accredited and the institutions in the North-East Region need to improve their quality. And there is also a lack of funding by the government to private sectors."

2. **Outflow of the local students to other parts of the country:** In North-East India, due to insufficient number of institutions of excellence, like IITs and IIMs, the students are bound to migrate to other parts of the nation and even abroad for higher education. In addition, parents and guardians usually have the tendency to send their children to metropolitan cities for higher education. As a result, North-East India loses the local meritorious students. The 2010 report of Indian Chamber of Commerce analysed that the majority of the students migrate to the other states such as Delhi and Bangalore not only to pursue higher education like research but also a basic level of higher education like graduation because of the lack of quality educational Institutions in the region.
3. **Theoretical-based syllabus:** The theoretical-based syllabus over practical has created a huge setback in the Indian higher education system. The curriculum of higher education is also not up-to-date. The 2010 report of Indian Chamber of Commerce stated that technical and professional educational centres within the region provide outdated and irrelevant curriculum which also push the students to other parts of the country. Many colleges depend on university syllabuses however the curriculum is outdated as a result 60% of our younger generation is unemployed and underemployed. Thus, the performing colleges need to be given autonomy, especially those who are ranked high in the process of accreditation to design their own set of syllabus to meet the needs of the students and region.

4. **Conducting Research and creating new knowledge:** Due to the lack of infrastructure and research facilities in the North-East region, it is not feasible or rather not beneficial to carry out research work at international level. This region also lacks high-quality researchers because of low level of PhD enrolment. The matter is exacerbated due to few opportunities for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary disciplines, lack of early stage research experience and a weak ecosystem for innovation, in addition to low levels of industry engagement. The higher educational institutions in North-East India also suffer from limited funds so they are constricted to carry out research works.
5. **The problem of language barrier:** The North-Eastern region is gifted with a manifold number of languages where some states even have over 300 dialects some of which are very well developed while others are not. State languages vary from one state to the other. There is paucity, if not absence, of books in the local language for pursuing higher education.
6. **Disturbed Areas Act:** States such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya have seen many inter-ethnic conflicts and disturbances since India's independence. Due to these disturbances, socio-economic life is adversely affected and means of transportation and communication are often cut off and directly or indirectly affect the higher educational institutions in the region. (Sharma 2004).
7. **Lack of trained faculty members:** Quality education depends on the quality of teachers as availability of qualified or well-trained teachers are a prerequisite of a quality education. Due to the lack of good infrastructural facilities, better communication, better input, and standard teacher-student ratio, most of the qualified teachers are also not interested to work in this region.
8. **Lack of job guaranteed courses:** Education is always seen as a medium to guarantee livelihood prospects in future. But in today's competitive world, the world is seeking

professional courses and the educational institutions in North-Eastern Regions are still venturing for traditional courses. Although in recent years the situation has changed and most of the institutions are providing professional education courses but these are failing to provide the infrastructure for campus recruitment or somehow not fulfilling the guarantee to provide services.

9. **Enrolment of students:** The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of India in higher education is only 15% which is quite low as compared to the developed as well as other developing countries. The enrolment of students in the region is below 10% in the graduate and below 3% for the postgraduate studies in the region.
10. **Influence of social media and online games:** The number of online gaming and social media apps has geared up even in the North-Eastern region where many of the population are engaged in social media and online gaming in different sections of the society. The gamer spends hours and hours in gaming neglecting their studies and works which has become a great problem and thereby it has become one of the core reasons in affecting the various relationships, same goes with the social media addiction.
11. **Transition of industrial revolution to digital dashing:** With the time, improvisation in technology and strategic advancement, most of the higher education faculties had shifted to global level policies and strategies, having wider access to educational resources and resource sharing for the students. This advancement in digitizing education has been enhancing qualitative updates to advance education as well. Qualitative exchanges of knowledge over digital platforms have also been changing the holistic changes in the classroom experience and professional practices. To which of these, most of the institutions of higher education in the North-East region of India still lags behind others in many of these digitizing areas.

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12. **Only 10% educated youth are employable from colleges and universities:** Our degrees are not securing jobs for our youth as a result, unemployment is growing. The curriculum of our colleges and universities are not updated with the requirements of the time, with which, the students are not equipped enough with employability skills and knowledge.
13. **Values and principles:** Values and principles such as integrity, independence, and ethics should be incorporated in the educational system which will sustain education in the long run. This will also in turn, develop education which is committed and self-supportive.
14. **Balancing the curriculum:** Institutions need to respond to growing demand for new skills in digital and computer programming, which could align with the institutional curriculum of our time. Balancing theoretical education with practical expertise is still absent in our educational system, and an area that can be improved.
15. **Collaboration rather than competitions among institutions:** A negative competition among different institutions, colleges and universities is at large in our region, which is deteriorating the qualitative development of education in our region. Institutions should rather collaborate, share information and resources in order to seek for further improvisation, which is still absent in our colleges and universities. Negative competition over academic performances holds back many educational institutions to collaborate and grow together strategically.
16. **Increase of unemployment due to traditional and conventional learning.** Colleges and universities still rely on the conventional traditional teaching-learning practice which is hindering qualitative self-development education among the youth in the region. The region has become a host of youths who are educated yet, unemployable in terms of updated knowledge and skills.
17. **Lack of support and collaboration from the government departments:** There is also a lack of support from the

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government agencies and departments. It is expected that government departments could extend assistance and support to both the private and government institutions and thus bring reforms in policies and development, which needs to be enhanced and updated with the changing needs.

18. **Lack of region-specific educational institutions:** The needs of the North-East region of India are critical and require specific attention to details when it comes to educational perspectives. In comparison to the other parts of India, the region has a lot of differences in terms of economic participation, political administration, environmental condition, social experiences, developmental technologies etc, as such, specific region-focused institutions are required to rectify traditional and indigenous experiences along with the enhancement of technological and scientific knowledge with it. The blend of both is required to fill in the regional development and growth, however, is still absent.
19. **Teachers as Mentors:** During the pandemic the mental health of both students and teachers has been widely affected and they need to be taken care of. The faculty members need to be continuously connected with the students. Today the educators have become not only the teachers but mentors. Students need to be continuously encouraged and supported, in this new trend the teachers have to be really a mentor to the students. The teachers need to be continuously connected to the students by encouraging and supporting them. They also need to be connected to the parents and they too need to be educated as well.

The New Normal

In the new normal, all the policy makers, administrators, teachers, students have had to learn the technology of online learning. All of us have learned how to manage online technologies in teaching and learning. The digitalization and online learning has become the trend. The whole family has become a center of education during COVID-19 and continues even in the post-Covid world. The future is going to

be a blended learning of both online and face-to-face learning. Therefore, we need to redesign the whole education system. Government and the regulatory body of education have to play a pivotal role in redesigning the new normal educational curriculum and system. We all need to collaborate with each other and make this transition very smooth lest we may find it very difficult to cross this situation. And with this regards, a new digital and online learning Department will have to be established in the colleges and universities.

Opportunities and the Way Forward

1. **Internationalizing North-East India:** The region is 98% internationally connected to Bhutan and China in the North, Myanmar in the East and Bangladesh in the South and Nepal to the West of Sikkim, hence providing an opportunity or platform to collaborate and explore in foreign universities through scholarships funded by international agencies. The emerging interest in regional higher education institutions in the vocational skills market provides areas for potential engagement with national and international partners.
2. **Research areas in Humanities:** North-Eastern region has seen many inter-ethnic conflicts and disturbances since India's independence. For example, the Naga insurgency, which started in the 1950s, widely regarded as 'the mother of the Northeast insurgencies' is one of the oldest unresolved armed conflicts in the world and that being said, the North-East region can be a model region to conduct or explore research on peace and conflict studies or be a research centre with special regards to the Humanities.
3. **Expansion of tourism and handicraft industry:** The North-Eastern region consists of diverse culture blessed with rich handicrafts heritage, unique history, etc. and very promising as a hub for tourist destinations. There is also a need for specialized institutions to meet the needs of the specific population.
4. **Positive youth profile:** The youth of the North-Eastern region are creative, innovative, hard-working and have

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language proficiency. These all are an added value to educational achievements and development. These values should be nurtured alongside proper educational needs, and will enable the youth of the region to be employable in any parts of the country and abroad as well as network with the rest of the world for self-employment.

5. **Conducive environment for higher studies:** The North-Eastern region of India has moderate climate and humidity. Cities and towns in the region have low population density which are accommodative and healthy. Such attributes are suitable and conducive for higher education. These positive attributes should be acknowledged and should be utilized to the best of our advantage.
6. **Integrating indigenous knowledge:** The North-Eastern region has potential of enhancing and integrating indigenous knowledge with modern trade and employment. Blending traditional and indigenous experiences with scientific and technological knowledge could influence our educational experience to a great extent. It will not only enhance the promotion of our culture but will also develop our economy. Hence, region-based specific education should be promoted and enhance education to a whole new advancement.
7. **Building stronger networks:** There is a strong possibility to build stronger relationships and increase mutual understanding in higher education among the institutions in the region to combat regional-based issues, collaborate and coordinate in organizing conferences, workshops, seminars which enable debate and dialogue with other national and international institutions.

Additionally, in the context of North-East India, alternative medicine and treatments in health sciences have to be enhanced and explored. The region has a rich ecosystem of ayurvedic plants and natural health remedies, and more studies of this traditional and community-based health systems should be conducted.

Best Practices of North-East Institute of Social Sciences and Research (NEISSR): A Higher Educational Institution in Nagaland.

As an practical approach of the earlier stated points, the best practices of NEISSR are listed below:

The Seven Pillars of NEISSR:

1. **Holistic Development**, which focuses on:
 - *Intellectual Competency*: academic growth; professional growth; information technology; creativity and innovation; objectivity.
 - *Personal Skills*, which is about character formation - spiritual development, self-confidence, conviction and commitment, communication skill; goal setting.
 - *Interpersonal Skills*, focuses on teamwork; leadership skills; empathy and sensitivity.
 - *Social Skills, Responsiveness to the environment*
 - *Protection of culture; Futuristic*
 - *Communication Skills*
 - *Core values*: Integrity, Punctuality.
2. **Inclusive Culture**: Inclusion is a basic right of everyone and NEISSR embraces everyone regardless of race, age, gender, disability, religious and cultural beliefs and sexual orientation. NEISSR also strives towards creating a tolerant and understanding environment, not just in the classroom and school but also in wider society.
3. **Sustainability**: NEISSR aims to develop students, and communities with the values and the motivation to take action for sustainability. Students are encouraged to think critically, innovate and provide solutions towards more sustainable patterns of living by including key sustainable development issues into teaching and learning. NEISSR is focusing on four SDG - Goals 2, 4, 5 and 13.
4. **Educational Innovation**:
 - *Dual faculty system*: Education is a critical process that includes promoting innovation in teaching and learning.

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Dual Faculty System as one of the core delivery mechanisms enriches the development of students to be more academically sound, and in building a culture of excellence in teaching and learning process.

- *Remedial classes:* Remedial programs are designed to close the gap between what a student knows and what a student is expected to know. Remedial classes enable the teachers and peers to give additional help to students who, for one reason or another, have fallen behind the rest of the class in the subjects and need the extra help.
- *Professional Progressive Circle (PPC):* 'Professional Progressive Circle' are formal, institutionalized systems for productive and participative problem-solving interaction among the group members. The students are encouraged to form small groups with likeminded people with similar interest in the work-area.
- 5. **Student Centric:** NEISSR emphasises and stresses on student centered learning. Students are encouraged to apply the theoretical concepts in practice, reflect, and plan for action:
 - *Sarvodaya:* NEISSR begins the day with the morning assembly (Sarvodaya). Sarvodaya is a Sanskrit term meaning 'Universal Upliftment' or 'Progress of All'. Sarvodaya is the time to be mindful, and a platform for the students to develop their skills and confidence.
 - *Group learning:* Group learning helps students have maximum involvement academically and socially. This enhances deeper engagement and more lasting learning arises from the active use of concepts in the class.
 - *Buddy system:* The idea of promoting interaction through the "Buddy System" is based on the assumption that students could work well and benefit by supporting each other through sharing their ideas, knowledge and motivation. This enables students to further enrich their knowledge, improve their attendance, and learn to take responsibility for others.

- **Forum:** Forums help students to sharpen their abilities and to build capacities in various aspects of life skills. It cater to the needs of the students by giving equal importance to extracurricular activities with a range of activities such as Debate, quiz, round the year. The forum also organizes specific programs which are directly related to their area of interest such as 'WE KNIT', 'Peace Knit' and 'Youth Knit'. The College has seven forums pertaining to the felt need of the students, namely: Community Forum, Peace Forum, Youth Forum, Cultural Forum, Music Forum, Social Forum, and Literary Forum.
- 6. **Research Leadership:** NEISSR emphasizes on the importance of research and research leadership. Students learn about theoretical and methodological approaches and skills for effective knowledge transfer to better align research efforts with local needs and political realities, contribute to transfer of research findings towards policymakers, learn to identify and integrate equity considerations in research, and facilitate community engagement and participation in the development and implementation of different projects.
- 7. **Community Engagement:**
 - NEISSR extends institutional services to the urban community by adopting localities for neighborhood development through various student forums.
 - NEISSR plans to extend institutional services by adopting 5 villages in the rural areas focusing on peace building, youth and women empowerment.
 - NEISSR is planning to adopt 5 schools for mentoring and capaciting the educational institutions for better outcomes.
 - NEISSR plans to adopt 5 NGOs for mentoring the NGOs. Provide training to staff for proper administration and functioning of NGOs, project management, etc.

Conclusion

The North-East region was found to be lagging behind in quality education and lacking in constructive higher educational institutions

as compared to other regions of India. Though the region has been witnessing rapid expansion of higher educational institutes, due to lack of attention in systematic educational planning, it demeaned the value in higher education. The region has also witnessed many educated unemployed youths where the education system is to be directly or indirectly blamed.

A recent seminar held in 2011 by the Education Development of the North-East Regional Unit (EDNERU) of IGNOU on the theme "Emerging Scenario of Education in the North Eastern States of India" highlighted a need to set standards for vocational education and training. One of the key requirements that were pointed out was the need for faculty development and training workshops in order to update the skills of faculty members of educational institutes of the North-East region. It was also highlighted that skills development in the North-East should not just focus on the organised sector but also on the unorganised section. There is also a need to integrate the indigenous knowledge of the traditional communities in the North-East with modern trade and employment. Efforts have to be strengthened to ensure that indigenous knowledge is wiped out by the onslaught of modern technologies and trade.

The region is blessed with a unique history, culture, rich biodiversity and natural resources that have ample opportunities for the dynamic and hardworking youths of the North-Eastern region to come up at par with the rest of the world. The government in this juncture cannot be quiescent or rather play a game of ignorance but should wake up from the deep slumber and work in full swing in collaboration with the other organizations and institutions for the upliftment and betterment of the education system in the North-East region. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 notified by the government of India, on 29th July 2020 aims to address and transform Indian educational system which is very peremptory that proposes the revision and revamping of all aspects of education structure. NEP 2020 visualizes universal access and adopts a constructivists approach to school education at all levels pre-school to secondary, reducing

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dropouts and achieving 100% gross enrolment ratio by 2030. Hence, with such a vibrant region with a large percentage of young talented population properly educated, the possibilities are endless. If knowledge is imparted using advanced digital teaching and learning tools, and society is made aware of where we are currently lagging behind, the region can easily emerge as one of the most developed regions in the country.

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