



Enhancing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of Students in Conventional State Universities in India: Challenges in Attracting Students and a Practical Action Plan for Sustainable Retention of Traditional Courses in Semi-Urban Karnataka

First Author: **Dr. Pradeep B S**, Professor, Social work Department, Davangere University, Davanagere.
pradeepwagonr@gmail.com

Second Author: **Dr. Kalpana B S**, Assistant Professor, Social work Department, JSS University, Mysuru.
kalpanabsmsw@gmail.com

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Abstract

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 sets an ambitious target to raise the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education from under 30% to 50% by 2035. While metro-centric private and specialized universities continue to attract high candidate volumes, conventional state public universities located in semi-urban regions face severe enrolment stagnation, particularly in traditional basic science (B.Sc.), arts (B.A.), and humanities programs. Taking the semi-urban university landscape of Karnataka as a focal case study—where the overall state GER stands at 36.2% alongside deep regional disparities between urban hubs and semi-urban or interior districts—this study examines the structural, socio-economic, and pedagogical barriers discouraging prospective students from enrolling in traditional degree programs.

Through a mixed-methods empirical approach involving multi-stakeholder surveys (N = 840) across four semi-urban public universities in Karnataka, the paper identifies four primary friction points: perceived employabilities deficit, rigid traditional curricula, infrastructural deficits, and aggressive competition from private technical institutions. To address these challenges without abandoning core disciplines, this paper presents a practical, scalable action plan. Key interventions include:

- **Hybrid Skill-Curriculum Integration:** Embedding industry-aligned micro-credentials into liberal arts and pure sciences.
- **Earn-While-Learn Work Integrated Learning (WIL):** Local community-industry apprenticeship pathways.
- **Flexible Multi-Entry/Multi-Exit Systems:** Aligned with the National Credit Framework (NCrF).
- **Targeted Digital-Infrastructural Hubs:** Bridging the semi-urban technology divide.

This research provides actionable insights for policymakers, university administrators, and educational planners working to expand equitable higher education access across developing economies.

Keywords: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), State Public Universities, Traditional Courses, Skill Integration, Semi-Urban Higher Education, NEP 2020, Karnataka.



1. Introduction

Higher education serves as the catalyst for economic mobility and human capital development. In India, expanding tertiary education access remains a critical national priority. Under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, India aims to increase its tertiary Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to 50% by 2035—requiring millions of new student seats.

However, macro-level enrolment metrics mask severe intra-state and structural disparities. While Karnataka reports a tertiary GER of 36.2% (above the national average of ~28.4%), the distribution is heavily skewed toward urban centres like Bengaluru Urban (which accounts for over 1,100 higher education institutions). In semi-urban and non-coastal interior districts (e.g., regions across Northern and Central Karnataka such as Kalaburagi, Raichur, Vijayapura, and Shimoga), conventional state public universities face declining student enrolment.

THE GER DICHOTOMY IN KARNATAKA			
Urban Centers (e.g., Bengaluru)		Semi-Urban / Interior Districts	
• GER > 45%	• GER Stagnant (~22% - 28%)	• High density of private/tech institutions	• Dependent on Conventional State Universities
• Strong industry placement links	• Declining enrolment in B.A/B.Sc.		

Conventional state universities form the backbone of affordable, equitable higher education for rural and semi-urban populations, particularly for socio-economically marginalized communities and first-generation learners. Yet, traditional three- or four-year degree programs in Liberal Arts (B.A.), Basic Sciences (B.Sc.), and Commerce (B.Com.) are seeing empty seats and rising dropout rates. Students increasingly view these degrees as low-ROI pathways compared to private technical, professional, or vocational diploma courses.

Core Research Questions

- Attraction:** What structural, socio-economic, and programmatic factors deter students in semi-urban areas from enrolling in traditional courses in state public universities?
- Retention & Relevance:** How can traditional disciplines (Humanities, Basic Sciences, Social Sciences) be restructured to maintain academic integrity while offering tangible career pathways?
- Actionable Roadmap:** What operational, policy, and financial interventions are required to sustainably boost the GER in semi-urban state universities?

2. Contextual Overview & Literature Review

2.1 The Indian Tertiary Landscape and the GER Target

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is defined as total enrolment in tertiary education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the official 18–23 age bracket. While India's national GER has grown steadily from 24.6% in 2017–18 to over 28% in recent years, reaching the 50% threshold by 2035 demands a rapid expansion in state university capacity and student uptake.

National Target vs. Current Status (GER 18-23 Years)



National Target (2035): [=====] 50.0%

Karnataka State (2024): [=====] 36.2%

National Average: [=====] 28.4%

Semi-Urban Districts: [=====] 22-26%

2.2 The Semi-Urban University Crisis

Semi-urban universities inhabit an intermediate ecosystem: they cater to students transitioning from agricultural or rural livelihoods but lack the deep corporate ecosystems, funding, and campus infrastructure of tier-1 metro universities. Literature highlights three key challenges facing state institutions in these areas:

1. **Employability Mismatch:** Employers report that conventional B.A. and B.Sc. graduates lack functional digital literacy, soft skills, and domain-specific practical application.
2. **Faculty and Resource Shortages:** Sanctioned teaching positions in state universities frequently experience prolonged vacancies, leading to heavy reliance on contractual or guest faculty.
3. **Socio-Economic Pressures on First-Generation Learners:** Families in semi-urban regions prioritize immediate earning capacity over long-term degree pursuits, leading to early dropouts or preference for short-term technical diplomas.

3. Methodology

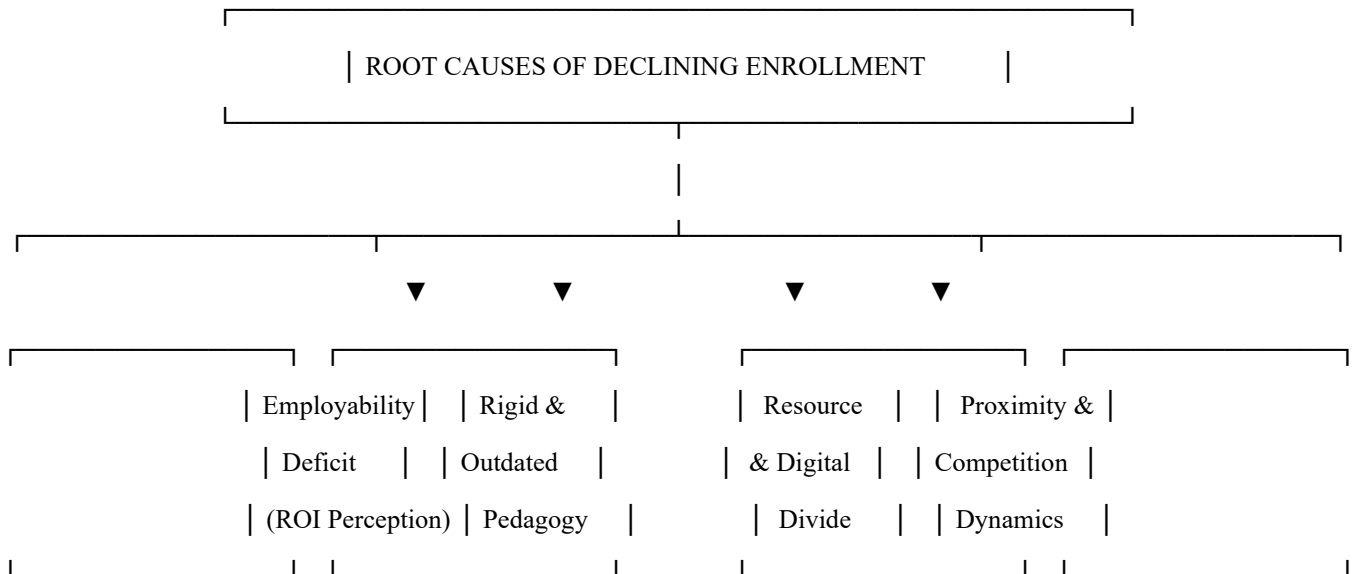
This paper uses a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, gathering quantitative survey data alongside qualitative key-informant interviews across four selected conventional state public universities in semi-urban regions of Karnataka.

3.1 Sample Selection and Data Collection

- **Study Locations:** Four state universities in semi-urban/regional hubs across Karnataka (representing Central, Northern, and Malnad belts).
- **Sample Size (N = 840):**
 - **Students (n = 520):** Currently enrolled undergraduates (n = 320) and recent higher secondary (10+2) graduates/dropouts (n = 200).
 - **Faculty & Administrators (n = 180):** Department heads, professors, and university policy administrators.
 - **Industry Professionals & Local Employers (n = 140):** Representatives from regional industrial estates, MSMEs, agriculture cooperatives, and service sectors.
- **Qualitative Data:** 24 In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and 8 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

4. Key Empirical Diagnostics & Root Causes

Our field data reveals four primary drivers of declining student attraction and retention in semi-urban state university traditional courses:



4.1 The ROI & Employability Mismatch

Over **74% of surveyed high-school graduates** cited "lack of direct job guarantees" as their primary reason for bypassing traditional B.A. or B.Sc. programs.

"In our village, a B.A. or B.Sc. degree is seen as a stepping stone only to competitive exams with low selection rates. If a student doesn't clear those, they are left with limited market-relevant skills. They prefer a 1-year diploma in medical lab technology or ITI over a 3-year pure science degree."

— FGD Participant, Degree College Principal, Northern Karnataka

4.2 Pedagogy Disconnect and Curriculum Rigidity

Traditional syllabi remain heavily theoretical, with minimal lab exposure, field research, or industry interaction. While private universities offer elective flexibility, state universities often struggle to implement credit choice across departments due to administrative inertia and faculty constraints.

4.3 Structural and Digital Infrastructure Gaps

While regional universities offer low tuition fees, they face deficits in modern digital infrastructure—such as high-speed campus Wi-Fi, updated laboratory software, and modern library databases. First-generation learners, who lack personal laptops or high-speed home internet, are particularly affected.

4.4 Regional Gender and Socio-Economic Dynamics

Female enrolment in basic arts and sciences remains relatively high (constituting over 52% of traditional course enrolments in the sample), but retention to degree completion is disrupted by early family pressure, safety concerns in commuting from distant villages, and lack of secure campus housing.

5. Practical Action Plan for Sustainable Retention & GER Growth

To transform conventional public universities into modern, high-value learning centres without diluting fundamental academics, we propose a four-pillar operational framework: **T.R.A.N.S.F.O.R.M.**



THE T.R.A.N.S.F.O.R.M. FRAMEWORK

- | |
|---|
| Pillar 1: Industry-Embedded Curriculum Dualization (Skill-Stacking) |
| Pillar 2: Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) & Regional Micro-Apprenticeships |
| Pillar 3: Flexible NCrF Pathways & Multi-Entry/Multi-Exit Execution |
| Pillar 4: Institutional Modernization, Digital Hubs & Community Outreach |

Pillar 1: Industry-Embedded Dualization (Skill-Stacking)

Rather than replacing traditional basic sciences or humanities disciplines, state universities should implement mandatory "Skill Stacks" integrated directly into B.A., B.Sc., and B.Com. degree paths.

Traditional Major	Integrated Skill Stack (3-Year Track)	Market Application
B.A. Literature / History	Content Creation, Digital Archiving, Localization & Translation, SEO	EdTech, Media, Tourism, Civil Services
B.A. Economics / Social Work	Data Visualization, SPSS/R Programming, Survey Methodology, Public Policy Analytics	NGO Management, Market Research, Governance
B.Sc. Chemistry / Botany	Quality Control (QC/QA), Agro-Chemical Testing, Soil Health Analytics, Bio-fertilizer Tech	Agri-business, Pharma Units, Food Processing
B.Sc. Mathematics / Physics	Python for Data Analysis, Financial Modelling, Solar Technology Basics	IT Services, Renewable Energy, FinTech

Pillar 2: Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) & Micro-Apprenticeships

Semi-urban state universities should leverage regional economic activities rather than attempting to emulate metro-style corporate campus recruitment.

- **Regional Hub Alignment:** Partner with local Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), agricultural processing units, district administration offices, local banks, and NGOs.
- **Credit-Bearing Internships:** Mandatory 1-semester (12–16 credits) regional internship embedded within the final year, evaluated jointly by academic mentors and field supervisors.
- **Earn-While-Learn Schemes:** Establish campus enterprise cells where students handle digitized university record management, translation projects, software testing, or community water quality audits for stipend support.

Pillar 3: Multi-Entry/Multi-Exit Execution via NCrF

To prevent dropouts from being counted as total losses to the GER, universities must operationalize the National Credit Framework (NCrF) effectively:

- **Year 1 Exit:** Undergraduate Certificate in Applied Skill + Major Discipline.



- **Year 2 Exit:** Undergraduate Diploma.
- **Year 3 Exit:** Bachelor's Degree.
- **Year 4 Exit:** Bachelor's Degree (Honors / Research).

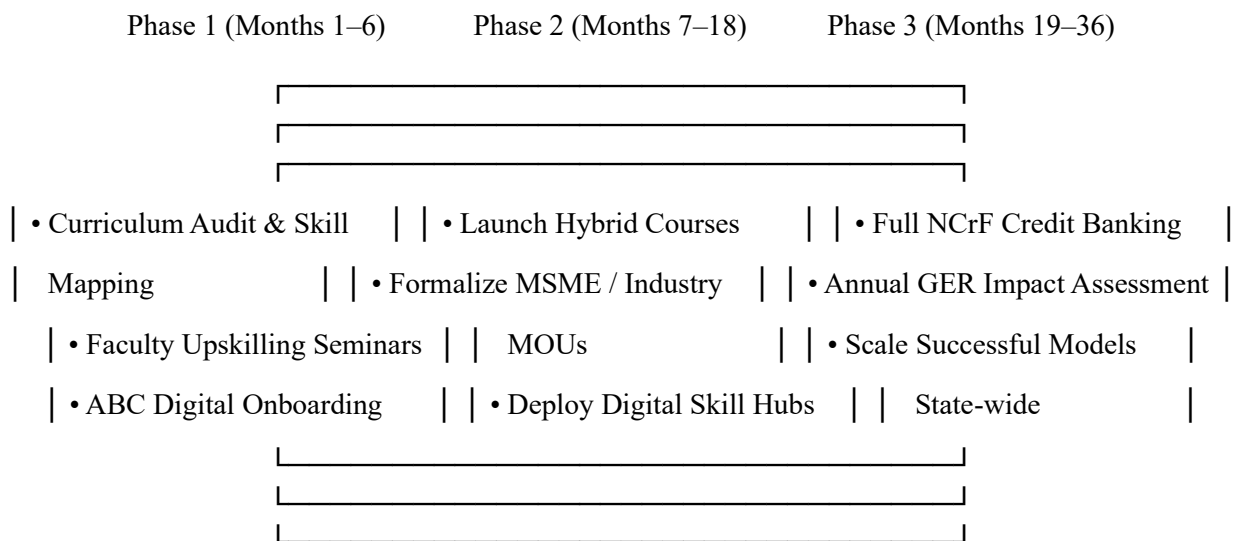
A student who pauses their education after Year 1 due to financial stress retains banked credits in the **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)** and can return seamlessly within a 3–5 year window.

Pillar 4: Targeted Community Outreach & Campus Infrastructure

1. **Mobile Counselling Units:** Active outreach programs targeting higher secondary schools across tier-3 towns and rural clusters to inform parents and students about scholarship options and career pathways.
2. **Safe Transit & Residential Hubs:** State-subsidized transit passes and safe hostel facilities dedicated to female students from surrounding rural belts.
3. **Shared Central Digital Labs:** Establishing high-speed digital resource hubs within university campuses, providing access to computing hardware, software tools, and online learning repositories.

6. Implementation Roadmap & Policy Matrix

A phased implementation timeline ensures that administrative adjustments do not overwhelm existing public university infrastructure.



Strategy	Action Item	Primary Responsibility	Target Metric
Curriculum Realignment	Redesign B.A./B.Sc. syllabi to include 20–25% industry-applied modules	Board of Studies (BoS), State Council for Higher Education	100% courses skill-integrated within 2 years
Faculty Upskilling	Train conventional faculty in digital tools, industry-relevant applications	UGC-Human Resource Development Centres (HRDCs)	80% faculty trained in blended pedagogy



Strategy	Action Item	Primary Responsibility	Target Metric
Industry MoUs	Establish partnerships with regional industrial associations	District Industrial Centres (DIC) & University Placement Cells	Minimum 5 active local employer partnerships per department
Retention Support	Deploy target scholarships and subsidized transport for rural women learners	Dept. of Higher Education, Karnataka & CSR Partners	15% reduction in female dropout rates in year 2

7. Conclusion

Enhancing the Gross Enrolment Ratio in India cannot be achieved solely through expanding top-tier urban institutions or encouraging private university growth. The sustainable path to reaching a 50% state and national GER lies in reviving conventional public universities in semi-urban and rural areas.

By modernizing traditional B.A., B.Sc., and B.Com. curricula through practical skill-stacking, community-integrated work opportunities, flexible entry-exit pathways, and improved digital infrastructure, state universities in Karnataka can restore student confidence in fundamental disciplines. These steps ensure that traditional academic programs remain academically rigorous, economically viable, and accessible to all sections of society.

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