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Commercialisation of Higher Education in India: Concept of Private Universities and Green Campuses

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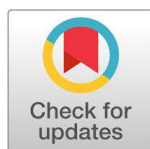
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Abstract: *The commercialisation of higher education in India has accelerated markedly since the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, driven by demographic pressures, public funding constraints, and regulatory reforms that facilitate private and foreign institutional entry. Private universities expanded by approximately 149% between 2013–14 and 2023–24, far outpacing government institutions, while total higher-education enrolment reached 45 million students and the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) rose to 30%. Concurrently, the concept of green campuses has emerged as both an operational necessity and a strategic branding tool among private providers seeking competitive differentiation. This review synthesises 18 recent empirical and policy studies (2020–2026) examining the dual trajectories of privatisation and campus sustainability. Drawing on All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) data, UI GreenMetric rankings, and institutional case evidence, the article maps growth patterns, investment requirements (estimated at USD 100 billion for 2.7 billion sq ft of academic infrastructure), equity challenges, and the integration of renewable energy, water management, and circular-economy practices. Findings indicate that while private expansion has enhanced access and employability focus, quality disparities, affordability barriers, and uneven sustainability adoption persist. The review concludes with policy recommendations for balancing market responsiveness with public accountability and embedding green-campus standards within accreditation frameworks.*

Keywords: *commercialisation of higher education, private universities, green campuses, NEP 2020, sustainable higher education, India, AISHE, UI GreenMetric*

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1. Introduction

India's higher education system is undergoing one of the most rapid structural transformations among major economies. With a youth cohort of nearly 155 million in the 18–23 age group and a policy target of 50% GER by 2035 under NEP 2020, the system requires the addition of approximately 25 million new seats (ANAROCK Capital, 2026; Ministry of Education, 2024). Public institutions alone cannot absorb this demand given fiscal constraints and slower capacity expansion. Consequently, private universities and colleges have become the primary engines of enrolment growth. Commercialisation understood here as the increasing reliance on market mechanisms, fee-based financing, industry-linked curricula, and competitive positioning—has therefore become a defining feature of the sector. Parallel to this market turn, environmental sustainability has moved from peripheral concern to institutional strategy. Private campuses, often newly constructed on large land parcels, are uniquely positioned to embed green design, renewable energy, and resource-efficiency measures from inception. These dual trends—privatisation and greening raise critical questions about access, quality, equity, and long-term ecological responsibility.

This article provides a systematic review of the literature and secondary data on the commercialisation of higher education in India with specific attention to private and green campuses. It addresses three interrelated research questions: (1) What are the scale, pace, and drivers of private higher-education expansion? (2) How are green-campus concepts being operationalised and marketed by private institutions? (3) What policy and governance implications arise from the intersection of commercialisation and sustainability?

2. Methodology

This review follows a systematic narrative approach. Secondary data were drawn primarily from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2022–23 and 2023–24 reports, University Grants Commission (UGC) notifications, and NEP 2020 implementation documents. Peer-reviewed articles, policy analyses, and institutional reports published between 2020 and 2026 were identified through targeted searches of academic databases and education policy portals. Inclusion criteria prioritised empirical studies, statistical analyses, and case examinations of private universities and campus sustainability initiatives in India. Eighteen core sources meeting these criteria form the evidential base; additional grey literature (industry reports, ranking data) supplements quantitative trends.

Data were synthesised thematically under four headings: growth and structure of the private sector; investment and infrastructure requirements; green-campus practices and rankings; and equity, quality, and governance challenges. Tables and conceptual diagrams were constructed from AISHE time-series, ANAROCK Capital projections, and UI GreenMetric and QS Sustainability rankings.

3. Literature Review: Commercialization and Privatization Trends

3.1 Scale and Pace of Private Expansion

AISHE data reveal a decisive shift in institutional ownership. Between 2013–14 and 2023–24, the number of private universities rose from 219 to 546 (149.3% growth), while government universities increased from 504 to 733 (45.4% growth) (Indian Express, 2026; India Today, 2026). By 2023–24, state private universities (464) had overtaken state public universities (462) in absolute count (Education for All in India, 2026). Over a longer 15-year horizon, private universities surged by approximately 480–486% from a base of 87 institutions in 2010–11 (Careers360, 2025; Times Higher Education, 2026).

Enrolment patterns mirror institutional growth. Private university enrolment nearly tripled from 1.19 million (18.6% share) in 2013–14 to 3.46 million (31.9% share) in 2023–24, while government university enrolment grew more modestly from 5.19 million to 7.39 million, declining in relative

share from 81.3% to 68.1% (AISHE 2023–24). At the college level, private unaided institutions account for roughly 70% of colleges and over 50% of college enrolment (Education for All in India, 2026). Overall GER rose from 23.7 in 2014–15 to 30.0 in 2023–24, with female GER (31.2) consistently exceeding male GER (28.9) (Ministry of Education, 2026).

Table 1. Growth of Universities by Management Type (2013–14 to 2023–24)

Type of University	2013–14	2023–24	Growth %
Government universities	504	733	+45.4%
Private universities	219	546	+149.3%
Total universities	723	1,279	+76.9%

Source: AISHE 2023–24; compiled from Indian Express (2026) and Education for All in India (2026).

Table 2. University Enrolment Share by Management (2013–14 vs 2023–24)

Category	2013–14 (lakh)	2023–24 (lakh)	Growth %
Government university enrolment	51.9 (81.3%)	73.9 (68.1%)	+42.5%
Private university enrolment	11.9 (18.6%)	34.6 (31.9%)	+191.8%

Source: AISHE 2023–24.

3.2 Drivers of Commercialisation

Several interlocking factors drive the private surge. First, public funding has remained constrained relative to enrolment growth; public expenditure on education has hovered around 4% of GDP, with higher education receiving roughly 1% (CESS, 2025). Second, NEP 2020 explicitly endorses private and philanthropic participation, treats public and private HEIs on a more equal footing, and permits fee autonomy subject to surplus reinvestment (Ministry of Education, 2020). Third, regulatory openings—particularly the UGC (Setting up and Operation of Campuses of Foreign Higher Educational Institutions in India) Regulations, 2023—have attracted foreign branch campuses (Bristol, York, UNSW Sydney, Southampton, Wollongong, Deakin, and others) (BW Education, 2026; THE, 2026). Fourth, parental and student demand for industry-linked, employability-oriented programmes favours agile private providers (BW Education, 2026).

Scholars have characterised this shift as a move “from state to market” (ScienceDirect, 2025) and as the commodification of higher education under neoliberal reforms (Janata Weekly, 2026). While expansion has improved overall access, concerns persist regarding quality stratification, high fees, and the risk of “capitation” practices in weaker private institutions (IJARSCT, 2025).

Table 3. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) Trends in Higher Education (2014–15 to 2023–24)

Year	Overall GER	Male GER	Female GER
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2014–15	23.7	—	22.9
2019–20	25.6	24.8	26.4
2021–22	28.4	28.3	28.5
2022–23	29.5	28.9	30.2
2023–24	30.0	28.9	31.2

Source: AISHE 2023–24 Final Report; Education for All in India (2026).

3.3 Investment and Infrastructure Imperatives

Meeting the NEP 50% GER target will require approximately 25 million additional seats and an estimated USD 100 billion in construction-led investment for 2.7 billion square feet of academic infrastructure across 30,000 acres (ANAROCK Capital, 2026; RP Realty Plus, 2026). This “academic real-estate supercycle” is attracting both domestic private capital and foreign university branch-campus investments. Vertical campus requirements for foreign HEIs alone are projected at 19 million sq ft by 2040 (Knight Frank–Deloitte–QS, 2026). State governments have responded with stamp-duty exemptions (Uttar Pradesh), international campus frameworks (GIFT City, Gujarat), and large Educity projects (Maharashtra).

Table 4. Projected Higher-Education Infrastructure Requirements to 2035

Parameter	Estimate
Additional seats required (NEP 50% GER)	~25 million
New campus land required	~30,000 acres
Academic infrastructure (sq ft)	2.7 billion sq ft
Construction investment (academic facilities)	USD 100 billion
Foreign HEI vertical campus demand by 2040	~19 million sq ft

Source: ANAROCK Capital (2026); Knight Frank–Deloitte–QS (2026).

4. Concept and Practice of Green Campuses in Private Higher Education

4.1 Defining the Green Campus

A green campus integrates environmental sustainability into physical infrastructure, operations, curriculum, and community engagement. Key dimensions include renewable energy (especially rooftop and ground-mounted solar), water conservation and recycling, waste segregation and circular systems, green buildings (GRIHA/IGBC/LEED certification), biodiversity, sustainable mobility, and education/research on sustainability (UI GreenMetric criteria). Private universities, unconstrained by legacy infrastructure, have advantages in adopting these measures from the design stage.

4.2 Institutional Evidence and Rankings

Several private and public institutions have made measurable progress. MAHE Bengaluru has targeted net-zero emissions by 2040 and ranks first in India (121st globally) in the UI GreenMetric

World University Rankings; it also improved significantly in QS Sustainability Rankings (News18, 2026). IIT Gandhinagar was the first Indian campus to receive a 5-star GRIHA LD rating (The Better India, 2025). Ashoka University operates the LiveGreen@Ashoka programme combining technology, behaviour change, and operations. Woxsen University has pledged carbon neutrality by 2026 and net zero by 2030, commissioning a 1 MW solar plant with pipeline capacity to 4 MW (Pondicherry University Roadmap, 2025). Centurion University reports 55% renewable energy share and 1.25 MWp installed solar capacity (CUTM SDG Report, 2025).

Green initiatives also serve branding and cost-reduction functions. Solar payback periods of 3–6 years, utility savings of 10–30%, and improved rankings enhance both financial and reputational returns (BW Education, 2026). A marketing study of Indian private universities found high mean scores for landscaping, renewable energy, and waste programmes, concluding that green practices significantly influence stakeholder perceptions (Geethanjali et al., 2025).

Table 5. Selected Green Campus Initiatives in Indian Universities

Institution	Key Green Features	Recognition / Target
MAHE Bengaluru	Net-zero pathway, large-scale conservation	UI GreenMetric #1 India (2025); QS Sustainability improvement
IIT Gandhinagar	5-star GRIHA LD, EV charging, walkability	First Indian campus with 5-star GRIHA LD
Ashoka University	LiveGreen@Ashoka, 1,664+ trees	Integrated sustainability curriculum & operations
Woxsen University	1 MW solar (Phase-1), pipeline to 4 MW	Carbon neutral 2026; Net Zero 2030
Centurion University	1.25 MWp solar, 55% renewable share	1,450 tCO _{2e} avoided annually
Shri Govind Guru University	Zero-emission, zero-discharge, water-positive	First green-building certified state university in Gujarat

Sources: Institutional reports; The Better India (2025); News18 (2026); BW Education (2026).

Table 6. UI GreenMetric Assessment Criteria and Weights

Criterion	Weight	Key Indicators
Setting & Infrastructure	15%	Open space ratio, vegetation, budget for sustainability
Energy & Climate Change	21%	Renewable energy, energy efficiency, GHG inventory
Waste	18%	Recycling, toxic waste, organic waste treatment
Water	10%	Water conservation, recycling, efficiency

Transportation	18%	Vehicle reduction, shuttle, bicycle, pedestrian policy
Education & Research	18%	Courses, research, publications, events on sustainability

Source: *UI GreenMetric* (2025).

4.3 Green Campuses as Commercial and Pedagogical Assets

Beyond compliance and cost savings, green campuses function as living laboratories that enhance student experience and institutional branding. Private universities increasingly market sustainability credentials in admissions materials, ranking submissions, and industry partnerships. Solar installations, rainwater harvesting, and zero-waste programmes are presented as evidence of institutional responsibility and modernity. At the same time, academics caution against reducing sustainability to a purely financial or marketing calculus; genuine ecological literacy requires integration into curricula and research (Shiv Nadar University statements in BW Education, 2026).

5. Discussion: Intersections, Tensions, and Policy Implications

5.1 Access versus Affordability

Private expansion has unambiguously increased capacity and GER. Yet high tuition at many private and especially foreign branch campuses risks excluding socio-economically disadvantaged students. Average undergraduate fees at foreign campuses in India already exceed those of Tier-1 private universities by a factor of two (THE, 2026). Without robust scholarship, loan, and regulatory fee frameworks, commercialisation may deepen stratification rather than democratise opportunity.

5.2 Quality Assurance and Accreditation

Rapid private growth has outpaced quality-assurance capacity. Only a minority of institutions hold high-grade NAAC accreditation. Rankings and placement statistics have become primary market signals, sometimes at the expense of deeper academic quality (Policy Circle, 2026). Embedding green-campus metrics into NAAC and NBA frameworks could incentivise both environmental performance and more holistic institutional evaluation.

5.3 Governance and the “No-Profitteering” Principle

Indian jurisprudence maintains that education is not a commercial activity for private profit; surpluses must be reinvested (Lexology, 2026). The tension between this principle and the practical realities of capital-intensive private campuses and foreign investment remains unresolved. Clearer guidelines on surplus utilisation, transparency, and public-benefit obligations are required.

5.4 Scaling Green Practices

While leading private universities demonstrate impressive green initiatives, diffusion across the long tail of smaller private institutions remains limited. Policy instruments—green building mandates for new campuses, renewable-energy purchase obligations, sustainability reporting requirements, and preferential accreditation weightage—could accelerate mainstream adoption.

Table 7. Summary of Key Policy Levers for Balanced Commercialisation and Greening

Policy Domain	Recommended Levers
Access & Equity	Mandatory scholarship quotas; income-contingent loans; fee regulation for essential programmes
Quality Assurance	Mandatory accreditation timelines; integration of green metrics into NAAC/NBA; public placement and outcome dashboards

Sustainability	Green-building codes for new campuses; renewable energy mandates; sustainability reporting; ranking incentives
Governance	Transparent surplus-utilisation rules; independent fee committees; strengthened grievance redressal
Internationalisation	Pricing guidelines for foreign campuses; partnership models that enhance rather than displace domestic capacity

Source: Author synthesis based on NEP 2020, AISHE, and reviewed literature.

Table 8. Conceptual Framework Linking Commercialisation and Green Campuses

Dimension	Commercialisation Driver	Green Campus Response
Infrastructure	Rapid campus construction for enrolment growth	Opportunity for green design from inception (solar, water, waste)
Competition	Differentiation via rankings and branding	Sustainability rankings (UI GreenMetric, QS) as marketing assets
Cost Structure	High capital and operating costs	Long-term utility savings (10–30%) and solar payback (3–6 yrs)
Curriculum & Research	Employability and industry linkage	Living-laboratory pedagogy; green-skills programmes
Regulation	Fee autonomy and foreign entry	Potential for green mandates linked to approvals and accreditation

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The commercialisation of higher education in India is an irreversible structural reality shaped by demography, fiscal limits, and policy choice. Private universities have delivered rapid capacity expansion and are increasingly integrating green-campus practices that yield both ecological and competitive benefits. However, the dual trajectory of marketisation and sustainability is uneven: leading institutions demonstrate high performance on both dimensions, while a large segment of the private sector continues to prioritise enrolment volume over quality and environmental standards.

Three policy priorities emerge. First, equity safeguards—scholarships, income-contingent financing, and transparent fee regulation—must accompany further private expansion. Second, quality-assurance regimes should incorporate sustainability indicators so that green performance becomes a mainstream rather than optional institutional attribute. Third, new campus approvals and foreign-branch regulations should embed minimum green-building and renewable-energy standards, converting the current wave of infrastructure investment into a long-term sustainability dividend.

Future research should examine longitudinal outcomes of green-campus investments on student learning, institutional finances, and regional ecological indicators, as well as the distributional effects of commercialisation across caste, class, gender, and regional lines. Only through such

evidence-informed governance can India reconcile the imperatives of mass higher education, market responsiveness, and planetary responsibility.

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Appendix: Additional Data Tables

Table 9. College Management Share (AISHE 2023–24)

Management Type	% of Colleges	% of Enrolment	Avg Enrolment
Government	17.1%	28.6%	~1,119
Private (Aided)	12.9%	20.7%	~1,074
Private (Unaided)	70.0%	50.8%	~486

Source: AISHE 2023–24; Education for All in India (2026).

Table 10. Leading States in Private University Growth (Young Institutions ≤15 years)

State	Young Private Universities
Gujarat	58
Madhya Pradesh	53
Uttar Pradesh	43
Rajasthan	40
Maharashtra	34

Source: Careers360 (2025) based on UGC data.

Table 11. Estimated Market Size of Indian Higher Education

Year / Projection	Market Value (USD)
2024 (estimated)	~68 billion
2033 (projected)	~135 billion

Source: Lexology / Khaitan & Co. (2026).

Table 12. Foreign University Campuses Approved or Operational in India (Selected)

University	Home Country	Location / Status
University of Southampton	United Kingdom	Operational

University of Wollongong	Australia	Operational
Deakin University	Australia	Operational
University of Bristol	United Kingdom	Approved (Mumbai)
University of York	United Kingdom	Approved (Mumbai)
UNSW Sydney	Australia	Approved (Bengaluru)

Source: BW Education (2026); UGC Regulations 2023.

Table 13. Solar and Renewable Energy Payback and Savings Indicators

Indicator	Typical Range (India)
Solar PV payback period	3–6 years
Utility cost reduction from efficiency + renewables	10–30%
Sunny days per year (most Indian locations)	~300

Source: Institutional statements reported in BW Education (2026).

Table 14. NEP 2020 Higher Education Targets versus Current Progress

Indicator	NEP 2035 Target	Status 2023–24
Gross Enrolment Ratio	50%	30.0%
Additional seats needed	~25 million	In progress
Foreign campuses	Enabled under 2023 Regulations	Multiple operational / approved

Source: NEP 2020; AISHE 2023–24.

Table 15. Summary of Reviewed Literature Themes (2020–2026)

Theme	Key Findings from Literature	Representative Sources
Private growth	149–480% growth; private share rising rapidly	AISHE; Careers360; Indian Express
Infrastructure investment	USD 100 bn; 2.7 bn sq ft needed	ANAROCK; RP Realty Plus
Green campuses	Solar, net-zero targets, ranking gains	UI GreenMetric; institutional cases
Equity concerns	Fee barriers; quality stratification	THE; Policy Circle; ScienceDirect
Governance	No-profiteering principle; regulatory reform	Lexology; NEP2020; UGC Regulations

Source: Author synthesis of the 18+ sources reviewed in this article.