South Asian Universities: From Mass Access to Research Capability

How systems can widen participation while strengthening teaching, discovery and public purpose

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Direct answer. South Asian higher education cannot be judged by a few global rankings. The region needs systems that serve several purposes at once: broad undergraduate access, strong professional and vocational pathways, excellent teaching, independent scholarship, frontier research and local problem-solving. India reported a higher-education gross enrolment ratio of 29.5 percent for ages 18–23 in 2022–23, up from 23.7 percent in 2014–15, with women at 30.2 percent. Sri Lanka's public system offers tuition-free internal study but is capacity-constrained; its UGC recorded 141,315 internal undergraduates and 220,308 external, open and distance learners in 2023. These figures use different populations and structures and are not a ranking. The central policy challenge is to fund quality and inclusion across differentiated institutions while protecting academic freedom, building doctoral and laboratory capacity, and measuring learning, completion and employment rather than enrolment alone.

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1 System missions and differentiation

Higher education systems combine mass teaching, professions, research, innovation and public culture. Differentiated institutions need distinct missions, adequate resources and pathways that let students and staff move across them.

2 Access and comparability

India's GER rose to 29.5 percent in 2022–23; Sri Lanka reports internal, external and distance enrolments through a different public structure. Regional comparison must align age groups, programme coverage and reference years.

3 Equity beyond entry

Gender parity in aggregate enrolment does not establish parity by field, completion, employment or leadership. Geography, disability, language, caste, ethnicity and household income require disaggregated monitoring and targeted student support.

4 Teaching and learning

Expansion strains faculty, infrastructure and student services. Quality depends on curriculum, feedback, assessment, language and bridge support, and accessible design. Compliance and registration counts are weak proxies for learning.

5 Research and doctoral capability

Durable research requires funding, time, supervision, laboratories, technicians, libraries, data, ethics, maintenance and career structures. Doctoral quality is a system reproduction mechanism rather than a volume target.

6 Freedom, integrity and governance

Academic freedom permits question selection, criticism, access and publication. It operates with research ethics, transparent appointment and review, institutional autonomy and accountability for public funds.

7 Work and innovation

Graduate outcomes reflect both education and labour demand. Industry partnerships can improve work-linked learning and technology transfer, while basic research and humanities require public-value metrics beyond immediate commercialization.

8 Digital provision and regional networks

Distance education can expand opportunity when connectivity, interaction, accessibility, assessment and completion are protected. Cross-border shared facilities and doctoral networks can spread scarce capability.

9 Measurement framework

A balanced dashboard should cover access, progression, learning, faculty conditions, research integrity and openness, doctoral completion, employment quality, finance, freedom and social contribution rather than rankings alone.

10 Evidence assessment

Strong	Higher education participation has expanded substantially in India over the past decade.
Strong	Sri Lanka's public internal university capacity is substantially smaller than demand, with large external and distance enrolment.
Strong	National enrolment measures require aligned definitions before regional comparison.
Probable	Teaching quality, doctoral supervision and research infrastructure have often lagged rapid system expansion.
Probable	Regional shared infrastructure and networks can improve capability where national scale and funding are constrained.
Contested	The optimal balance among public, private, affiliated, autonomous, teaching-focused and research-intensive institutions.
Unsupported	The claim that global rank alone measures university-system quality or national knowledge capability.

11 Conclusion

South Asia's university challenge is no longer expansion alone. Access must lead to learning, completion, dignified work, independent inquiry and knowledge that serves local and global needs. Systems should differentiate missions without freezing hierarchy, fund teaching and research as complementary public goods, and publish comparable outcomes. A handful of ranked campuses cannot substitute for a capable national system.

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This paper is an evidence review for public scholarship.

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