



International Institute of SDGs & Public Policy Research



POLICY FRAMEWORK AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS FOR ACHIEVING SDG 4

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOUTH ASIAN NATIONS

Pulkit Raikwar, Gautham Shine

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a comparative India-based exploration of the policy frameworks and institutional reforms expected to help achieve sustainable development goal 4 (Quality Education) in the choice of countries in the South Asian region India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Having acknowledged education as the key pillar to sustainable development, the paper explores how these countries are converging their education policies with SDG 4 goals (4.1 - 4.7) that include universal access to education, gender equality, quality education, and lifelong learning. Based on secondary research sources, including UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, and national education policy reports, the study analyzes the variation between the governance models, financing scheme, teacher education changes, and digital inclusion. Results show that there has been a significant improvement in access and gender equity yet inequality in quality, monitoring, and resource distribution persists. India National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 presents a revolutionary policy that unites digital learning and inclusivity, whereas Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are promising in terms of gender parity and ICT-promoting quality improvement. It is observed in the paper that SDG 4 in South Asia can be achieved through regional cooperation, evidence-based policymaking and institutional reforms that are sustained.

KEYWORDS

SDG 4 · Quality Education · India · South Asia · Policy Framework · Institutional Reform · Inclusive Learning

If 'learning for all' is not given top most priority, if clear and achievable goals are not set, if teachers and parents are not supported in their efforts to help children learn, India will lose all the potential benefits of bringing every child to school. For a bright and hopeful future, whether as individuals, as families or even as a country, we must aim for "every child in school and learning well." (Rukmani Banerji, ASER, 2016)

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a foundation for human development and a key driver of socio-economic progress. Recognizing this, the United Nations launched 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, with SDG 4 focused on ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. It outlines seven targets (SDG 4.1 to 4.7), including universal primary and secondary education, gender equality, teacher training, and access to vocational and higher education.

In South Asia—home to over 1.8 billion people, many of them youth—achieving SDG 4 presents both opportunities and challenges. Despite a demographic advantage, the region faces persistent issues such as governance weaknesses, social discrimination, policy inconsistencies, colonial legacies, and limited resources.

Over the past two decades, countries in the region have introduced significant reforms. India's National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes foundational literacy, inclusivity, and digital learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). Bangladesh's 2010 policy promotes gender balance and technology use. Nepal's School Sector Development Plan (2016–2023) empowers local governance (UNICEF ROSA, 2023). Sri Lanka focuses on teacher quality, while Pakistan's 2017 policy addresses provincial autonomy and madrasa reforms (World Bank, 2024). Although enrolment and literacy have improved, challenges like learning disparities, fragile systems, and underfunding persist (Gupta & Khan, 2020; Sharma & Verma, 2020).

Existing studies often isolate issues like gender or technology without linking them to broader governance or financing structures. This paper addresses that gap by comparing how centralized, decentralized, and mixed systems influence education quality and access in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Using India as a reference, it analyzes national policies and institutional reforms from 2010 to 2024, based on secondary sources such as UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, and official documents. The study argues that achieving SDG 4 in South Asia requires more than policy reforms—it demands regional collaboration, equitable funding, strategic planning, and robust institutions to translate goals into lasting change.

Objectives

The main aim of this paper will be to examine and contrast the policy frameworks and institutional reforms followed by South Asian countries in order to meet the targets of SDG 4 paying special attention to the policy development and leadership strategies of India. The specific objectives are:

- 1.To explore the key policy models that have been embraced by India as well as the neighbouring states to encourage good and inclusive education.
- 2.To determine the character and success of institutional reforms toward the realization of the objectives of access, equity and quality in education.
- 3.To establish the gaps in policy in the region and give a recommendation on how to tighten the collaboration and policy convergence among the South Asian countries towards realizing SDG 4.

Definition of 'Quality Education' used in the present mapping

Dimensions of Quality Education	What that includes
<p>1. Thriving learners Healthy, well-nourished children with positive early learning experiences, their rights respected, and supportive, involved parents</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy, well-nourished children: Schooling system supports good health and nutrition of all students • Positive early childhood experiences: Parents are equipped for how to build a strong foundation for learners before they enter formal school • Children's rights respected: Schooling system takes efforts to ensure children are free from exploitation, violence, labour and other damaging situations that violate their rights • Home-school-community partnerships to ensure children's regular attendance, participation and progress in learning
<p>2. Welcoming learning environment An environment that provides appropriate physical, emotional and social conditions for every child's learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical infrastructure built to support children's health and learning (Eg. water & sanitation, small class sizes, accessibility) • Emotional environment that is safe, secure, and non-violent • Psychosocial support to identify children's individual special needs and to promote children's emotional wellbeing, particularly in emergency or conflict situations • Socially inclusive ethos that values and respects every learner's dignity and identity, including their gender, community, home language, and special needs (with special consideration for those from traditionally marginalised groups)
<p>3. Relevant learning materials Availability of curriculum and materials that are relevant to students' understanding, diversity, communities, and futures.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-centred: Learning materials are easily comprehensible, and appropriate for students' levels of understanding (rather than strictly determined by age). • Respectful of diversity: materials use language and examples that affirm students' different genders and backgrounds • Contributing to community: developing knowledge, values and skills that enable students to contribute to improving their communities (eg. equality, service, non-violence, HIV/AIDS prevention, emergency situations) • Equipping for future: imparts relevant literacy, numeracy, and other life skills necessary for preparing students to become contributing members of society
<p>4. Learning-centred processes Processes that empower both students and teachers through democratic practices geared towards enhancing learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowered students actively engaged in meaningful learning tasks • Empowered teachers who have positive working conditions and ongoing support to develop into competent professionals • Democratic relationships in a loving and fear-free environment • Learning-centred teachers who believe all children can learn, are committed to ensuring every child learns, and design diverse methods to support each child's unique learning needs
<p>5. Universal learning outcomes Holistic child-appropriate learning objectives are defined and regularly assessed in order to support every child to achieve them</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic outcomes: Curriculum and pedagogy go beyond developing basic skills to prepare students as lifelong learners, confident decision-makers, and responsible global citizens • Child-appropriate objectives: Systems and teachers define clear learning objectives based on curricular goals and students' current learning levels • Assessment for quality improvement: Classroom formative assessment and wider-scale summative assessments are regularly analysed in order to identify and address barriers to learning • Additional support for lower-performing students, especially those from disadvantaged groups, to reduce learning disparities.
<p>6. Supportive systems School leadership, administrative systems, education systems and governments that prioritise and support children's learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democratic school leadership and management that involve teachers, parents and students in decision-making and collective efforts for improving school quality • Efficient governance and administrative systems that are free of corruption, and use technology to decrease rather than increase disparities • Learning-centred educational systems (planning, teacher development, monitoring) that constantly self-reflect how they can improve to better support children's learning • National and sub-national political leadership that prioritises education, providing supportive laws, policies, financing, and political will for strengthening learning systems

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This review synthesizes peer-reviewed research, government policy documents, program assessments, and international benchmarks to trace India's progress toward SDG 4. It highlights major reforms, evaluates responses to challenges such as post-COVID learning losses, and examines equity and inclusion measures.

Legislative and Policy Foundations

India's convergence with SDG 4 builds on key legislation. The **Right to Education Act (2009)** operationalized Article 21A of the Constitution, guaranteeing free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14. It set standards for teacher qualifications, infrastructure, non-discrimination, and mandated a 25% quota in private unaided schools for disadvantaged groups.

The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** represents the most comprehensive reform in decades, explicitly aligned with SDG 4 targets. It promotes foundational literacy and numeracy, inclusion, digital integration, skill development, and a multidisciplinary higher education system, aiming for universal access, equity, and quality.

Integrated Flagship Schemes

India operationalizes SDG 4 through the **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2018)**, which unifies elementary, secondary, and teacher education programs into a sector-wide initiative covering ages 3–18. SSA translates RTE mandates into measurable targets for infrastructure, teacher training, and digital education, prioritizing districts with weaker outcomes. Complementary programs such as **Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA)** extend reforms to higher education.

Monitoring and Governance

A distinctive feature of India's SDG governance is **NITI Aayog**, which coordinates and monitors progress through tools like the **SDG India Index** and dashboards. These mechanisms benchmark state and district performance, fostering cooperative federalism and accountability.

NEP 2020: Core Reforms and Alignment with SDG 4

- **Early Childhood & Foundational Literacy:** A new 5+3+3+4 structure embeds early childhood care and foundational literacy/numeracy (SDG 4.2, 4.6).
- **Curricular & Pedagogical Reform:** Inquiry-based, competency-driven pedagogy and formative assessment replace rote learning, supporting inclusive and quality education.

- **Vocational Integration:** Vocational education from Grade 6, with internships, aligns with SDG 4.3 and 4.4.
- **Digital Platforms:** Initiatives like **DIKSHA, SWAYAM, and NISHTHA** expand teacher training and content dissemination, bridging geographic and digital divides.

Comparative Insights and Challenges

Studies show NEP 2020 is among the most comprehensive in South Asia, comparable to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, but with stronger emphasis on foundational learning, teacher standards, and technology. However, successful implementation depends on effective federal collaboration, adequate financing, expanded digital infrastructure, and adaptive local governance—recurring challenges noted across international literature.

Key Institutional Reforms and Thematic Initiatives Aligned with SDG 4

Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA): From Quantity to Quality

SSA, India's integrated umbrella scheme, has expanded access and enrollment, achieving near-universal primary education with high Net Enrollment Ratios (NERs). It has improved gender parity and social inclusion through initiatives like Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) and targeted support for SC/ST and minority groups. Monitoring tools such as UDISE+ and the National Achievement Survey provide real-time, disaggregated data. Persistent challenges include stagnant learning outcomes, infrastructural gaps (libraries, playgrounds), teacher vacancies, and weak accountability in resource-poor regions.

Mid-Day Meal Scheme (PM POSHAN)

The Mid-Day Meal scheme, now PM POSHAN, reduces classroom hunger, boosts attendance and retention, and narrows gender disparities. Evidence shows improvements in learning outcomes and social equity, though nutritional gains remain uneven. Challenges include residual malnutrition, food safety concerns, and exclusion of private unaided schools serving low-income students.

Teacher Training and Capacity Building

Reforms under NEP 2020 emphasize teacher quality through the Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP), mandatory in-service upskilling via NISHTHA and DIKSHA, and the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST). Regulatory changes under NCTE and UGC aim to improve training curricula. Key concerns remain: high teacher vacancies, regional imbalances, contractual employment, and low-quality private institutions.

Vocational Education and Skill Development

India operationalizes SDG 4.3 and 4.4 (skills and lifelong learning) through the National Skill Development Mission (NSDM), PMKVY, and the National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF). These initiatives integrate vocational education into schools and higher education, promoting digital literacy and apprenticeships. Literature notes gaps in industry relevance, geographic coverage, and access for women and marginalized youth.

Digital Education and Technology Integration

Post-COVID reforms accelerated digital learning via platforms like DIKSHA, SWAYAM, and e-Vidya, supporting remote teaching and teacher development. Efforts to bridge the digital divide include device distribution, connectivity grants, and localized content. Persistent inequities affect rural students, girls, and learners with disabilities, alongside limited adaptation of pedagogy to digital formats.

Equity and Inclusion Policies

India has reduced gender gaps in primary and lower secondary completion through Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao and scholarships. Equity measures include the RTE 25% quota for disadvantaged groups and interventions for children with special needs (CWSN) under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act. Remaining challenges include disparities at higher levels, teacher preparedness for diversity, and meaningful inclusion of marginalized students.

Regional Disparities

Data from NITI Aayog's SDG India Index and UDISE+ highlight interstate differences. States like Kerala and Delhi outperform in enrollment and learning outcomes, while Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and tribal regions lag in GERs, PTRs, and digital access. Addressing these disparities requires flexible governance and targeted resource allocation.

Financing for Quality Education

Despite a record allocation of ₹1.48 lakh crore in the Union Budget 2024-25, education spending remains at 2.7–3.1% of GDP—below the NEP benchmark of 6% and UNESCO’s global norm. Literature emphasizes the need for equity-oriented budgeting, ring-fenced funding for quality interventions, and stronger financial audits to ensure resources reach marginalized districts.

Monitoring and Data Systems

India has strengthened data systems through the SDG India Index, NAS, UDISE+, and the Performance Grading Index (PGI), enabling disaggregated tracking of learning outcomes, infrastructure, and equity. Challenges remain in data completeness and effective use for policymaking.

Higher Education Reforms

Reforms aim to expand access, promote multidisciplinary learning, and align with global standards. The UGC Quality Mandate, Academic Bank of Credits, and multi-exit pathways support lifelong learning and flexibility. Investments in IITs, NITs, and central universities reflect a dual focus on elite and broad-based excellence. Persistent issues include inequitable funding, institutional fragmentation, and uneven research quality.

Here’s a simplified, reframed version of your section that keeps the essence but makes it easier to read and directly tied to **SDG 4 priorities**:

Gaps, Persistent Challenges, and Critical Appraisals

Despite strong policies and programs, several gaps remain in India’s progress toward SDG 4:

Foundational Learning Crisis: Many children in Grade 3–5 still struggle with basic reading and arithmetic, especially from marginalized groups.

Digital Divide & Learning Loss: COVID-19 widened inequalities; students without devices or internet access fell behind, and remedial strategies are uneven.

Teacher Shortages: Over 10 lakh vacancies, weak professional development, and uneven teacher distribution continue to affect quality.

Inclusivity Issues: Girls (especially at higher levels), rural children, minorities, and students with disabilities face persistent disadvantages.

Financing Gaps: Education spending remains below targets, funds are underutilized, and marginalized districts often receive less support.

Privatization Pressures: Growth of low-fee private schools and unregulated teacher training institutions undermines equity and accountability.

Regional Disparities: States like Kerala and Delhi perform well, while Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and tribal regions lag in outcomes and infrastructure.

Recommendations and Way Forward

The literature suggests several cross-cutting actions:

Strengthen Foundational Learning: Invest in early childhood care and foundational skills; monitor progress through surveys like ASER.

Address Teacher Gaps: Recruit teachers in mission mode, expand continuous training, and regulate private institutions for quality.

Bridge the Digital Divide: Provide affordable devices and internet, localize content, train teachers in digital skills, and adapt materials for marginalized groups.

Increase Financing: Raise education spending toward 6% of GDP, protect funds for quality initiatives, and prioritize equity-focused allocations.

Improve Data Systems: Build real-time, disaggregated platforms for learning and equity metrics; encourage independent evaluations.

Promote Inclusion: Tailor vocational and higher education opportunities for girls and marginalized groups; create special inclusion funds.

Empower Local Governance: Strengthen school and district leadership, community participation, and context-responsive planning.

Ensure Accountable Partnerships: Scale up PPPs in skills, digital, and higher education with strong quality and equity safeguards.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative comparative policy analysis** to examine how South Asian countries design and implement education policies aimed at achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4: Quality Education). The analysis focuses on five countries—India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan—selected due to their shared regional context, comparable socio-economic challenges, and divergent education governance structures.

India is treated as a **comparative reference case** given the scale and scope of recent reforms under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which provides a useful benchmark for assessing policy convergence and divergence within South Asia. The study is exploratory in nature and seeks to identify patterns, institutional arrangements, and policy trade-offs rather than to establish causal relationships.

3.2 Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on **secondary data** drawn from authoritative international and national sources. Key data sources include:

- UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Reports (2015–2023)
- World Bank Education Statistics (EdStats)
- UNICEF South Asia Regional Office publications
- National education policy documents of the selected countries, including India’s NEP 2020, Bangladesh’s National Education Policy 2010, Nepal’s School Sector Development Plan (2016–2023), Sri Lanka’s Education Sector Development Framework and Programme, and Pakistan’s National Education Policy 2017

These sources provide comparable indicators on access, equity, quality, governance structures, and financing, enabling cross-national analysis.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis integrates two complementary frameworks. First, the **Walt and Gilson policy analysis framework** is used to examine education reforms across four dimensions: policy context, content, key actors, and implementation processes. Second, the **Quality–Access–Equity–Inclusion (QAEI) framework**, derived from UNESCO and World Bank literature, is applied to assess how national policies align with core SDG 4 objectives.

Policy documents and institutional reports were systematically reviewed using **thematic content analysis**, with coding organized around governance arrangements, financing mechanisms, teacher policy, and digital education initiatives. Comparative matrices were developed to identify patterns of convergence and divergence across countries, with particular attention to India’s positioning relative to its regional counterparts.

3.4 Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on **national-level policy frameworks and institutional arrangements** and does not include primary fieldwork or school-level case studies. As a desk-based analysis, it is subject to limitations related to data availability, reporting cycles, and cross-country comparability. Nevertheless, triangulation across multiple international databases and policy sources enhances the robustness and credibility of the findings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Governance Models

Education governance across South Asia reflects varying degrees of centralization and institutional capacity. India operates within a complex federal structure in which national policy direction coexists with significant state-level implementation autonomy. Recent reforms under NEP 2020 aim to strengthen coordination through centralized monitoring systems such as UDISE+ and the SDG India Index.

In contrast, Nepal and Pakistan have pursued deeper decentralization following federal restructuring, transferring substantial administrative authority to provincial or local governments. While this has increased local responsiveness, evidence suggests that uneven institutional capacity has limited implementation consistency. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka occupy intermediate positions, combining national policy control with community-level management mechanisms.

Comparative

insight:

The regional pattern suggests that decentralization alone does not improve outcomes; rather, the effectiveness of governance reforms depends on administrative capacity and accountability mechanisms. India's relatively stronger monitoring architecture differentiates it from more capacity-constrained decentralized systems.

4.2 Financing Patterns

All five countries face persistent constraints in education financing relative to SDG 4 targets. Public expenditure remains below the recommended 6% of GDP in most cases, with significant variation in resource allocation efficiency.

India has expanded budgetary allocations following NEP 2020 but continues to experience interstate disparities and underutilization in some regions. Bangladesh and Nepal rely more heavily on external donor support for infrastructure and equity-focused programs, while Pakistan faces chronic fiscal instability that constrains reform implementation. Sri Lanka maintains relatively stable public funding but faces pressure from broader macroeconomic challenges.

Comparative

insight:

The analysis indicates that financing adequacy alone is insufficient; governance quality and expenditure efficiency play a critical role in translating resources into improved learning outcomes.

4.3 Digital Education and the Digital Divide

Digital education has emerged as a central policy response across South Asia, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. India has developed large-scale national platforms such as DIKSHA and SWAYAM, aiming to expand access to digital content and teacher training. Similar initiatives exist in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, while Nepal and Pakistan have implemented more limited or donor-supported digital programs.

Despite these efforts, all countries face a pronounced digital divide along rural–urban, gender, and socio-economic lines. Limited device access, connectivity gaps, and uneven digital literacy continue to constrain the effectiveness of technology-based interventions.

Comparative

insight:

Across the region, digital initiatives function primarily as access-enhancing tools rather than quality-transforming mechanisms. Without parallel investment in infrastructure and teacher capacity, digital expansion risks reinforcing existing educational inequalities.

4.4 Teacher Policy and Institutional Capacity

Teacher availability and professional development remain critical constraints across South Asia. India has introduced structural reforms such as the Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP) and technology-enabled in-service training. However, large-scale vacancies and uneven distribution persist, particularly in rural and disadvantaged regions.

Other countries face similar challenges, including shortages, limited training quality, and reliance on contractual or underqualified staff. Institutional capacity for continuous professional development remains uneven, especially in decentralized systems.

Comparative

insight:

The regional evidence underscores that teacher policy represents a key bottleneck for SDG 4 implementation, with institutional capacity rather than policy design emerging as the primary limiting factor.

at state and district levels along with the coordination of central and state governments also are significant governance mechanisms of the implementation of SDG 4-relevant policies.

4.5 Comparative Synthesis: Convergence and Divergence

Across South Asia, education reforms show strong convergence around three priorities: expanding access, promoting gender equity, and integrating digital learning. However, significant divergence exists in governance capacity, financing stability, and implementation effectiveness.

India's NEP 2020 represents the most comprehensive system-wide reform, but its scale also introduces coordination challenges across states. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka demonstrate incremental progress through targeted interventions, while Nepal and Pakistan illustrate the constraints associated with rapid decentralization in low-capacity administrative environments.

Overall, the comparative analysis suggests that progress toward SDG 4 in South Asia is shaped less by policy ambition than by institutional capacity, monitoring systems, and the efficiency of resource use.

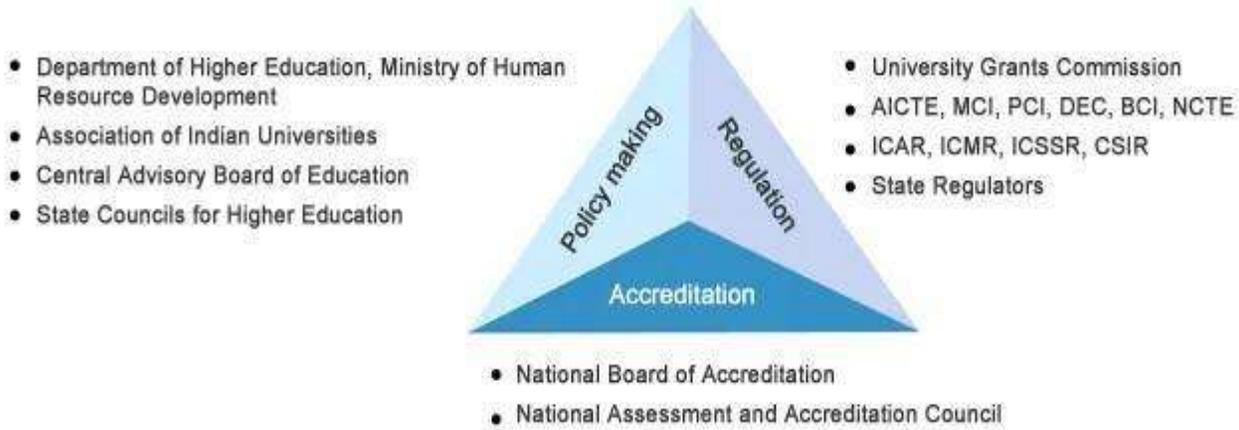
Theme 2 : Institutional Reforms And Mechanisms 5.1 Institutional Reforms in India

5.1.1 Higher Education Autonomy and Accreditation

We can clearly see that since the late 2010s, India has been pushing towards a two-pronged strategy in higher education: by expanding institutional autonomy while also tightening system-level accountability through the form of accreditation and outcome-oriented metrics. The University Grants Commission or UGC has put forward regulations on conferment of autonomous status (UGC Regulations, 2018), which in turn lead to the formalising criteria and some major procedural safeguards for autonomous colleges, enabling curriculum flexibility, while showcasing autonomous examinations and academic innovation, while retaining oversight mechanisms. We can also see that at the same time, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has revised its Quality Indicator Frameworks and manuals to mark a deep emphasis on measurable learning outcomes, research, and institutional governance indicators by formally strengthening external quality assurance, as seen as the counterpart to autonomy.

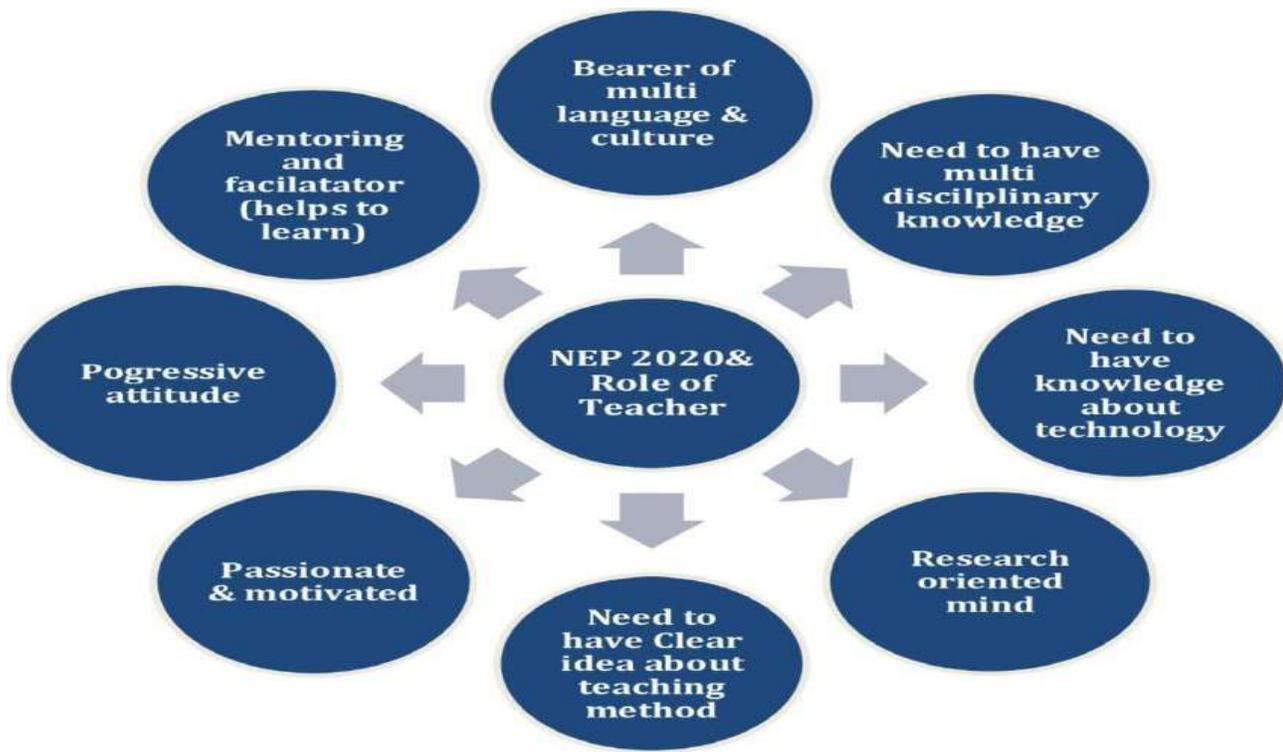
When we look towards the practical instruments that tend to operationalise performance orientation, which majorly include piloting of some of the performance-linked grants and evaluation frameworks, that have mostly appeared in the last five years. Domestic analyses, along with contemplation and policy notices, can thoroughly describe emerging performance-based funding pilots and a very much broader shift towards the linking of public allocations to demonstrable preferable outcomes (research outputs, graduate employability, NAAC ratings), although we see a full system-wide, formulaic performance-funding model that totally remains emergent rather than universal or global.

Regulatory Framework Of Higher Education In India



5.1.2 Teacher Education Reforms

Teachers' education and teacher-student relationships and framework work have been reshaped by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 into a very concise and single continuum, aiming totally towards professionalizing teaching and aligning it to SDG-4 goals. One of the key reforms made is the Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP) a specialised four-year dual-major undergraduate degree that embeds instructional training as part of any multidisciplinary bachelor's education and phases out the two-year B.Ed. as the main route. The ITEP and related NCTE guidance align a lot within the teacher preparation with stronger subject and content mastery, practicum experience, and continuous professional development that basically reflects evidence that the teacher quality is central to learning outcomes and SDG-4 targets.



5.1.3 Digital Institutional Reforms

Most of the digital reforms consist mainly of an institutional layer that is pretty much intended to increase mobility, transparency, and credential portability. The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), which is a high-quality national digital repository of a student credits system, is primarily designed to enable multiple-exit/entry pathways, inter-institutional transfer of credits, and consists of lifelong learning through a modular form of certification. There are also other parallel initiatives, like those that include moving toward a National Digital University and digital academic library, that aim to combine both forms of credit portability with centralized verification and open learning platforms.

5.2 Reforms in Other South Asian Countries

In Bangladesh, we can see how it has experimented with decentralising school management through forms of strengthened School Management Committees and by assigning operational decision-making to mostly the local entities under programs such as PEDP and subsequent sector plans that have been put forward. The decentralisation point of the agenda aims primarily to increase community oversight, trying to speed local responses, and improve

accountability at even the grassroots levels, also through strict implementation that highlights capacity and resourcing gaps at local tiers.

Looking towards Sri Lanka's recent National Education Policy Framework (2023–2033) and analysing all the related curriculum restructuring, they try to place emphasis on redefined governance arrangements, learning competency through a structural framework, and an expanded role for good quality assurance bodies (e.g., National Education Commission, TVEC) that can produce benchmark outcomes, particularly in secondary and tertiary vocational lower level of streams. These changes can pair up with curriculum modernization with new institutional mandates for QA and coordination.

In the case of Pakistan, the 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010) put forward substantial education responsibilities to the country. Provinces have since tried to pursue divergent policy paths; many have some sort of experimented with provincial curricula, school improvement programs, and localized accountability, but still, there can be seen common challenges, including uneven institutional capacity, coordination gaps with federal bodies, and variable financing that limit scalable gains in quality.

5.3 Governance and Financing Challenges

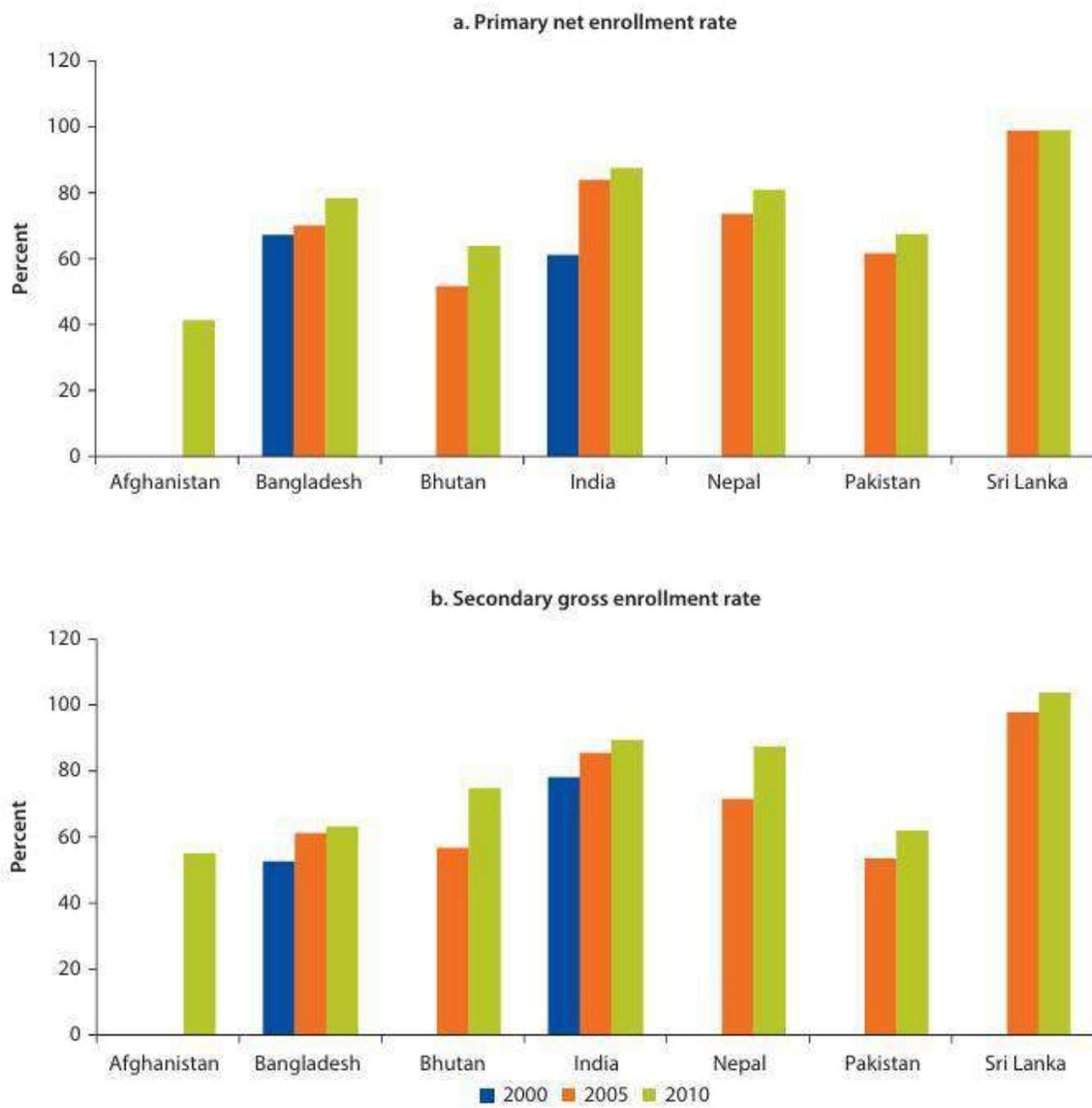
A form of really consistent governance dilemma across the region that may be particularly visible in India's push for autonomy is the type of autonomy-versus-accountability trade-off. UNESCO-IIEP analysis and related regional studies have seen to stressed that granting managerial freedom without proper forms of concurrent capacity for performance measurement, transparent reporting, and robust external QA risks variable quality and institutional drift; conversely, overly prescriptive accountability can undercut the very flexibility and autonomy seeks to create. Financial sustainability compounds the problem: many reforms (autonomy, digital systems, integrated teacher education) require predictable public funding, targeted capacity building.

5.4 Comparative Synthesis

All the countries on convergence are committed to universal access, inclusion (especially gender and the marginalised), and enhanced quality of education according to SDG 4. They also move more towards digital and

technology-based practices and concentrate more on vocational or lifelong learning trajectories. At the point of divergence, there are major variations in governance systems (more centralised in India compared to more decentralised/community-based in Nepal and Pakistan), financing systems (domestic funding compared to a strong involvement of donors), teacher policy and professional development, and the level of digital/distance learning infrastructure. The policy of NEP 2020 in India is bolder in its re-structuring of the whole education system, whereas in some South Asian states the reforms are a gradual change in certain areas. The financing regime and the monitoring regime are very different, and the difference influences the efficacy of the implementation.

Figure 1.2 Enrollment Rates in Primary and Secondary Education in South Asia, 2000–10



5.4.1 Bangladesh: Decentralised School Governance

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2010 of Bangladesh lays stress on decentralization, making the local communities empowered in making decisions on education. The policy fosters community-based management of schools, which facilitates involvement of parents and other local stakeholders in the management of schools. The strategy will support accountability and responsiveness to local education needs. The policy also proposes the creation of School Management Committees (SMCs) to administer the school and make sure that the educational services are aligned with the needs of that community.

5.4.2 Sri Lanka: Curriculum Reforms and Quality Assurance Council

The Education Sector Development Framework and Program (ESDFP) in Sri Lanka is directed at curriculum reforms to establish harmony between education and national development objectives. The ESDFP focuses on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a way of integration in the educational system to improve the processes of teaching and learning. Education Quality assurance bodies, including National Education Commission (NEC) are also important in governing and reviewing standards of education to ensure that institutions attain the set standards of good education. These changes have been made to enhance the value and suitability of education so that students are equipped to meet the current needs of the market place.

5.4.3 Nepal: Institutional restructuring after Federalisation

Since the Federal system was adopted, the education sector in Nepal restructured tremendously. School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016-2023 provides measures to decentralize the education management to the local governments and increase their potential to plan and execute educational programs. The SSDP highlights the importance of institutional capacity building on the local level to make educational policies responsive to community needs that are different. The objective of this restructuring is to foster inclusive learning and equal access to quality learning opportunities in the nation.

5.4.4 Pakistan: Experiment of Provincial Reforms

The education system in Pakistan has been characterised by different provincial reforms that are intended to level inequalities in the education system and enhance the education results within the region. The National Education

Policy 2017 promotes the idea of decentralization, which allows provinces to have more freedom to manage and provide education services. In this way, the provinces can customize the educational programs to their needs and contexts. The policy also stresses on madrasa reforms, which must integrate religious education into mainstream education, to achieve a more accommodative and holistic learning system.

In Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Pakistan, the educational reforms represent a common concern to enhance the education systems by means of decentralizing them, transforming their curriculums, and modernising the institutions. Although each country will have its own problems, these reforms will enable progress to inclusive, equitable, and quality education, which is aligned with the overall goals of Sustainable Development Goal 4. These need to remain the subject of focus in order to realize long term gains in the education sector of South Asia.

Theme 3 : Implementing QAEI (Quality, Access, Equity and Inclusion)

Implementing the QAEI framework is essential for realizing SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. QAEI integrates four interdependent pillars: Quality, to guarantee relevant learning outcomes; Access, to extend education to every learner; Equity, to remove systemic barriers; and Inclusion, to integrate marginalized groups into mainstream education. Across South Asia, particularly in India, these principles are embedded in reforms such as the Right to Education Act (2009), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, and the National Education Policy 2020.

3.1 Quality Dimension

India's efforts to improve educational quality focus on curriculum modernization, outcome-based education, and teacher development. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces a competency-based framework that emphasizes critical thinking, creativity, and foundational literacy, replacing rote memorization. The policy also promotes vocational training and digital literacy to align with SDG 4 on relevant skills. Teacher preparation is being strengthened through the four-year integrated B.Ed. program and continuous professional development modules on the DIKSHA and SWAYAM platforms. However, disparities between urban and rural institutions, limited access to ICT, and inadequate funding continue to constrain quality outcomes. South Asian neighbors such as Bangladesh and Sri

Lanka exhibit similar trends, integrating ICT-enabled classrooms and teacher training but facing sustainability challenges due to fiscal constraints (UNESCO, 2019).

3.2 Access and Equity

Despite notable gains in enrollment, rural and urban disparities, gender parity issues, and disability inclusion remain major concerns. India's Gross Enrolment Ratio in primary education exceeds 100 percent, yet dropout and transition gaps persist among girls, Scheduled Tribes, and economically weaker groups (World Bank, 2024). Government initiatives such as the mid-day meal scheme, free textbook distribution, and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have improved retention and gender parity. A study by IERJ (2024) on inclusive higher education notes that equity in tertiary education still lags because of affordability and language barriers. Across South Asia, Bangladesh's Female Stipend Program and Nepal's School Sector Development Plan demonstrate effective financial equity models. Nonetheless, bridging the access gap requires not only physical infrastructure but also digital connectivity and context-specific support for children with disabilities.

3.3 Inclusion Mechanisms

Inclusive education ensures participation of all learners in mainstream settings through scholarships, school feeding programs, and lifelong learning opportunities. India's Samagra Shiksha integrates special needs components: resource rooms, Braille materials, assistive devices, and teacher sensitization workshops, while the Saakshar Bharat and NIOS extend literacy to adults and out-of-school youth (IERJ, 2024). Comparative experiences reveal strong community-based approaches; Bangladesh's stipend scheme has significantly raised girls' completion rates, and Sri Lanka's free education legacy continues to guarantee universal primary access (UNESCO, 2020). Yet, challenges remain: insufficient trained personnel, stigma associated with disability, and limited localized funding often undermine inclusion efforts. Embedding inclusive pedagogy in preservice teacher education and ensuring dedicated budget lines for marginalized learners are critical steps for equitable participation across South Asia.

3.4 Monitoring and Evaluation

Effective QAEI implementation relies on credible and disaggregated data. India's SDG India Index by NITI Aayog (2023) and the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) track progress in enrolment and learning outcomes.

However, inconsistent data quality and inadequate feedback loops weaken policy responses. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the World Bank's EdStats provide regional benchmarks, but South Asian countries lack harmonized indicators for quality and inclusion. Upgrading Education Management Information Systems (EMIS), training administrators in data analysis, and promoting open-access dashboards could strengthen accountability. Regional cooperation through a SAARC Education Forum could further align monitoring standards and accelerate progress toward achieving SDG 4.

Future Topics & Best Practices

Technical Advancements

Utilizing technology to repair and improve education in South Asia (SDG 4) is a complex situation. On one side, AI and EdTech education provide exciting tools, but on the other hand, there are technological issues. We're seeing a huge boost in AI-driven personalized learning, virtual tutors, and teaching to help and improve with teacher decline, along with new and powerful innovative ways to destroy language barriers. India, with its #The AIforAll campaign is pushing this hard.

But there's another huge barrier that affects all entities: the **digital divide**. This isn't just about not having a laptop or a proper internet connection; it's a much intense and complicated and complex social and economic gap. If we simply showcase and portray technology at the problem, we risk leaving the most vulnerable, avoided, pushed back and neglected students even further behind, pushing them further behind, exacerbating inequality and other discriminatory issues.

Comparative Case Studies

We can be able to portray this tension in India's own policies and programmes. The **DIKSHA** platform is a massive, top-down, tech-first attempt to put everything online and towards digital integrity. It's all about *scale*. In complete contrast, the older **Saakshar Bharat Mission** was a bottom-up, human-first program for adult literacy. It was all about *community*.

Other countries offer different lessons. **Bangladesh** didn't try to fix everything at once but through stages and improvements. It used a pragmatic, data-driven approach to solve specific, targeted problems in its secondary schools. **Nepal** took a slightly different route by decentralizing, giving local communities direct control over their schools and educational systems. This paved the way and showcased a correct way for a more intense and powerful "accountability through proximity"—parents and guardians could eventually hold their local schools accountable and responsible for the deeds.

So, what's the solution? There is no instant or fast relief or solution. These case studies show it's a constant, difficult balancing act between **scale, quality, and equity**.

The big takeaway is that the government's role is changing and having paradigm shifts. It's having a tidal shift from being the sole *provider* of education to being the *governor* of a complex system that includes public, private, and community players all under a proper umbrella.

Lessons Learned

The analyses, study, practice, and evaluation of technological advancements, digital literacy, and comparative policy case studies from countries like India, Bangladesh, and Nepal offer a much more intricate and efficient form of strategies, successes, and challenges in the pursuit of SDG 4. Analysing these findings reveals not only a set of transferable best practices but also a deeper understanding and intense meaning of the fundamental blocks that policymakers in the region must navigate and find a definitive path toward the needed solutions. No single model provides a perfect solution. Instead, a path forward requires a way simpler and more definitive appreciation of the complex overlap between scale, quality, and equity, and the development of integrated, multi-layered policy frameworks and institutional reforms that can adapt to the diverse, complex, and improving educational ground of South Asia.

The state's role is particularly in fundamentally changing and evolving with practices and trials, and errors. It is moving from being the primary provider of education to being the governor of a complex system with public, private,

and community actors all combined and looked upon and evaluated and inspected by several actors and factors. Success in not just achieving the ambitious vision of SDG 4 but also will depend upon whether it will therefore depend less on launching the next big technological platform and more on building the knowledgeable legal, ethical, and regulatory capacity to lead this hybrid system toward equitable, high-quality, and inclusive outcomes for all learners and youth. The future battle for quality education will be won or lost not in the realm of technology, but in the arena of good governance and proper institutional reforms.

Recommendations

In order to achieve SDG 4, South Asian countries need to move from planning to real actions. Achieving the SDG4 is not just about policy, it is about what are the on ground impacts of those policies. While some countries have improved fast, others are still facing huge gaps. When most of the South Asian countries are experiencing the demographic dividend the implication of accurate education policy becomes important. The following ideas focus on what the government can do better to reach SDG4 and hence the development of Human Resource.

- ***Prioritize Foundational Literacy and Early Learning***

Governments must be investing in early learning and foundational literacy as a national priority. Unlike infrastructure or technology reforms, improving early literacy delivers faster and deeper results. Governments in South Asia need to treat foundational learning as the real starting point for achieving SDG

- ***Institutionalize Continuous Teacher Development***

There is a need for regular and tech based training along with a performance based assessment for teachers. A motivated and skilled teacher who is well equipped with technological knowledge can contribute more efficiently .

- ***Enhance Digital Infrastructure and Inclusivity***

Expanding affordable internet, device access and local language e-content is essential. Without proper connectivity, digital reforms might end up helping only the privileged and deepen the educational divide.

- ***Increase and Rationalize Education Financing***

Education budget should gradually move closer to 6% of GDP with protected funding for quality improvement.

More than spending, it's the proper use and tracking of funds that will decide the real impact. ● ***Strengthen***

Monitoring and Data-Based Governance

A regional education data network under SAARC or UNESCO could bring uniform standards and timely feedback. Reliable and detailed data assists the governments in making quicker decisions and plans that reflect the ground realities.

- ***Advance Gender and Social Inclusion***

Targeted schemes for girls, CWSN and minority learners should be expanded with proper funding and teacher training. True inclusion means participation and learning achievement, not just enrollment numbers.

- ***Foster Regional Cooperation and Policy Convergence***

South Asian nations must share best practices through common digital, teacher, and monitoring platforms. Regional collaboration can solve issues like financing, quality gaps and teacher shortage more efficiently than isolated efforts.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the policy frameworks and institutional reforms adopted by India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan to advance Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The comparative analysis reveals a clear regional convergence around expanding access, improving gender parity, and integrating digital learning into education systems. However, progress toward inclusive and high-quality education remains uneven across countries.

The findings indicate that differences in **institutional capacity, governance effectiveness, and resource management** play a more decisive role than differences in policy design alone. While India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents the most comprehensive system-wide reform in the region, its implementation challenges reflect the complexity of coordinating reforms within a large federal structure. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka demonstrate steady progress through targeted and incremental interventions, whereas Nepal and Pakistan illustrate the constraints associated with decentralization in contexts of limited administrative and fiscal capacity.

A key insight emerging from the analysis is that **policy ambition does not automatically translate into improved educational outcomes**. Across South Asia, the effectiveness of reforms depends on sustained public financing, reliable monitoring systems, and the administrative capacity to implement programs at subnational levels. Digital initiatives, although widely adopted, function primarily as access-support mechanisms and remain constrained by persistent inequalities in infrastructure and connectivity.

This study contributes to the literature by providing a structured comparative perspective that positions India within a broader regional context and highlights institutional capacity as a central determinant of SDG 4 progress. The analysis also underscores the importance of moving beyond policy formulation toward a stronger focus on implementation quality and governance performance.

The study is subject to certain limitations. As a desk-based analysis relying on secondary data, it does not capture ground-level variations in school practices or learning outcomes. Future research could incorporate primary fieldwork, subnational case studies, or quantitative assessments to examine how institutional reforms translate into classroom-level change.

Overall, the evidence suggests that achieving SDG 4 in South Asia will depend less on the introduction of new policy frameworks and more on strengthening institutional systems capable of delivering equitable and sustained improvements in learning.

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