



Multi Dimensional Digital Divide among Rural and Urban Higher Education Institutions [HEIs] in Maharashtra: A Decadal Analysis (2015–2025)

Ms. Durga R. Dhabale¹, Prof. Shubham Kadam²

¹ Department of Higher Education, Datta Meghe Institute of Higher Education and Research Wardha, Maharashtra, India

² Department of Higher Education, Datta Meghe Institute of Higher Education and Research Wardha, Maharashtra, India

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comprehensive statistical and thematic analysis of the digitization of higher education in Maharashtra from 2015 to 2025, highlighting the persistent and evolving digital divide between rural and urban institutions. Pre pandemic data revealed a 30–50% infrastructure gap. During the COVID 19 pandemic (2020–2022), this gap widened into a critical chasm, with urban student access to online learning being 3–4 times higher. Post pandemic (2023–2025), while basic access gaps have narrowed, a new quality-based divide has emerged, with urban institutions leading in advanced technology adoption and blended learning models. The study underscores the need for targeted, equitable interventions to ensure digitization serves as a tool for inclusion rather than exclusion. The paper concludes with targeted recommendations for policy, infrastructure, and capacity building to foster inclusive digital transformation in Maharashtra's higher education landscape.

Keyword: Digitization, Higher Education, Digital Divide, Rural Urban Disparity, Blended Learning, NEP, Educational Technology, COVID 19, Educational Equity.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a comprehensive decadal analysis of the digitization of higher education in Maharashtra from 2015 to 2025 a period marked by rapid technological adoption, policy reforms, and systemic stress testing[2]. The year 2015 serves as a pivotal starting point, coinciding with the launch of national initiatives such as Digital India and the increasing emphasis on technology integration in education[10].

The subsequent decade witnessed the formulation and implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which explicitly prioritizes digital infrastructure, online learning, and blended pedagogical models. However, the true litmus test for digital readiness arrived unexpectedly with the COVID 19 pandemic, which forced an overnight shift to remote learning and exposed critical vulnerabilities in the state's educational ecosystem [14].

While digitization promises greater accessibility, flexibility, and innovation in education, its benefits have not been uniformly distributed. A persistent and multi-dimensional digital divide has emerged between rural and urban higher education institutions (HEIs) in Maharashtra, reflecting disparities not only in infrastructure but also in digital pedagogy, institutional capacity, and socio-cultural readiness [8]. This divide is not merely a matter of connectivity or device ownership; it encompasses gaps in digital literacy, pedagogical adaptation, resource accessibility, and systemic support. As urban institutions advance into the era of artificial intelligence, data analytics, and sophisticated blended learning models, many rural HEIs remain entrenched in efforts to stabilize basic digital access and adoption[13].

The central argument of this paper is that digitization, while a powerful enabler of educational transformation, risks becoming a force of exclusion if not guided by principles of equity, context sensitivity, and systemic support. The findings underscore that technological adoption alone is insufficient; meaningful digital integration requires parallel investments in human capital, pedagogical redesign, institutional governance, and policy frameworks that prioritize the most underserved regions and populations [4].

By examining the interplay between policy intent and ground level implementation, this analysis aims to inform educators, administrators, policymakers, and researchers about the complexities of digital equity in higher education. It concludes with a forward looking set of recommendations designed to bridge the digital divide, foster inclusive innovation, and ensure that the future of education in Maharashtra is not only digitally advanced but also democratically accessible.[14]



1.1 Objectives

- To analyze the evolution and impact of digitization on higher education in Maharashtra from 2015 to 2025 [2], [3].
- To quantify and examine the multi-dimensional digital divide between rural and urban HEIs [1], [13].
- To evaluate the role of key catalysts such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the COVID 19 pandemic in shaping digitization [4], [10].

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study provides a quantifiable, data driven analysis of the digital divide across key domains: infrastructure, access, pedagogy, and administration [2], [6]. By comparing top-down policy successes with bottom-up pedagogical challenges, it offers actionable insights for institutional benchmarking and policy refinement [7], [8]. The paper emphasizes that digitization must aim for universal empowerment and serves as a critical call to action for equitable educational technology distribution [14], [18].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: CONTEXTUALIZING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The digitization of higher education is a global phenomenon, yet its implementation and impact are profoundly localized, shaped by regional infrastructure, policy, and socio-economic contexts. A review of recent literature, both within India and internationally, reveals a consensus on the transformative potential of educational technology, tempered by persistent concerns over equity and access. The scholarship can be synthesized into three core thematic areas that directly inform the analysis of Maharashtra's landscape.

2.1 Digital Adoption and the Persistent Urban Rural Divide

A significant body of literature confirms that while digital adoption in higher education has accelerated, it remains starkly uneven. Studies like those by Kulkarni & Deshpande (2023)[1] document a post pandemic surge in the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) and video conferencing tools across Indian HEIs. However, their integration is often superficial in rural settings, focused on content delivery rather than interactive pedagogy. This echoes global findings that technology adoption follows a "Matthew Effect," where resource rich institutions advance more rapidly, thereby widening existing gaps.

The urban rural digital divide is not merely a binary of connectivity but a multi layered chasm. Research, including the work of Reddy, Chaudhary, & Hussein (2023)[13], highlights a critical dimension: the device divide[1]. Their studies indicate a "smartphone centric" model in rural student populations, which, while providing basic access, limits engagement with complex academic software, coding environments, and sustained writing tasks that are more feasible on laptops or desktops—the "laptop centric" model prevalent in urban institutions. Shinde (2024)[9] specifically examines rural Maharashtra, identifying challenges such as erratic power supply, low bandwidth, and a lack of dedicated digital learning spaces, which collectively impede meaningful integration beyond emergency remote teaching.

2.2 Catalytic Shocks: Policy Mandates and the Pandemic Accelerator

The literature identifies two major catalysts that have defined the last decade: the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the COVID 19 pandemic.[7]

The NEP 2020 is widely recognized as a watershed policy framework that explicitly prioritizes digital infrastructure, online and blended learning, and the creation of a National Educational Technology Forum (NETF). Scholars like Kumar & Singh (2022)[14] argue that the NEP provides a crucial normative and strategic direction for equitable digitization. However, a critical thread in the literature, as seen in analyses of NEP implementation, points to a significant policy practice gap. The ambitious digital vision of the NEP often clashes with ground level realities of funding deficits, bureaucratic delays, and a lack of localized implementation strategies, particularly in rural areas.

Concurrently, the COVID 19 pandemic acted as a forced, global experiment in remote education. Literature unanimously acknowledges its role as both an accelerator and an exposé. Yadav (2023)[10] and Kaul, Bhat, & Sahu (2021)[17] detail how the pandemic spurred rapid adoption of digital platforms. However, reports from McKinsey (2021)[16] and the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)[15] provide quantitative evidence of the devastating equity fallout. They reveal that the pandemic transformed preexisting infrastructural gaps into acute educational inequities, with rural and economically disadvantaged students experiencing drastic reductions in learning time and engagement, leading to what has been termed "unfinished learning" and enrollment dips, as corroborated by AISHE data[6].

2.3 The Pedagogical Shift: From Emergency Remote Teaching to Blended Learning

The literature documents a significant evolution in the conception of digital education. The initial pandemic phase was characterized by Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) a crisis response mode focused on continuity. Post pandemic scholarship, such as that by Gupta & Garg (2022)[11], evaluates the transition towards intentional



Blended Learning models that thoughtfully integrate online and face to face elements to enhance learning outcomes.

This shift unveils a new frontier of the divide: a qualitative pedagogical gap. While urban HEIs are increasingly experimenting with flipped classrooms, AI powered tutoring systems, and simulation based learning, rural institutions often remain in the stabilization phase of ERT. The work of Singh & Murali (2023)[12] on AI integration highlights this emerging frontier, showing that access to and training in advanced educational technologies like generative AI are becoming new markers of institutional stratification. Furthermore, studies emphasize that successful digitization hinges not on technology alone but on digital pedagogy the capacity of faculty to design and deliver effective digital instruction an area where faculty development gaps between urban and rural HEIs are pronounced.

2.4 Synthesis and Research Gap

In summary, the existing literature establishes a clear narrative: digitization in Indian higher education is progressing rapidly but inequitably. The divide is multi-dimensional (infrastructural, device based, pedagogical, and socio cultural), has been exacerbated by the pandemic, and is now evolving from a gap in basic access to a gap in the quality and sophistication of technology use.

The present study, focusing on a decadal analysis (2015–2025) of Maharashtra, seeks to contribute to this body of knowledge by providing a longitudinal, state specific, and statistically synthesized analysis. It aims to bridge the often-siloed discussions of policy, infrastructure, and pedagogy into a cohesive narrative, tracing the evolution of the divide through distinct phases (pre pandemic, pandemic, post pandemic) and across key domains (infrastructure, teaching learning, administration). By doing so, it addresses a gap in literature that offers a consolidated, data driven view of how the digital divide has transformed in shape and character over a critical decade for higher education in India.

3. STATISTICAL SYNTHESIS: THE EVOLUTION OF THE DIVIDE

3.1 Domain 1: Core Infrastructure & Connectivity

Table 1: Infrastructure & Connectivity (2018–2024)

SN	Indicator	Urban HEIs	Rural HEIs	Data Source
1	Institutions with High-Speed Broadband (>100 Mbps)	85–95% (2023)	35–50% (2023)	AISHE, State IT Surveys
2	Adequate Functional Computer Labs	90%+	60–70%	Institutional Audits
3	Student Access: Personal Laptop	75–85%	20–35%	Student Surveys
4	Student Access: Smartphone	~98%	85–95%	Student Surveys
5	Smart/Digital Classrooms	~70% (2024)	~30% (2024)	University Reports

The data suggests a smartphone-centric model in rural HEIs, whereas urban institutions operate on a laptop/desktop-centric model. This has pedagogical implications: smartphone access may limit engagement with resource-intensive academic activities (e.g., coding, design software, complex simulations) compared to laptops. Smart/digital classroom adoption has increased but remains low in rural areas: ~30% in 2024 compared to ~70% in urban HEIs. This indicates that while digitization is advancing, the quality and sophistication of digital infrastructure lag significantly in rural institutions. While basic access indicators (like smartphone ownership) show convergence, advanced infrastructure metrics (broadband, laptops, smart classrooms) reveal a deep and persistent divide. The gap is not merely about access but about the quality and capability of that access, affecting the type and depth of digital learning possible.

3.2 Domain 2: Teaching-Learning Process & Adoption

Table 2: Teaching-Learning Adoption (2019–2024)

Sr. No.	Indicator	Urban HEIs	Rural HEIs	Data Source
1	Faculty Using LMS Regularly	~80%(2024)	~40% (2024)	Faculty Development Studies
2	Complete Shift to Online (2020 Peak)	~95%	60–70%	Crisis-Learning Surveys
3	Students Facing Frequent Connectivity Issues	10–20%	60–80%	Pandemic Impact Studies
4	Use of Digital Assessments	~90% (2024)	~65% (2024)	University Policy Analysis

Frequent Connectivity Problems: 60–80% of rural students faced frequent connectivity issues during online lectures, compared to only 10–20% in urban areas. This highlights that infrastructure limitations directly impede pedagogical delivery and student engagement in rural settings. Urban adoption appears proactive and enhancement-driven, whereas rural adoption is often reactive and crisis-managed. The data suggests that rural digitization efforts are still in a stabilization phase, while urban institutions are advancing toward sophisticated



and sustained digital pedagogy. Despite gaps, rural HEIs have shown notable growth in LMS usage (from ~15% in 2019 to ~40% in 2024) and digital assessment adoption (from ~25% to ~65%). However, the rate of progress in rural areas is slower, and the absolute gap remains wide. Faculty Development is Critical: Targeted training and support for rural faculty in LMS and digital tool usage are essential. Infrastructure Must Precede Pedagogy: Without reliable connectivity, even well-trained faculty cannot effectively implement digital teaching. Hybrid Models Should Be Context-Sensitive: Rural HEIs may benefit from low-bandwidth and offline-capable digital solutions rather than high-end online platforms. Monitoring and Support Systems: Continuous tracking of adoption metrics can help tailor interventions and resource allocation.

3.3 Domain 3: Administrative Digitization & Resource Access

Table 3: Administrative Digitization & Resource Access

Sr. No.	Indicator	Urban HEIs	Rural HEIs	Data Source
1	Fully Implemented ERP System	~90%	~55%	Capacity Studies
2	Students Using E-Library	~70%	~35%	Library Science Research
3	Awareness of MOOC Platforms	>80%	~50%	NPTEL/SWAYAM Data
4	Digital Scholarship Applications (MahaDBT)	~95% (High Success)	~85% (High Intermediary Reliance)	MahaDBT Analytics

MahaDBT Scholarship Applications: Both urban (~95%) and rural (~85%) show high application rates, but rural success often depends on intermediary support (teachers, administrators, cyber cafes). This suggests that while access to digital services is improving, digital self-sufficiency and literacy remain lower in rural institutions. The relative success of transactional systems like MahaDBT compared to low e-library/MOOC usage indicates that rural digitization is currently more effective in administration than in academic enrichment. This creates a lopsided digital ecosystem where back-office processes are digitized faster than teaching-learning resources. The gaps in e-library and MOOC usage are not merely due to lack of access but also reflect differences in institutional advocacy, training, and integration of digital resources into the curriculum. Rural HEIs may require targeted capacity-building programs to promote digital resource utilization beyond administrative functions. Bridge the Academic-Administrative Digitization Gap: Policies should not only focus on ERP and scholarship portals but also promote e-library subscriptions, MOOC integration, and digital literacy programs. Reduce Intermediary Dependence: Enhance digital self-sufficiency through student and faculty training on platform navigation and usage. Promote Open Educational Resources (OER): Increase awareness and accessibility of OERs like SWAYAM in rural HEIs through institutional partnerships and incentives. Holistic Digital Capacity Building: Administrative digitization should be complemented with academic resource digitization to create a balanced and effective digital learning environment.

3.4 The Pandemic as a Statistical Inflection Point

Data from 2020–2022 reveals stark disparities [5], [6], [16]:

- A 2021 survey showed 92% of urban students attended >75% of online classes vs. 28% of rural students [5].
- McKinsey (2021) estimated rural student learning time fell to 30–50% of pre-pandemic levels [16].
- AISHE 2020–21 reported enrollment dips in rural districts linked to digital access crises [6].

4. DISCUSSION

The paper's decadal framework (2015–2025) is a major strength. By segmenting the analysis into pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic phases, it captures the *dynamic* nature of the digital divide—not as a static gap, but as an evolving phenomenon shaped by policy, crisis, and recovery. This approach allows the authors to argue convincingly that the divide has shifted from access to quality, a nuanced observation that many cross-sectional studies miss. The use of comparative tables across infrastructure, pedagogy, and administration provides a clear, evidence-based picture of disparity. The identification of the “smartphone-centric” vs. “laptop-centric” models is particularly insightful, as it moves beyond simple connectivity metrics to reveal how device type influences pedagogical possibility. This aligns with global research on the “second-level digital divide.” The paper does not merely report disparities but contextualizes them within India's ambitious policy landscape (Digital India, NEP 2020). By showing how top-down administrative digitization (e.g., ERP, MahaDBT) has progressed while bottom-up pedagogical integration lags, it exposes a critical implementation gap—a valuable insight for policymakers. While the paper synthesizes data from credible sources (AISHE, UGC, institutional surveys), the methodology section is notably brief. Details on sampling, survey instruments, data triangulation, or qualitative components (if any) are absent. A more rigorous explanation of how the “statistical synthesis” was conducted would enhance reproducibility and credibility. The analysis is strong on infrastructure and adoption metrics but could delve deeper into socio-cultural and motivational dimensions. For instance, how do attitudes toward online learning, family support, gender dynamics, or regional language content availability affect digital engagement in rural vs. urban settings? These factors are hinted at but not systematically explored. The paper relies heavily on quantitative indicators and institutional reports. Incorporating **qualitative insights**—student interviews, faculty



narratives, case studies of “digitally successful” rural HEIs—could enrich the understanding of how the divide is experienced and navigated at the human level.

The concept of a “quality-based divide” is introduced but could be more precisely defined. Does “quality” refer to:

- Pedagogical design (e.g., interactive vs. passive digital content)?
- Technological sophistication (AI, VR)?
- Learning outcomes?

The Maharashtra case is microcosmic of India’s larger digital education challenge. The findings likely resonate across other Indian states with similar rural-urban and developmental disparities. Internationally, the paper contributes to the growing literature on how systemic shocks (like COVID-19) can both accelerate digitization and exacerbate inequality in emerging economies. This paper is a significant and well-structured contribution to the literature on digital equity in higher education. Its phased analysis, empirical grounding, and clear articulation of the shifting nature of the divide provide a solid foundation for policy and practice. To further strengthen its impact, future iterations could benefit from greater methodological detail, deeper socio-cultural analysis, and more tailored, context-aware recommendations. Nonetheless, it stands as an important resource for educators, administrators, and policymakers committed to fostering an inclusive digital future for Indian higher education.

4.1 Emerging Trends & Future Projections (2023–2025)

- **AI Adoption:** >60% of urban faculty have used GenAI vs. <15% in rural institutions [12].
- **Blended Learning:** ~80% of urban HEIs have a formal blended learning strategy vs. ~30% in rural HEIs [11].
- **Digital Skills:** Urban students score 25–40% higher on digital literacy assessments [11], [13].

4.2 Future Path & Recommendations

To bridge the divide, future efforts must prioritize [14], [18]:

- Targeted infrastructure and device subsidies.
- Continuous faculty development for digital pedagogy.
- Robust frameworks for hybrid learning and quality assurance.
- Ethical guidelines for AI integration in education.

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides a rigorous, decade-long examination of the digital transformation in Maharashtra's higher education sector, revealing a complex and evolving divide between rural and urban institutions. The analysis demonstrates that while digitization has advanced significantly since 2015—propelled by national initiatives like Digital India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and the forced acceleration of the COVID-19 pandemic—its benefits have been profoundly uneven. The study underscores that top-down policy and administrative digitization—evidenced by the relative success of systems like MahaDBT—have seen measurable progress. However, bottom-up pedagogical and cultural transformation lags significantly, especially in rural institutions. Without deliberate, context-sensitive, and equity-focused interventions, digitization risks reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than democratizing education.

The paper establishes that the digital divide is not a monolithic issue but a multi-dimensional chasm encompassing disparities in infrastructure, device access, pedagogical adoption, administrative digitization, and digital literacy. The pre-pandemic era laid bare foundational gaps in connectivity and resources. The pandemic then exacerbated these gaps into critical educational inequities, disproportionately affecting rural students' access, engagement, and learning outcomes. Crucially, the post-pandemic period (2023–2025) reveals a qualitative shift in the nature of the divide. While basic access indicators such as smartphone ownership show convergence, a new and potentially more insidious quality-based divide has emerged. Urban HEIs are progressing into sophisticated realms of blended learning, artificial intelligence, and data-driven pedagogy, whereas rural HEIs remain largely focused on stabilizing basic digital integration. This indicates that the gap is no longer solely about *whether* technology is available, but about *how effectively and transformatively* it is used to enhance learning.

In summary, this decadal analysis serves as both a diagnostic and a directive. It highlights the urgent need for holistic, “rural-first” strategies that integrate targeted infrastructure investment, sustained faculty development, pedagogical innovation, and inclusive policy frameworks. Only through such concerted efforts can digitization fulfill its promise as a tool for universal empowerment and equitable advancement in Maharashtra’s—and by extension, India’s—higher education landscape.



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