

# Scale Without Sightlines

West Bengal runs one of India's largest higher-education systems and produces some of its finest graduates. What it lacks is the ability to see where that talent goes — and a strategy to align what its institutions produce with where opportunity actually lies.

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*I was educated in West Bengal before my work took me to the United States. The question at the center of this analysis — why a state that produces so much talent so often watches it leave — has never been an abstract one for me. I write about it plainly, and without alignment to any party or government, by choice.*

A state's higher-education problem is usually told as a story of shortage. West Bengal's is a story of misalignment, which is harder to see and more correctable than it first appears.

By headcount, the system is vast. West Bengal enrolls roughly 27.22 lakh students across some 1,514 colleges and more than 58 universities, the fifth-largest student population of any Indian state. It contains institutions of genuine global standing. The difficulty is not that the state educates too few people. It is that the state has almost no instrument for connecting what those people study to where the economy is actually hiring, and no way to see, in any systematic form, where its graduates go once they leave.

Two numbers frame the situation. The first is participation: West Bengal's gross enrollment ratio in higher education sits at 26.3 percent, below the national average and far beneath the southern states that have made participation a deliberate project. The second is more revealing. The state's headline unemployment rate is low — 2.2 percent on the usual-status measure. A government counterpart will cite that figure first, and a case built on the language of crisis will not survive it. The argument here is different. A 2.2 percent rate in a state that exports its workers and underemploys its graduates is not a sign of health. It is a sign that the labor market clears through departure and distress work rather than through good local jobs, and that the state cannot presently see the difference.

THE LANDSCAPE IN FOUR FIGURES

|                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                       |                                                                                                        |                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <div>27.22<sub>lakh</sub></div> <div>students enrolled – the 5th-largest system in India</div> <div>AISHE 2021–22</div> | <div>26.3%</div> <div>gross enrollment ratio, against 28.4% nationally</div> <div>AISHE 2021–22</div> | <div>~13%</div> <div>graduate unemployment, four times the headline rate</div> <div>PLFS 2023–24</div> | <div>4th</div> <div>among states for residents who migrate out for work</div> <div>CENSUS 2011</div> |
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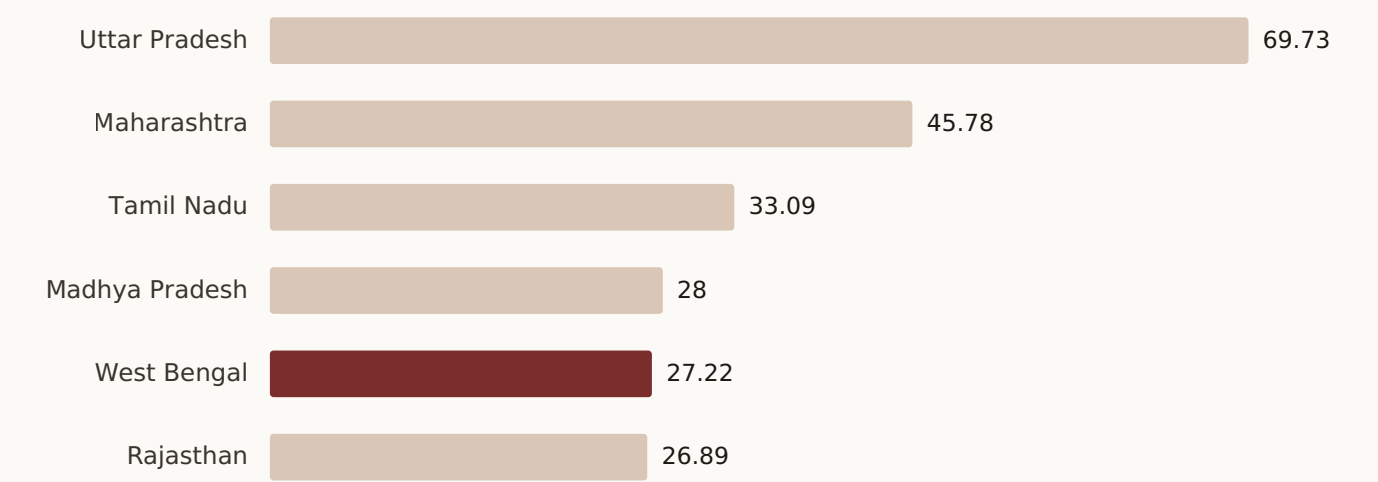
THE SYSTEM IS LARGE

A top-five system, by the only measure that is purely about size

West Bengal belongs to the small group of states that together hold more than half of all Indian enrollment. Whatever the system’s difficulties, scarcity of institutions or of students is not among them. That matters for what follows: the levers worth pulling are about quality, direction, and information, not about building capacity the state already has.

Total higher-education enrollment, leading states

Students enrolled, in lakh (one lakh = 100,000). West Bengal is the fifth-largest system in the country.



Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22, Ministry of Education. Enrollment denominators rest on 2011 population projections.

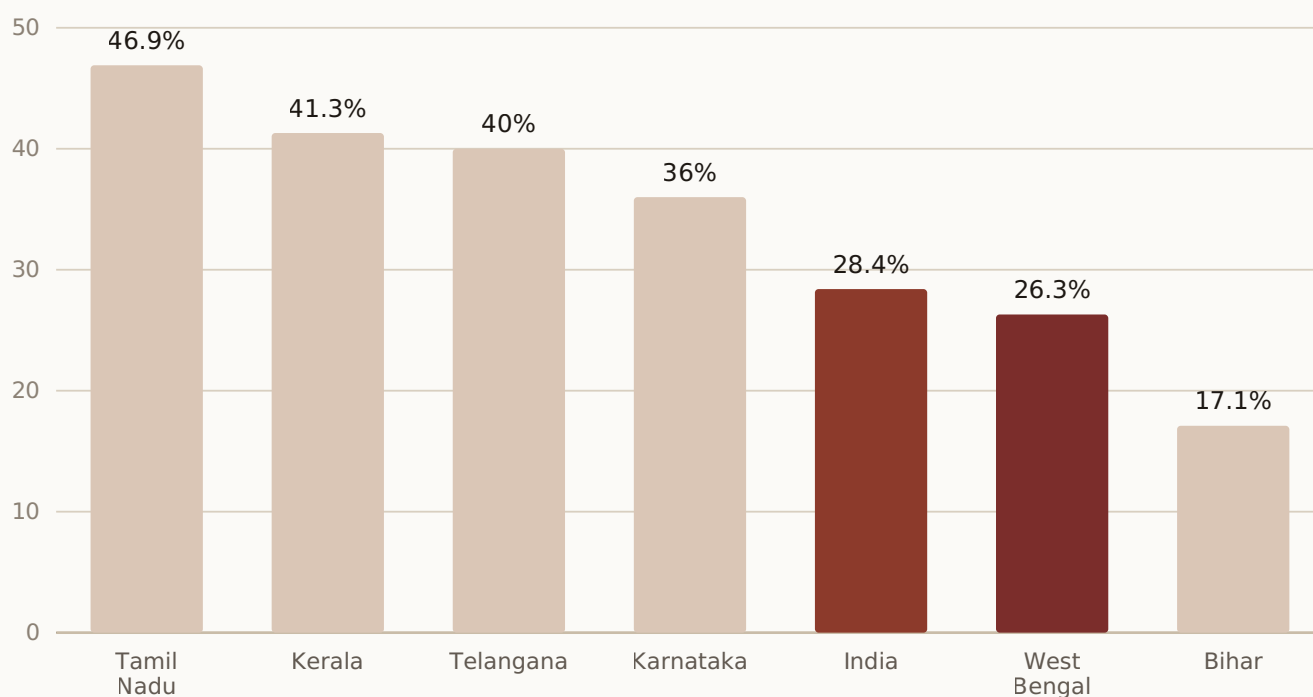
## THE APERTURE IS NARROW

### Participation tells a different story than size

Size and participation are not the same thing. Measured as the share of the eligible-age population actually enrolled, West Bengal falls below the national average and well behind Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, and Karnataka – states that treated higher-education access as a sustained policy commitment. The gap is not a verdict on the quality of Bengal's students or its faculty. It is a measure of reach, and reach is a function of strategy.

#### Gross enrollment ratio in higher education, 18–23 age group

Percent of the eligible-age population enrolled. West Bengal and the all-India figure are highlighted; comparator states shown for context.



Source: AISHE 2021–22, Ministry of Education. GER uses 2011 Census population projections as the denominator.

## THE COUNTERINTUITIVE FACT

### In India, more education raises the odds of unemployment

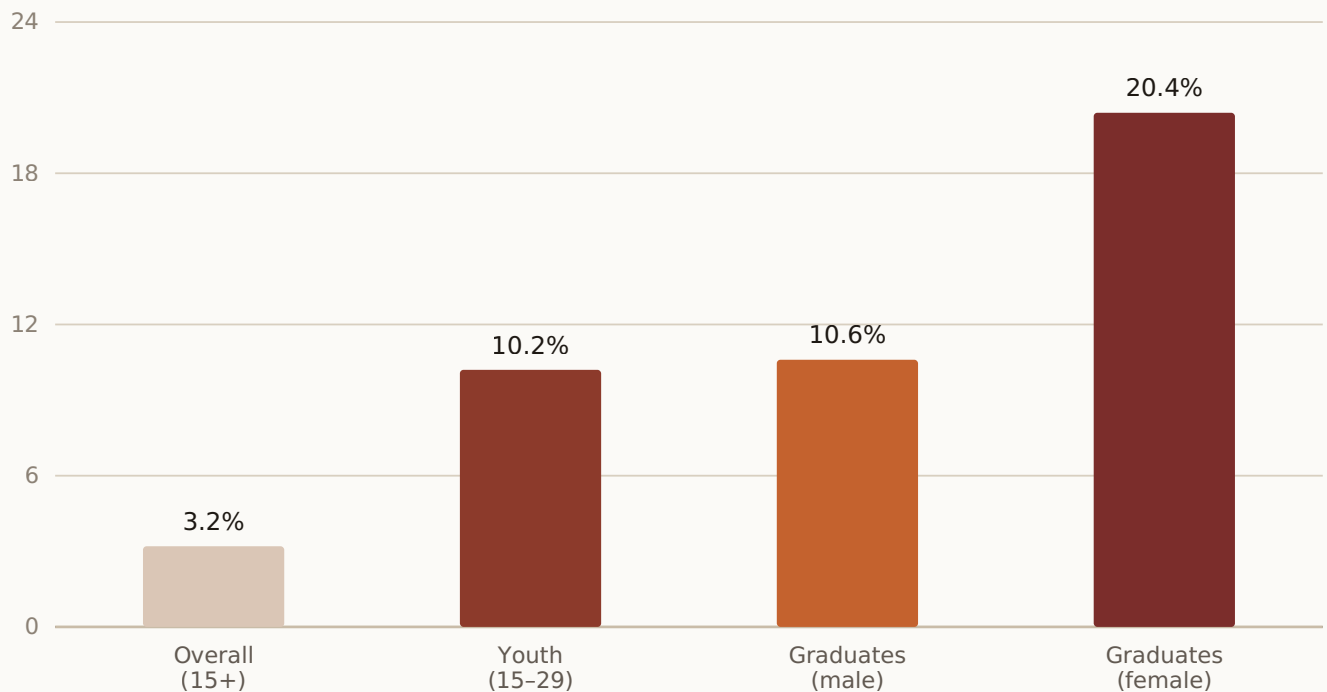
The single statistic that reorders this entire discussion is the relationship between education and joblessness. Across India, the overall unemployment rate is close to 3 percent, but the rate among graduates is roughly four times higher, and among young women with degrees it is higher still. Unemployment in India rises with education rather than falling with it – the opposite of the pattern in most mature economies, where a degree is the surest protection against being out of work.

This is the clearest possible evidence that the problem is not a simple deficit of jobs. A pure jobs shortage would fall hardest on the least credentialed. Instead it falls on the most educated, which points to a mismatch between what graduates are

prepared for and what employers are hiring for – and to the absence of any signal that would let students, institutions, or the state correct course.

### Unemployment rate by group, India

Percent unemployed on the usual-status measure. The rate climbs sharply with education, and climbs again for graduate women.



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24, MoSPI; graduate figures from government replies to Parliament. The redesigned 2025 PLFS is not directly comparable to the earlier series.

*“A degree in West Bengal too often raises the odds of leaving, not the odds of staying employed at home.”*

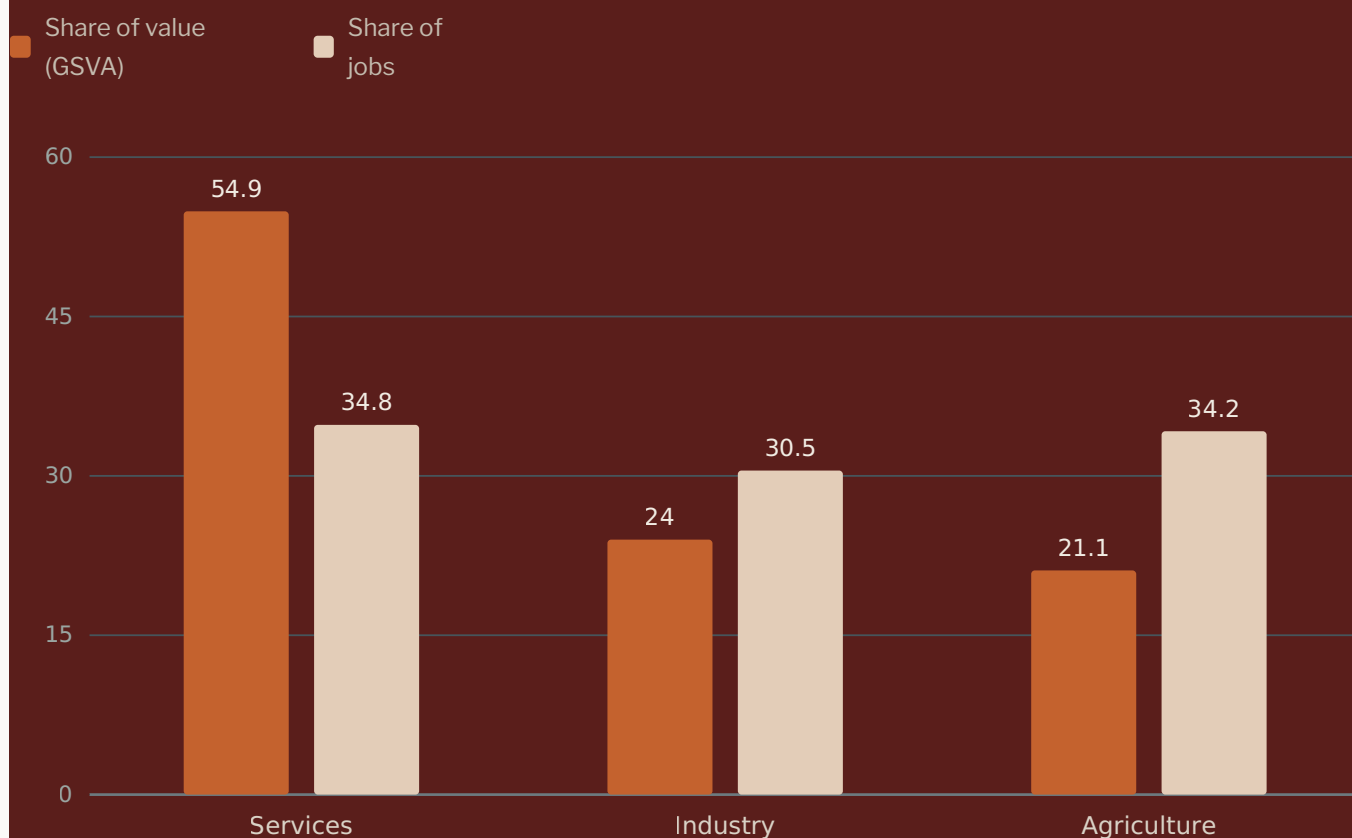
## Where value and work part ways

The deepest version of the problem is visible in a single comparison: where the state's economy creates value, against where it employs its people. Services generate well over half of West Bengal's output but absorb only about a third of its workers. Agriculture holds roughly the same share of workers while producing a fifth of the value. Manufacturing employs more of the workforce than in Karnataka or Maharashtra, yet contributes a smaller share of output – the signature of low-productivity, largely informal work.

A workforce-alignment strategy reads exactly this picture. The distance between each pair of bars is the space where a graduate's preparation and the economy's demand fail to meet. It is also the space a state can act on – once it can measure it.

### Share of economic value versus share of jobs, by sector

Gross State Value Added compared with employment, in percent. The gap between the two bars in each sector is the misalignment.



Source: NITI Aayog, "Macro and Fiscal Landscape of West Bengal," July 2025. GSVA shares for FY2021–22; employment shares from PLFS 2022–23. Industry combines manufacturing and construction.

## EXCELLENCE AND ITS LONG TAIL

### World-class peaks above an unmeasured tail

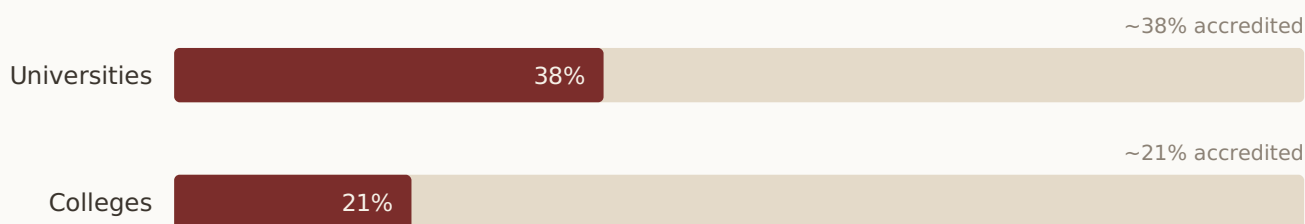
West Bengal's reputation rests on real summits. IIT Kharagpur, Jadavpur University, IIM Calcutta, Presidency, IISER Kolkata, and the University of Calcutta hold national standing, and several sit among the country's top-ranked institutions. The marquee names are accredited and competitive. The difficulty lies in the long tail beneath them.

The national pattern is documented: of roughly 1,113 universities and 43,796 colleges, about 418 universities and 9,062 colleges held NAAC accreditation as of early 2023 – more than one university in three, and about one college in five. West Bengal broadly mirrors that picture, and a large share of the state's colleges therefore operate without any external, evidence-based assessment of quality. The structure compounds the problem: a handful of affiliating universities carry enormous loads – the University of Calcutta alone affiliates roughly 150 colleges – concentrating examinations, affiliation, and quality oversight in institutions stretched far past the point of close attention.

The timing is unusually favorable. The national accreditation regime is shifting to a binary, outcome-based model built on a single linked-data platform, and as of mid-2026 the new system has not yet fully launched. That interval is a planning window: the institutions that organize their data and their outcomes now will be the ones prepared when it does.

#### Currently valid accreditation, national pattern

Estimated share of institutions holding valid NAAC accreditation. West Bengal broadly mirrors the national picture; the unaccredited share is where quality is least visible.



Share of institutions accredited nationally: 418 of 1,113 universities and 9,062 of 43,796 colleges, per a February 2023 government reply to Parliament. National figures shown; a West Bengal-specific accredited-college count is not published from a primary source.

## AN HONEST BOUNDARY

### What alignment can reach, and what it cannot

Credibility on this subject depends on naming the limits as clearly as the possibilities. A workforce-alignment strategy is an instrument for matching, information, and quality. It is not an instrument for creating demand. Several of West Bengal's challenges sit squarely within its reach; others are problems of industrial policy and investment that no alignment system can solve on its own.

## Within reach of alignment

- **Program-to-occupation mismatch.** Mapping fields of study to occupational demand, and steering the program mix toward where the economy hires.
- **The information failure.** Graduate-outcome tracking and earnings transparency, so students and institutions choose on evidence rather than assumption.
- **Labor-market intelligence.** A state system that reads demand and wages by district and occupation, in something closer to real time.
- **Credentialing pathways.** Stackable, recognized credentials and recognition of prior learning that connect skilling to formal qualification.
- **Quality assurance.** Using the accreditation-reform window to lift the unmeasured college tail toward outcome-based standards.

## Beyond what alignment alone can do

- **Aggregate job creation.** Alignment directs people toward existing demand; it does not generate net formal-sector jobs.
- **The informal economy.** Low-productivity manufacturing is a question of industrial policy and capital, not of data tools.
- **Wage-driven out-migration.** Better local matching cannot, by itself, offset the wage gaps that pull workers to other states.
- **Governance and affiliation load.** The overstretched affiliating structure calls for institutional reform, not analysis alone.
- **Participation in the workforce.** Women's labor-force participation is shaped by forces well beyond the education system.

## THE METHOD, AND WHY IT IS FEASIBLE NOW

### The instrument already has its parts

The approach is not speculative. In the United States, a federal system links university records to employment and earnings data and publishes, by institution and field of study, what graduates actually earn one, five, and ten years out. It now covers more than nine hundred institutions and roughly a third of all American graduates. The architecture is a crosswalk between a taxonomy of instructional programs and a taxonomy of occupations — the same logic that can be rebuilt on India's own National Classification of Occupations.

The point is not to import that system. The work is the adaptation: the American program codes become India's occupational codes, the accreditation self-study becomes the national accreditation framework, and the credit-transfer logic becomes the National Credit Framework and Academic Bank of Credits. What makes this feasible now is that India has already built the parts. The National Credit Framework, the Academic Bank of Credits, the National Skills Qualifications Framework, the National Career Service with its occupation coding, and the redesigned 2025 labor-force survey together supply the data layers an alignment system needs. The scaffolding exists. What is missing is the instrument that connects it, and the analytic capacity to use it.

There is also money moving toward exactly this aim. A national program backed by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, approved in early 2026, is rebuilding industrial-training institutes around labor-market alignment and

explicitly funding state-level data systems for that purpose — a precedent, and a potential channel, for the work described here.

## A SEQUENCE, NOT A LEAP

# How the work would actually proceed

A strategy of this kind is built in stages, each one earning the next. The early stages cost little and prove the method; the later ones scale only once the evidence is in hand.

## 01

0–12 MONTHS

### Build the data spine

Stand up a state labor-market information system that joins enrollment data, the redesigned labor-force survey, occupation-coded vacancy data, and skilling-placement records — and adopt a program taxonomy crosswalked to the National Classification of Occupations.

## 02

12–24 MONTHS

### Track where graduates go

Pilot graduate-outcome tracking by linking degree records to employment and payroll data for one- and three-year outcomes, beginning with the largest affiliating universities, and expand once the pilot covers a meaningful share of graduates.

## 03

12–36 MONTHS

### Use the accreditation window

While the new accreditation system is still pre-launch, help the unaccredited college tail organize its data and outcomes, and embed recognized skill credits within degree programs through the National Credit Framework.

## 04

ONGOING

### Steer the program mix

Use the system's signals to expand high-demand, high-earning programs, rationalize those in oversupply, and connect the higher-education and vocational tracks so that students move between them on evidence.

## IN CLOSING

# A state that can see itself can keep more of what it makes

West Bengal does not need to be persuaded that its young people are capable. The evidence of that leaves the state every year, builds companies and institutions elsewhere, and rarely comes home. What the state has never had is the ability to watch that happen with enough precision to change it — to know which programs lead where, which skills the economy is asking for, and where the distance between the two is widest.

That instrument is buildable, the national scaffolding for it already exists, and the work begins not with a grand commitment but with a single honest measurement. A place that produces this much talent deserves the means to see where it goes.

## A NOTE ON THE DATA

This analysis draws on primary and official sources. Two cautions apply throughout. First, several figures rest on the 2011 Census, which remains India's last complete enumeration; all out-migration magnitudes and the population denominators behind enrollment ratios should be read as the most recent authoritative figures, not as current-year counts. Second, the headline higher-education data is from the 2021–22 All India Survey on Higher Education, the latest confirmed release at the time of writing.

A small number of figures are computed estimates rather than single official ratios. The national accreditation figures are drawn from a February 2023 government reply to Parliament; the enrollment discipline split is published by AISHE only at the all-India level, and is used here as national context rather than attributed to West Bengal. Where a West Bengal-specific figure could not be confirmed from a primary source — the state's discipline-by-discipline enrollment split, its count of accredited colleges, its student-teacher ratio, and its specific graduate-employability score — it has been left out rather than estimated. The redesigned 2025 labor-force survey is not directly comparable to the earlier series, and one prior survey round carried an acknowledged weighting anomaly. The analysis is deliberately technocratic and makes no claim about any administration or policy program.

## Principal sources

All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 — Ministry of Education

Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24 and 2025 — MoSPI

Macro and Fiscal Landscape of West Bengal, July 2025 — NITI Aayog

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) — accreditation data, 2024

Census of India 2011 — migration tables

Post-Secondary Employment Outcomes (PSEO) — U.S. Census Bureau, 2026 update

National Credit Framework and Academic Bank of Credits — UGC / Ministry of Education

World Bank PM-SETU program announcement, February 2026

IWWAGE West Bengal labor-force factsheet, 2025

India Skills Report 2025 — Wheebox, AICTE, CII, AIU

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