

NEP 2020 And Challenges and Opportunities in Research in Higher Education Institutes in Assam

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Abstract- National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 treats research and knowledge creation as essential to the renewal of Indian higher education. Its proposals for multidisciplinary institutions, research-intensive learning, faculty and institutional autonomy, innovation, stronger research ecosystems and national-level research funding have particular significance for Assam, where higher education serves a geographically dispersed and socially diverse population. This article examines the challenges and opportunities associated with research in higher education institutes of Assam in the context of NEP 2020. The study follows a descriptive-analytical review design and draws on the NEP 2020, official higher-education statistics, Government of Assam documents, UGC materials, and relevant policy and research literature. The analysis shows that the research environment in Assam is shaped by uneven institutional capacity, differences in access to laboratories, libraries and digital resources, limited research funding and mentoring, competing teaching and administrative responsibilities, difficulties in inter-institutional collaboration, and the need for stronger systems of research integrity and dissemination. At the same time, the state has substantial research opportunities arising from its biodiversity, riverine and rural environments, indigenous and community knowledge, linguistic and cultural diversity, borderland location, agriculture, disaster management needs, public health concerns, education challenges and emerging digital economy. NEP 2020 provides a policy framework through which these contextual strengths can be connected with multidisciplinary research, undergraduate research experiences, institutional autonomy, innovation and entrepreneurship, community engagement, digital scholarship and national funding opportunities. The article proposes a state-level research ecosystem based on institutional research cells, mentoring networks, shared facilities, competitive seed grants, doctoral and post-doctoral linkages, open research practices, ethics training, research clusters and partnerships among colleges, universities, government, industry and communities. The paper argues that research capacity should not be concentrated only in a few metropolitan or research-intensive institutions. Strengthening teaching-oriented colleges and geographically remote institutions is necessary for an inclusive and regionally relevant research

culture. The article concludes that effective implementation of NEP 2020 can convert structural constraints into opportunities if policy implementation is accompanied by sustained resources, transparent governance, capacity development and recognition of high-quality research in the social sciences, humanities, education, natural sciences and interdisciplinary fields.

Keywords: NEP 2020; Higher Education; Research in Assam; Research Capacity; Research Ecosystem; Multidisciplinary Research; Innovation; Research Funding; Research Integrity; Higher Education Institutions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Research is one of the principal mechanisms through which higher education contributes to the intellectual, economic, cultural and social development of a society. Universities and colleges do not merely transmit existing knowledge; they also generate evidence, test ideas, preserve cultural memory, develop technologies, interpret social change and contribute to solutions for local and national problems. NEP 2020 places this knowledge-creating function at the centre of higher education reform. The policy links a vibrant research culture with high-quality teaching, multidisciplinary learning, institutional autonomy and national development (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The policy's research orientation is particularly important for Assam. The state presents a distinctive research landscape because its higher education institutions operate across urban, semi-urban, rural, riverine, hill and borderland contexts. Assam's social and cultural diversity, multilingual communities, biodiversity, tea and agricultural economy, recurring floods and erosion, migration, public-health concerns, educational inequalities and changing patterns of digital participation create a wide range of research questions. Many of these questions cannot be

addressed adequately within a single discipline. They require collaboration among education, sociology, economics, environmental science, geography, public health, agriculture, information technology, humanities and other fields.

The transition envisaged by NEP 2020 therefore involves more than adding research projects to existing academic work. It calls for an institutional culture in which teachers and students are encouraged to ask questions, collect and interpret evidence, work collaboratively, communicate findings and use research responsibly. The policy advocates large multidisciplinary universities and colleges, greater faculty and institutional autonomy, research and innovation initiatives, start-up incubation, industry-academic linkages and a strong national research funding architecture (Ministry of Education, 2020).

In Assam, the implementation of this vision has to be sensitive to institutional diversity. A well-resourced university, an autonomous college, an affiliated undergraduate college and a geographically remote institution cannot be expected to begin from the same level of research capacity. The challenge is therefore to create multiple pathways to research excellence rather than a single model. Small and teaching-oriented institutions can contribute through community-based research, classroom research, local history, indigenous knowledge documentation, social surveys, action research and collaborative projects, while universities and specialized centres can provide advanced laboratories, doctoral supervision and methodological support.

This article examines the major challenges and opportunities in this transition. It does not present fabricated survey results or claim primary empirical findings. Instead, it uses a policy-oriented analytical review to identify institutional conditions, contextual research themes and practical strategies for building an inclusive research ecosystem in Assam.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the research-related vision and major provisions of NEP 2020 relevant to higher education institutions.
- To analyse the principal challenges affecting research capacity in higher education institutions in Assam.
- To identify research opportunities emerging from Assam's social, cultural, environmental and economic context.
- To examine the potential contribution of multidisciplinary and collaborative research to regional development.
- To propose practical institutional and policy measures for strengthening research culture and research quality in Assam.

II. METHODOLOGY

The article adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical review methodology. The unit of analysis is the research ecosystem of higher education institutions in Assam rather than a single institution or discipline. Documentary sources include the National Education Policy 2020, official All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) materials, Government of Assam higher-education documents, UGC regulatory and academic-integrity materials, and information published by the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF). The documents were read thematically and organised under five broad dimensions: policy expectations, institutional capacity, research resources, contextual opportunities, and implementation strategies.

The approach is appropriate because the purpose is exploratory and policy-analytical rather than statistical generalisation. No primary responses are invented and no numerical findings are attributed to a survey that was not conducted. Official statistics are used only to provide contextual indicators. AISHE 2021-22, for example, provides national and state-level information on institutions, enrolment and other higher-education characteristics; the Ministry of Education's later parliamentary material reports Assam's higher-education gross enrolment ratio as 18.7 for 2022-23 (provisional) (Ministry of Education, 2025).

A limitation of the review is that research performance differs substantially across institutions and disciplines, and a documentary analysis cannot substitute for institution-level fieldwork. Future research may

therefore use mixed methods to examine faculty research productivity, funding access, student research participation, laboratory capacity, publication practices and institutional support across different categories of Assam's HEIs.

NEP 2020 and the Changing Research Landscape

Research as a Core Function of Higher Education

NEP 2020 explicitly recognises knowledge creation and research as essential to a prosperous and socially responsive society. It connects research with economic development, social problem-solving, culture and the quality of teaching and learning. The policy argues that high-quality research environments strengthen teaching because students learn within communities where knowledge is actively produced rather than merely transmitted (Ministry of Education, 2020). This principle has implications for colleges as well as universities. Research should not be understood only as a doctoral or post-doctoral activity; it can become part of undergraduate learning, teacher development, curriculum innovation and community engagement.

Multidisciplinary and Interdisciplinary Research

One of the most important changes proposed by NEP 2020 is the movement away from fragmented disciplinary structures towards multidisciplinary institutions and research communities. The policy identifies large multidisciplinary universities, colleges and higher-education clusters as mechanisms for creating vibrant academic communities and cross-disciplinary research (Ministry of Education, 2020). For Assam, this approach is highly relevant because many regional problems cross disciplinary boundaries. Flood resilience, for example, requires environmental science, geography, civil engineering, economics, public administration, education and community studies. Similarly, educational participation in remote areas may require education, sociology, economics, digital technology and public policy.

Research and Innovation Infrastructure

NEP 2020 encourages higher education institutions to establish start-up incubation centres, technology development centres, centres for frontier research and stronger industry-academic linkages. The policy also recognises the importance of research in humanities and social sciences alongside science and technology

(Ministry of Education, 2020). This broader understanding is valuable for Assam because regional development depends not only on technological innovation but also on knowledge about language, culture, society, governance, education, livelihoods and ecological relationships.

National Research Funding Architecture

The policy envisaged a National Research Foundation to seed and strengthen research across universities and colleges. The current ANRF, established under the ANRF Act, 2023, is designed to provide strategic direction for research, innovation and entrepreneurship and to foster research culture across universities, colleges, research institutions and laboratories (ANRF, 2026). The existence of a national research funding architecture creates opportunities for researchers in Assam, but access will depend on proposal quality, institutional preparedness, mentoring, research networks and the ability to manage funded projects effectively.

Higher Education Context of Assam

Assam's higher-education system is part of a wider national landscape marked by expansion in institutions and enrolment alongside persistent differences in regional capacity. AISHE is the principal official source for system-level higher-education statistics in India and covers universities, colleges and stand-alone institutions (Ministry of Education, 2024). The available data show that Assam's participation in higher education remains an important policy concern. The Ministry of Education reported a provisional higher-education GER of 18.7 for Assam in 2022-23, compared with substantial variation among states (Ministry of Education, 2025).

Participation indicators matter for research because a growing higher-education system produces a larger pool of potential researchers, teachers and knowledge users. At the same time, expansion without adequate research capacity may produce a teaching-heavy system in which faculty have little time or infrastructure for systematic inquiry. Assam therefore needs to connect expansion, quality improvement and research development rather than treating them as separate agendas.

Government of Assam initiatives also recognise research and innovation as components of higher-education development. The state's RUSA framework identifies research and innovation, infrastructural gaps, faculty availability, quality improvement and regional balance among its objectives. This policy direction is consistent with NEP 2020's emphasis on quality and research-oriented institutional development (Government of Assam, 2026).

Major Challenges of Research in Higher Education Institutions in Assam

Inadequate and Uneven Research Infrastructure

Research requires more than a library card and an internet connection. Depending on the discipline, institutions need laboratories, field equipment, statistical software, digital databases, archives, computing facilities, research rooms, reliable internet, data-storage systems and appropriate safety arrangements. The availability of such resources is uneven across institutions. Smaller colleges may have limited capacity to purchase specialised databases or instruments, while remote institutions can face additional connectivity and logistics constraints.

The appropriate response is not to replicate expensive infrastructure in every institution. Shared facilities, regional research centres, university-college equipment-sharing arrangements and digital library consortia can reduce duplication and extend access. Institutions should map existing resources and create formal mechanisms for researchers from affiliated or neighbouring colleges to access advanced facilities.

Limited Research Funding and Proposal-Writing Capacity

Funding is a recurring constraint for research in institutions where faculty members have limited experience of competitive grants. A lack of proposal-writing mentoring can be as important as a lack of funds. Researchers may have relevant ideas but struggle with problem formulation, literature synthesis, research design, budgeting, ethical documentation, data management and impact planning. Small internal seed grants can provide an important bridge by enabling preliminary studies that later support larger proposals.

The emerging ANRF ecosystem provides a national opportunity, but institutions need systems that help researchers move from individual applications to sustained project development. Research development cells, proposal clinics, peer review groups and mentoring by experienced investigators can increase institutional readiness.

Heavy Teaching and Administrative Responsibilities
College teachers often balance teaching, evaluation, admissions, examinations, student support, committee work, documentation and institutional administration. These activities are necessary, but when research is treated as an additional task without protected time, sustained research becomes difficult. The solution is not simply to reduce teaching; it is to develop rational workload planning, research leave where feasible, team-based academic administration, research assistants and institutional calendars that protect periods for research activity.

Limited Research Mentoring and Methodological Support

Research quality depends on methodological competence. Researchers in education and social sciences require training in research design, sampling, measurement, qualitative inquiry, mixed methods, statistics, digital data collection, academic writing and referencing. Researchers in laboratory and technical fields require specialised methodological and instrumentation support. A sustainable research culture therefore needs mentoring beyond one-time workshops.

Universities can support affiliated colleges through faculty-development networks, online research-methodology clinics, consultation hours and co-supervision or collaborative research arrangements where permitted. Experienced researchers should be encouraged to mentor early-career faculty and student research groups.

Weak Inter-Institutional Collaboration

Research productivity is often strengthened by collaboration because researchers can share expertise, equipment, data and complementary perspectives. However, institutional boundaries, limited communication and differences in academic calendars

can prevent collaboration. Assam needs stronger networks linking colleges with universities, specialised institutes, government departments, civil-society organisations and industry. Collaborative projects should be built around shared regional problems rather than only around institutional prestige.

Publication Pressure and Research Quality

The expansion of research evaluation can create incentives for rapid publication. If quantity becomes more important than quality, researchers may become vulnerable to low-quality or predatory publishing, inappropriate authorship, duplicate publication and weak peer review. UGC's academic-integrity framework emphasises intellectual honesty in research and academic work, and institutions need systems that make ethical research practice part of routine research training rather than an afterthought (UGC, 2018).

Plagiarism, Authorship and Research Ethics

Digital access has made literature searching easier but has also increased the possibility of careless copying, patchwriting, inappropriate paraphrasing and unattributed use of sources. Research integrity also includes responsible authorship, transparent methods, accurate reporting and proper handling of data. The objective should not be merely to obtain a low similarity score. Genuine originality comes from independent thinking, appropriate citation, clear attribution, transparent methodology and meaningful interpretation. Institutions should therefore provide training in academic writing, citation management, research ethics and responsible use of artificial intelligence tools.

Digital Divide and Unequal Access to Scholarly Information

Digital scholarship has expanded access to journals, repositories, datasets, statistical tools and research communities. Yet access is not uniform. Researchers may encounter bandwidth limitations, insufficient devices, software costs, database access barriers and limited digital literacy. Digital infrastructure must therefore be treated as research infrastructure. Institutional repositories, open-access resources, library consortia and training in information literacy can reduce these inequalities.

Limited Research Culture in Teaching-Oriented Institutions

In some colleges, research remains associated mainly with universities and doctoral scholars. This perception can discourage teachers who do not have a long research track record. A research culture grows through small, regular activities: departmental seminars, reading groups, classroom-based inquiry, local surveys, working papers, student projects, collaborative presentations and internal peer review. Recognition of such activities can gradually build confidence and institutional momentum.

Difficulty in Converting Research into Social Impact

Research becomes socially valuable when findings reach teachers, administrators, communities, practitioners, industry or policymakers in usable form. Academic articles remain important, but institutions should also develop policy briefs, community reports, open datasets where ethically appropriate, training materials, exhibitions, demonstration projects and local-language communication. Assam's regional problems provide many opportunities for such knowledge translation.

Opportunities for Research under NEP 2020 in Assam Assam as a Living Laboratory for Contextual Research

Assam's geographical and socio-cultural diversity provides a natural setting for context-sensitive research. Researchers can study education in rural and riverine communities, migration and schooling, disaster preparedness, livelihood transitions, biodiversity conservation, public health, gender and education, language education, indigenous knowledge, tourism, agriculture, entrepreneurship and digital inclusion. Research questions grounded in local realities can contribute both to regional development and to wider academic debates.

Research on Floods, Erosion and Climate Resilience

Flooding and riverbank erosion are recurring concerns in Assam. Research can move beyond documenting impacts to developing evidence-based approaches to preparedness, resilient infrastructure, school continuity, digital learning during disruptions, community response, livelihood adaptation and local governance. Such work naturally supports

interdisciplinary collaboration among education, geography, environmental science, economics, engineering and social sciences.

Indigenous and Community Knowledge

NEP 2020 gives importance to Indian knowledge traditions and local contexts. Assam offers opportunities to document and critically examine community knowledge relating to agriculture, medicinal plants, crafts, food practices, water management, ecological conservation, oral traditions and local history. Such research must follow ethical principles, respect community ownership and avoid extracting knowledge without appropriate recognition or benefit.

Education and Teacher Education Research

Education is an especially significant field for Assam because the implementation of NEP 2020 involves curriculum change, competency-based learning, multilingual education, assessment reform, teacher preparation, digital learning, inclusive education and vocational exposure. Colleges of education and education departments can conduct action research and longitudinal studies on how reforms affect classroom practice, student participation and learning outcomes.

Multilingualism and Language Research

Assam's linguistic diversity provides a strong basis for research on multilingual pedagogy, language acquisition, translation, language technology, literature, cultural identity and educational access. Digital tools can support corpus development, documentation and educational resources in regional and minority languages, while researchers can investigate how language choices influence participation and learning.

Agriculture, Livelihood and Rural Development

Research on agriculture, fisheries, livestock, tea, rural entrepreneurship, self-help groups, markets, financial inclusion and climate adaptation can connect higher education with local economic development. Colleges located in rural areas are particularly well placed to undertake community-linked studies because faculty and students are closer to local institutions and communities.

8.7 Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence

The expansion of digital education and artificial intelligence creates research opportunities as well as risks. Assamese and other regional-language educational content, AI-supported tutoring, digital assessment, online teacher development, learning analytics, accessibility and digital inclusion can become important areas of research. Research should also examine privacy, bias, academic integrity, unequal access and the changing role of teachers.

Entrepreneurship and Innovation

NEP 2020 encourages innovation and entrepreneurship within higher education. Assam's institutions can establish innovation clubs, incubation partnerships and problem-solving laboratories focused on local needs. Student projects can be connected with agriculture, tourism, handicrafts, environmental services, education technology and community enterprise. Innovation should be understood broadly to include social and educational innovation, not only commercial technology products.

Role of Colleges in Building a Research Culture

Colleges constitute a crucial but sometimes under-recognised part of Assam's research ecosystem. Many colleges have direct relationships with communities and can identify research questions that are invisible at a distance. Departments can create annual research plans containing a small number of realistic priorities. Each department can maintain a research seminar calendar, organise reading groups, mentor student projects and encourage faculty to prepare proposals collaboratively.

An institutional research cell should not be a purely administrative committee. Its functions should include research mentoring, identifying funding opportunities, maintaining a database of faculty expertise, supporting ethics procedures, coordinating seminars, facilitating collaborations, monitoring projects and disseminating research outputs. The cell can also maintain a repository of datasets, instruments and locally relevant literature.

10. Role of Universities and Research-Intensive Institutions

Universities can act as hubs that support the wider college system. Their laboratories, libraries, doctoral programmes and experienced researchers can be connected with affiliated colleges through formal research networks. Joint seminars, short-term training, collaborative fieldwork, shared equipment and co-authored projects can help reduce institutional isolation.

Research-intensive institutions should also develop outreach mechanisms rather than concentrating expertise within their own campuses. A university-college partnership model could identify regional research themes and invite faculty from colleges to participate in working groups. Such networks would

be consistent with NEP 2020's emphasis on multidisciplinary and collaborative research.

Proposed Assam Higher Education Research Ecosystem

Based on the analysis, an inclusive research ecosystem for Assam can be organised around six mutually reinforcing layers: institutional capacity, people and mentoring, shared infrastructure, funding, collaboration, and research integrity. The model should recognise institutional diversity while establishing minimum support systems for all research-active departments.

Layer	Key mechanism	Expected outcome
Institutional capacity	Research cells, annual research plans, seed grants	Regular and organised research activity
People & mentoring	Faculty mentors, research-method clinics, peer groups	Improved proposal and methodological quality
Shared infrastructure	Libraries, laboratories, software and equipment-sharing	Lower cost and wider access
Funding	Internal seed funding plus competitive external proposals	More successful research projects
Collaboration	University-college-government-industry-community networks	Multidisciplinary and socially relevant research
Integrity & dissemination	Ethics training, plagiarism prevention, repositories, policy briefs	Credible and usable knowledge

Suggested Institutional Action Plan

Short-Term Actions

- Create or strengthen an active institutional research and development cell.
- Prepare a faculty expertise and research-interest database.
- Conduct regular workshops on research methodology, academic writing, citation and research ethics.
- Introduce departmental research seminars and peer-review sessions.
- Create small internal seed grants for feasible pilot studies.
- Develop institutional repositories and organised digital research resources.

Medium-Term Actions

- Establish university-college research clusters around regionally relevant themes.
- Develop shared access arrangements for specialised laboratories, databases and software.
- Increase collaborative proposals to national research agencies and other funding bodies.
- Build formal partnerships with government departments, local bodies, NGOs, industry and community organisations.
- Create mechanisms for student participation in supervised research and community projects.

Long-Term Actions

- Develop regional centres of excellence around selected research strengths of Assam.
- Create sustained research funding windows for social sciences, humanities, education and community-based research alongside STEM fields.
- Build international and inter-state research collaborations based on clear academic priorities.
- Develop systems for translating high-quality research into policy recommendations, technologies, educational resources and community interventions.
- Establish transparent institutional research evaluation that values quality, integrity, collaboration and societal impact.

III. DISCUSSION

The analysis suggests that the central issue is not whether Assam has research potential; it clearly does. The more important question is whether institutions possess the systems needed to convert potential into sustained research performance. NEP 2020 offers a broad policy direction, but policy statements become meaningful only when they are translated into institutional routines. Research needs time, resources, mentoring, peer interaction, ethical standards and opportunities to communicate findings.

A major implication is that research policy should avoid a binary distinction between 'research institutions' and 'teaching institutions'. Undergraduate colleges can contribute valuable research if the scale and method are appropriate to their resources. Community-based studies, action research, educational innovation, local history, environmental observation, small-scale social surveys and interdisciplinary field projects can produce significant knowledge. At the same time, colleges should have pathways to collaborate with universities when advanced methods or facilities are required.

Another implication concerns the meaning of research quality. Quality should be assessed through methodological rigour, relevance, originality, transparency, ethical conduct, peer review and

potential impact rather than only publication counts. The UGC's academic-integrity framework and contemporary research-assessment principles support the need for responsible research practices. Institutions should cultivate a culture in which researchers are rewarded for producing trustworthy knowledge, sharing data where appropriate, mentoring students and contributing to communities.

The Assam context also makes local relevance particularly important. Research themes should emerge not only from international literature but also from local evidence and community priorities. A flood-affected school, a rural college, an indigenous community, a tea-growing area or a digitally underserved village can generate research questions of national and international significance when studied rigorously. Local relevance and scholarly quality are not opposites; they can reinforce each other.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop an Assam-wide research networking mechanism connecting universities, autonomous colleges, affiliated colleges and specialised institutions.
- Provide competitive but accessible institutional seed grants, particularly for early-career faculty and teaching-oriented colleges.
- Establish regular research-methodology and proposal-development clinics with experienced mentors.
- Promote shared research facilities and digital library access to reduce institutional inequality.
- Encourage multidisciplinary research clusters focused on floods and climate resilience, education, health, biodiversity, agriculture, rural development, language and culture, and digital transformation.
- Create institutional policies for ethical research, responsible authorship, data management, conflict-of-interest disclosure and appropriate use of AI tools.
- Protect reasonable research time through workload planning and administrative efficiency.
- Strengthen university-college collaboration through joint seminars, field studies, project teams and access to specialised facilities.

- Encourage undergraduate research and community-based projects consistent with the research orientation of NEP 2020.
- Support publication beyond journal articles through policy briefs, working papers, repositories, local-language dissemination and practitioner-oriented outputs.
- Build institutional capacity to apply for ANRF and other competitive funding schemes through proposal review committees and mentoring.
- Recognise research quality, collaboration, mentoring, innovation and societal impact in institutional academic-development systems.
- Promote documentation and responsible study of indigenous and community knowledge with appropriate ethical safeguards.
- Develop mechanisms to monitor the implementation of research-related provisions of NEP 2020 using transparent indicators.
- Ensure that research development reaches geographically remote and resource-constrained institutions rather than remaining concentrated in a small number of campuses.

V. CONCLUSION

NEP 2020 provides an important opportunity to reposition research as a central component of India's higher education system. For Assam, the policy is especially significant because the state possesses substantial but unevenly mobilised research potential. Its diverse communities, ecological systems, languages, cultural traditions, rural economy and developmental challenges provide a rich field for original and socially relevant inquiry.

The major constraints identified in this article—infrastructure gaps, limited funding, lack of mentoring, workload pressures, uneven digital access, weak collaboration, publication-quality concerns and research-integrity challenges—are not insurmountable. They require coordinated institutional action and sustained policy support. The emerging national research ecosystem through ANRF, together with Assam's higher-education reform initiatives, creates a favourable policy environment. However, opportunities will benefit institutions only when researchers are supported to develop proposals,

access facilities, work collaboratively and communicate findings responsibly.

The future of research in Assam should therefore be inclusive, multidisciplinary, ethical and locally grounded. Universities can provide advanced research leadership, while colleges can contribute community knowledge, field evidence and student participation. Government, industry, civil society and communities can become partners in knowledge creation. If these relationships are institutionalised, NEP 2020 can help Assam move from a fragmented research environment towards a connected regional research ecosystem capable of producing knowledge that is both academically credible and socially useful.

Limitations of the Study

This article is a documentary and analytical review and does not claim to represent the experiences of every higher education institution in Assam. Institutional conditions vary by university, college type, discipline, location, funding status and accreditation level. The article also does not provide a primary survey of faculty or students. Accordingly, its recommendations should be tested and refined through empirical studies. Future research can develop institution-level indicators of research capacity and conduct comparative studies across urban, rural, remote and specialised institutions.

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