

Negotiating Social Justice and Global Competitiveness in Higher Education: A Comparative Discourse Analysis of India and the UAE

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary context of neoliberal globalisation, higher education has increasingly become a critical arena through which states negotiate questions of social justice, economic competitiveness, innovation, and national development. Both India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) formally promote inclusive and globally competitive educational systems; however, the ideological foundations and policy narratives shaping these objectives differ significantly. This study comparatively examines how higher education policy discourse in India and the UAE constructs and legitimises notions of equity, merit, citizenship, excellence, and global talent within distinct socio-political and economic contexts. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Fairclough, Foucault, and Bourdieu, the article critically analyses key policy documents, including India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, University Grants Commission (UGC) policy frameworks, UAE Centennial 2071, and strategic educational policy texts issued by the UAE Ministry of Education. The analysis reveals that India's higher education discourse remains strongly influenced by constitutional commitments to social justice, affirmative inclusion, and representation of historically marginalised communities, whereas the UAE's educational policy framework is predominantly shaped by discourses of innovation, internationalisation, human capital development, and global competitiveness. Despite these differing ideological orientations, both policy regimes reproduce structural inequalities through class, language, institutional privilege, citizenship, and differential access to elite educational capital.

Key Words : Higher education, Social justice, Global competitiveness, Critical discourse analysis, India; UAE, Educational policy, Neoliberalism, Inclusion, Internationalisation

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has become one of the most contested domains within contemporary public policy discourse. Across the world, universities are increasingly expected to function not only as centres of knowledge production but also as engines of economic growth, innovation, global competitiveness, and social transformation (Spring, 2015). The expansion of globalisation, internationalisation, and neoliberal governance has significantly reshaped the objectives and institutional structures of higher education systems,

particularly in emerging economies and knowledge-driven states (Naidoo, 2011).

In this context, educational policies increasingly emphasise competitiveness, employability, entrepreneurship, global rankings, and innovation ecosystems (World Bank, 2022). Simultaneously, higher education remains deeply connected to questions of social justice, democratic participation, educational access, and equity. Consequently, educational policy discourse often reflects tensions between redistributive justice and market-oriented competitiveness (Fraser, 2008).

India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) provide

particularly significant comparative contexts for examining these tensions. India's higher education system has historically been shaped by constitutional commitments toward equality, affirmative action, and democratic inclusion. Policies related to reservations, minority rights, multilingualism, gender inclusion, and educational access for disadvantaged communities have remained central to educational governance in postcolonial India (Government of India, 2020).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 re-emphasises the importance of equity, access, inclusion, and multidisciplinary learning while simultaneously promoting internationalisation, innovation, and global educational competitiveness (Government of India, 2020). This dual orientation reflects the growing influence of neoliberal educational reforms within Indian higher education.

In contrast, the UAE's higher education landscape has evolved within a rapidly globalising and market-oriented developmental framework. The UAE positions itself as a global knowledge economy driven by innovation, technological advancement, entrepreneurship, and internationalisation. Educational policy frameworks such as UAE Centennial 2071 strongly emphasise excellence, talent attraction, future readiness, artificial intelligence, and economic diversification (UAE Government, 2017).

Despite these contrasting ideological orientations, both India and the UAE publicly advocate inclusive higher education systems. However, the meanings and structures of inclusion differ significantly across the two contexts. India's discourse of inclusion is primarily grounded in constitutional social justice and redistributive equality, whereas the UAE's educational discourse prioritises global competitiveness, strategic talent integration, and selective internationalisation.

This article comparatively analyses the discourses of inclusion and exclusion embedded within higher education policies in India and the UAE through the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Rather than treating educational policies as neutral administrative texts, the study examines how policy language constructs educational legitimacy, institutional hierarchy, merit, citizenship, and desirable educational subjects.

The article seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do higher education policies in India and the UAE construct discourses of inclusion and exclusion?

2. What ideological assumptions underpin educational policy narratives in the two countries?
3. How are social justice, merit, competitiveness, and educational access represented within policy discourse?
4. In what ways do educational policies reproduce structural hierarchies and selective inclusion?

The study contributes to scholarship on comparative higher education, sociology of education, educational governance, migration studies, and critical policy analysis by comparatively examining two distinct educational policy regimes within the Global South and Gulf region.

Literature Review

Higher Education and Social Justice

The relationship between higher education and social justice has occupied a central place within educational sociology and public policy scholarship. Education is frequently conceptualised as a mechanism for social mobility, democratic citizenship, and redistribution of opportunities (Tikly, 2011). In postcolonial societies such as India, higher education policies have historically been linked to constitutional commitments toward equality, representation, and affirmative justice.

Sen's (1999) capability approach argues that educational justice should not merely guarantee formal access but should enhance individuals' substantive freedoms and capabilities. Similarly, Fraser (2008) emphasises that social justice requires redistribution, recognition, and representation within institutional systems.

India's reservation policies for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) reflect attempts to address historical inequalities and structural exclusion. Educational inclusion within India has therefore been historically framed through the language of constitutional democracy, representation, and social justice (Government of India, 2020).

However, scholars have also argued that contemporary higher education reforms increasingly reflect neoliberal policy orientations that prioritise competitiveness, employability, and market-oriented governance (Naidoo, 2011). The coexistence of redistributive justice and neoliberal reforms creates important tensions within educational policy discourse.

Neoliberalism and Higher Education

The global transformation of higher education is deeply connected to neoliberal governance and marketisation. Universities increasingly function within frameworks shaped by competition, privatisation, rankings, employability, and global mobility (Spring, 2015). Educational institutions are increasingly expected to contribute directly to economic growth and national competitiveness (World Bank, 2022).

Neoliberal educational reforms often prioritise innovation, entrepreneurialism, efficiency, and human capital development. Critics argue that such reforms deepen educational inequalities by privileging elite institutions, economically advantaged groups, and globally marketable forms of knowledge (Marginson, 2016).

Within the Gulf region, the UAE represents a significant example of market-oriented educational governance. The country's educational strategies are strongly connected to innovation ecosystems, economic diversification, and global competitiveness. International branch campuses, private educational institutions, and foreign university partnerships occupy a central position within the UAE's higher education landscape.

Internationalisation and Educational Globalisation

Internationalisation has become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary higher education systems. Universities increasingly pursue international collaborations, foreign branch campuses, student mobility, and global ranking visibility (Marginson, 2016).

Although internationalisation is frequently associated with diversity and cosmopolitanism, scholars have argued that it may also reproduce forms of selective inclusion and educational stratification (Naidoo, 2011). Access to globally prestigious educational institutions often remains limited to economically privileged groups.

The UAE has emerged as a major regional hub for international higher education. Educational policy discourse frequently emphasises “world-class universities,” “global excellence,” “innovation ecosystems,” and “future-ready talent” (UAE Government, 2017). However, migrant communities, labour-class populations, and low-income expatriate groups often remain structurally marginal within these educational frameworks.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Educational Policy

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides an

important methodological framework for examining how educational policies construct power relations, institutional legitimacy, and social hierarchy (Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Fairclough (1995) conceptualises discourse as a form of social practice that both shapes and reproduces social reality.

Educational policies are therefore not neutral documents; they are ideological instruments that produce meanings of merit, citizenship, educational legitimacy, and institutional belonging (Van Dijk, 1993). Foucault's (1972) work further demonstrates how discourse functions as a mechanism of governance by classifying populations and regulating institutional norms.

Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural capital and symbolic power are particularly useful for understanding educational inequality. Educational institutions often privilege dominant linguistic, cultural, and institutional forms of capital while marginalising subordinated groups.

Despite growing scholarship on NEP 2020 and GCC educational reforms, limited comparative research has critically examined how India and the UAE construct competing discourses of educational inclusion, equity, and global competitiveness. This article seeks to address this gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon the theoretical contributions of Norman Fairclough, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough's (1995, 2003) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis forms the primary analytical framework of this study. According to Fairclough, discourse operates across three interconnected dimensions:

1. Textual analysis
2. Discursive practice
3. Social practice

Textual analysis examines vocabulary, framing, metaphors, and rhetorical structures within policy documents. Discursive practice analyses how policy narratives are produced, circulated, and institutionalised. Social practice explores the broader ideological and socio-political structures embedded within discourse.

This framework enables the study to examine how educational policy language constructs meanings of inclusion, merit, competitiveness, and legitimacy.

Foucault: Power and Educational Governance

Foucault's (1972) conception of discourse as a mechanism of power and governance is particularly relevant for educational policy analysis. Educational institutions do not merely provide knowledge; they regulate populations, classify subjects, and produce norms.

Policy language surrounding "global talent," "innovation," "future-ready learners," and "inclusive excellence" reflects broader governmental rationalities. Educational policies therefore shape who is recognised as a legitimate educational subject.

Bourdieu: Cultural Capital and Symbolic Power

Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural capital, symbolic power, and habitus are important for understanding educational inequality and institutional privilege. Higher education systems often privilege dominant linguistic and institutional forms of capital.

In both India and the UAE, educational inclusion remains constrained by class hierarchy, English-language privilege, citizenship structures, and institutional stratification.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The study is interpretive in orientation and focuses on policy discourse rather than empirical fieldwork. The article analyses major educational policy documents and strategic frameworks from India and the UAE.

For India, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, University Grants Commission (UGC) policy frameworks, Equity and inclusion policy documents and Government reports on higher education. whereas for UAE, UAE Centennial 2071, UAE Ministry of Education frameworks, Higher education strategic plans and Innovation and internationalisation policy documents are analysed comparatively. Particular attention is paid to recurring keywords including inclusion, equity, excellence, innovation, competitiveness, global talent, accessibility, social justice and human capital.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

India: The Discourse of Social Justice and Democratic Inclusion

India's higher education discourse is strongly shaped by constitutional commitments toward equality,

representation, affirmative action, and democratic inclusion. NEP 2020 repeatedly emphasises terms such as "equity," "access," "multilingualism," "inclusive education," and "socio-economically disadvantaged groups" (Government of India, 2020).

The discourse of inclusion within Indian higher education is closely connected to historical inequalities based on caste, class, religion, gender, and geography. The state positions itself as a democratic welfare institution responsible for expanding educational opportunities.

Equity and Representation

Indian higher education discourse frequently foregrounds affirmative inclusion and redistributive justice. Reservation policies are discursively justified as mechanisms for correcting historical exclusion and ensuring democratic participation.

Educational access is framed not merely as economic development but as a constitutional obligation linked to citizenship and social justice.

NEP 2020 explicitly references gender inclusion, minority representation, rural educational access and socio-economic disadvantage. This reflects a redistributive understanding of educational inclusion.

Multilingualism and Cultural Inclusion

Another important dimension of Indian educational discourse is multilingualism. The policy framework recognises linguistic diversity and local knowledge systems, thereby challenging colonial and elitist educational hierarchies.

However, important contradictions remain. Elite institutions continue to privilege English-language education and urban middle-class cultural capital. Consequently, educational inclusion often remains uneven despite inclusive rhetoric.

Neoliberal Tensions within NEP 2020

Despite its social justice orientation, NEP 2020 also incorporates neoliberal educational discourse. Terms such as "global standards," "innovation," "internationalisation," and "multidisciplinary excellence" increasingly appear within policy language. This reflects a growing tension between democratic inclusion and market-oriented competitiveness. Thus, Indian higher education policy simultaneously promotes redistributive justice and neoliberal educational reforms.

UAE: Global Competitiveness and Selective Inclusion

The UAE's higher education discourse is strongly shaped by globalisation, economic diversification, and future-oriented governance. Educational policy language frequently emphasizes innovation, excellence, entrepreneurship, artificial intelligence, global talent and knowledge economy development. The UAE positions higher education as a strategic instrument for global competitiveness and national prestige.

The Knowledge Economy Narrative

UAE educational policies strongly frame universities as engines of innovation and economic transformation. Educational institutions are expected to produce highly skilled graduates capable of contributing to global markets. The discourse of "human capital" is central to UAE educational policy. Students are primarily constructed as productive economic subjects within future-oriented innovation frameworks.

Internationalisation and Elite Globalism

The UAE hosts numerous international branch campuses and actively promotes itself as a global educational hub. Policy discourse frequently emphasizes world-class universities, international partnerships, innovation ecosystems and global rankings.

However, this discourse often reflects selective inclusion. Access to elite higher education institutions remains strongly shaped by class privilege, nationality, and economic capacity. Migrant labour communities and low-income expatriate groups remain largely invisible within policy discourse.

Citizenship and Educational Legitimacy

Educational access within the UAE is closely connected to citizenship structures and migration regimes. Although international students and "global talent" are welcomed within policy discourse, inclusion often remains economically filtered.

Unlike India's redistributive discourse of constitutional inclusion, the UAE's educational framework primarily prioritises productivity, innovation, and strategic talent integration.

Comparative Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals significant ideological differences between India and the UAE

(Vidovich, 2007). India's educational discourse reflects constitutional equality, redistributive justice, affirmative representation, and democratic inclusion.

In contrast, the UAE's educational discourse reflects neoliberal competitiveness, innovation-driven governance, selective cosmopolitanism, and human capital development. Despite these differences, both systems reproduce forms of selective inclusion.

Shared Contradictions

Both India and the UAE publicly advocate inclusive higher education while simultaneously reproducing structural inequalities.

India

Persistent inequalities include English-language privilege, elite institutional dominance, urban-rural disparity and class-based exclusion.

UAE

Educational exclusion is shaped by migrant precarity, citizenship hierarchy, class privilege and economic filtering.

Thus, inclusion within both systems remains conditional, stratified, and uneven.

Globalisation and Educational Transformation

The study further demonstrates how globalisation reshapes educational discourse across distinct political contexts. Even educational frameworks rooted in social justice increasingly adopt market-oriented vocabulary associated with rankings, innovation, employability, and competitiveness. Educational policy discourse therefore reflects a broader global shift toward neoliberal governance.

Conclusion

By comparatively analysing educational policy texts, the article demonstrated how distinct ideological frameworks shape competing understandings of educational access, merit, inclusion, and institutional legitimacy. The findings reveal that India's higher education discourse remains strongly connected to constitutional commitments toward social justice, democratic inclusion, and affirmative representation. In contrast, the UAE's educational discourse prioritises innovation, global competitiveness, and human capital development within a market-oriented governance

framework.

Despite these differences, both systems reproduce forms of selective inclusion shaped by institutional privilege, class hierarchy, linguistic capital, citizenship structures, and neoliberal governance. It is argued that contemporary higher education policies increasingly operate within a tension between democratic inclusion and market-driven competitiveness. Educational inclusion is therefore not merely a policy objective but a deeply ideological and discursive process linked to broader structures of power and governance.

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