

# Catalyzing Digital Financial Inclusion in India Through Academic-Industry Collaboration: A Qualitative Study

<sup>1</sup>**Professor Rajeev Kaur,**

Department of Commerce, Aditi Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi

E-mail: rajeevkaur@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>**Ms Gautami Khanna**

Research Scholar

E-mail: gautamikhanna2001@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

India's ambitious strides in digital financial inclusion—spearheaded by initiatives such as the Jan Dhan Yojana, Aadhaar, and the Unified Payments Interface (UPI)—have transformed the landscape of financial access. However, significant challenges persist, particularly for rural, low-income, and technologically marginalized population. Addressing these gaps demands more than policy interventions or market-driven innovation; it calls for a collaborative approach that brings together the intellectual depth of academic institutions and the implementation capacity of industry stakeholders.

This paper explores how academic-industry collaboration can serve as a strategic catalyst for deepening digital financial inclusion in India. It adopts a purely qualitative methodology, relying on thematic analysis of documented case studies, institutional reports, and expert commentary. The study investigates real-world partnerships such as IIT Madras's engagement with the Reserve Bank Innovation Hub, IIM Ahmedabad's FinTech initiatives supported by private players and cooperative models between NABARD and regional academic institutions.

Key themes that emerge include the role of academia in designing context-sensitive financial technologies, the private sector's capacity to scale and deploy innovations and the challenges posed by bureaucratic inertia and misaligned institutional priorities. The paper argues that while isolated instances of collaboration exist, India lacks a robust, systemic framework to harness academic-industry synergy for long-term financial inclusion goals.

By critically examining these models, this study highlights the untapped potential of structured collaboration and advocates for institutional mechanisms—such as policy-backed innovation labs and multi-stakeholder platforms—that bridge research with real-world application. The findings offer a roadmap for policymakers, educators, and industry leaders to co-create sustainable and inclusive digital financial ecosystems.

## Keywords

Digital Financial Inclusion; Academic-Industry Collaboration; FinTech; India; Financial Literacy; Inclusive Innovation; Qualitative Research

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.” — Peter F. Drucker

India stands at a pivotal juncture in its pursuit of inclusive development. Digital Financial Inclusion (DFI) has progressed substantially in the country through three major programs: Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), Aadhaar identity infrastructure, and Unified Payments Interface (UPI) since the last decade. These collaborative digital platforms have transformed the financial domain by enabling millions of people including disadvantaged groups to use banking along with credit and

insurance and payment facilities. The connection to meaningful financial participation remains incomplete since numerous people remain untouchable by current initiatives.

This is a particularly large gap in the rural and low-income areas where digital financial services are not used due to digital illiteracy, lack of connectivity, cultural mistrust, and social exclusion. The problems extend beyond infrastructure to problems of insight, i.e. how can we develop financial instruments that are contextually specific, inclusive, and sensitive to the underserved needs.

However, this paper argues that academic-industry collaboration is one of the most underutilized paths to solving this complex problem. With their deep expertise in research, behavioral science, data ethics and user-centered design as well as access to the vast talent pool of Indian academic institutions, the academic institutions in India bring to the table, while the private sector adds in the operational ability, lean and agile thinking and technological innovation and inventions. Together, these sectors possess the complementary strengths needed to foster impactful and sustainable DFI models.

However, such collaborations remain fragmented and underexplored. While isolated efforts exist—such as research incubators in premier institutions and CSR-funded literacy campaigns—India lacks a systemic, institutionalized framework that brings academia and industry into a sustained partnership for financial inclusion.

**Purpose of the Study** This paper aims to explore how such collaborations currently function—or could be designed—to bridge India’s remaining DFI gaps. Adopting a qualitative and interpretive approach, it examines illustrative case studies, institutional reports, and collaborative models to assess the strategic value of these partnerships.

## KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What forms of collaboration exist between Indian academia and industry in the context of digital financial inclusion?
2. What outcomes, opportunities, and challenges characterize these partnerships?
3. What lessons can be drawn to strengthen and scale future collaborations?

Through this inquiry, the paper seeks to offer actionable insights for policymakers, educators, financial institutions, and technology leaders committed to advancing inclusive growth in India’s evolving digital economy.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

India’s journey in digital financial inclusion (DFI) has drawn global attention for its scale, speed, and state-led vision. Pioneering programs such as the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), Aadhaar-enabled identification, and the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) have enabled access to banking, remittances, and credit for millions who were previously excluded. These technological interventions, backed by regulatory innovations like the India Stack and the Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) framework, have laid the foundational rails for a new financial ecosystem that prioritizes inclusion. However, as several scholars have noted, despite the impressive outreach metrics, deep and sustained inclusion remains elusive, particularly among women, rural communities, and informal sector workers (Dhakane & Lad, 2024).

The literature indicates that most inclusion strategies in India have either been state-driven or industry-led, with limited participation from the academic sector in shaping policies or designing grassroots interventions. Yet, there is growing recognition that the complex, behavioral, and contextual dimensions of financial exclusion require more than technological solutions. Academic institutions, based on their research capacities and contextual engagement, are uniquely positioned to contribute to

problem framing, innovation design, and impact evaluation.

When coupled with the implementation capabilities and user reach of the private sector, such collaborations can serve as powerful enablers for DFI.

Several studies suggest that academic-industry partnerships in India remain fragmented, lacking continuity or strategic alignment. Existing collaborations are often driven by short-term projects or corporate social responsibility (CSR) funding, rather than embedded within institutional frameworks. For instance, while institutions like IIT Madras have partnered with the Reserve Bank Innovation Hub to prototype financial technologies, IIM Ahmedabad's FinTech lab collaborates with startups on inclusive design, these initiatives often operate in silos without integration into policy loops or community feedback mechanisms (Rafsanjani et al., 2025).

Industry actors, especially FinTech companies such as Paytm, Phone Pe and Bharat Pe have played a transformative role in democratizing digital financial services. Their platforms have brought convenience and cost efficiency to millions. Yet, there is limited documentation of how these firms engage with academic knowledge systems to refine product designs or understand user behavior in rural markets. Where collaborations do occur, such as through startup incubators or CSR-funded digital literacy programs.

From the academic side, while there is a growing body of research on the behavioral aspects of financial inclusion, digital literacy and trust in technology, much of it remains confined within disciplinary silos. Scholars such as Larissa et al. (2024) argue for more consumer-centric models of Digital Public Infrastructure, developed through co-creation between research institutions, regulators, and service providers. However, such multi-stakeholder platforms are rare in India, where academia is still perceived largely as a source of talent rather than a co-producer of inclusive innovation.

A significant gap in the literature concerns the absence of systemic documentation and evaluation of collaborative models. Most publications focus either on the success of state-led digital initiatives or on technology adoption by users. Few studies critically assess the processes through which academia and industry can meaningfully collaborate—not just in terms of knowledge exchange, but in shaping the design, dissemination, and governance of financial technologies. Additionally, regulatory and institutional barriers often deter sustained partnerships: differing incentives, concerns over intellectual property, and unclear channels for policy translation continue to inhibit deeper engagement between the two sectors.

In summary, the literature presents a paradox. On the one hand, India has some of the most advanced infrastructure for digital financial services and a vibrant ecosystem of academic research and technological innovation. On the other hand, institutional collaboration between academia and industry in advancing DFI remains nascent, episodic, and poorly theorized. The need of the hour, as this paper seeks to explore, is to move beyond isolated success stories and toward an institutionalized model of collaboration that leverages the strengths of both academia and industry to foster sustainable and inclusive financial futures.

### 3. CASE STUDIES

#### 3.1 IIT Madras and Reserve Bank Innovation Hub (RBIH) – Fostering Inclusive FinTech Innovation

A model of such type of collaboration will be the one between the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT Madras) and the Reserve Bank Innovation Hub (RBIH) which will help drive digital financial inclusion in the country. RBIH was set up by the Reserve Bank of India in 2021 and RBIH is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Reserve Bank of India established to encourage innovation in the financial ecosystem for the underbanked and underserved population. Being aware of the necessary leverage of academic insight in handling grassroots problems, RBIH looked forward to forging partnerships with India's premier research institutions, and IIT Madras joined in as one of its earliest alliances.

This partnership leverages the unique strengths of both entities. RBIH provides the knowledge base of strategic oversight, financial sector know-how and connections to larger banks, regulators, and startups. Conversely, its Centre for Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship (CSIE), and Robert Bosch Centre for Data Science and AI provide it with cutting-edge research, technological capacity, and a growing incubation ecosystem of social and financial innovation. One of the major outcomes of this collaboration has been the launch of challenges and hackathons focused on last-mile financial access, encouraging student researchers and early-stage innovators to develop context-sensitive digital solutions.

Areas of focus have included low-cost biometric authentication for rural banking, vernacular digital literacy tools, and AI-powered credit scoring models for informal workers. These interventions aim not just to develop new technologies, but to do so with inclusive design principles, something that academia is uniquely equipped to champion.

But what makes this case unique is the commitment by both to the long-term amount of the systemic effect. The IIT Madras–RBIH partnership is unlike the typical CSR-funded one-off projects as it is built around knowledge sharing, pilot testing, and iterative co-creation. The problem statements and the success metrics are developed by faculty members as well as by developing tools. RBIH aids in this translation of academic outputs into real-world applications by connecting them with banks, NBFCs and FinTech platforms.

However, the partnership also has the typical challenges of such a cross-sector collaboration. Academic research timelines have no alignment with the market urgency that the industry needs. Also, access to data and regulatory permissions can stall prototypes in field trials. To overcome these issues, the collaboration has developed a sandbox approach based on using controlled testing environments and support of RBI.

In other words, the IIT Madras–RBIH partnership demonstrates a fine real-life example of how academia and financial institutions can jointly develop inclusive financial innovations. Second, it is a working model that can be replicated across other Indian institutions and other Indian policy domains. Finally, however, the institutional learnings inherent to the success of the project will need to be scaled, documented and embedded in national policy frameworks for it to be effective.

### 3.2 Case Study: NABARD and Academic Collaborations for Rural Financial Inclusion

The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) is a very old institution that has long been a cornerstone of rural development financing in India. NABARD has taken the responsibility of ensuring digital financial inclusion (DFI) as one of its priorities over the last decade, particularly in the unbanked and agrarian areas of the country. It, among other things, has adopted this as a key strategy by partnering with academic and training institutions and building grassroots financial awareness, capacity, and access.

NABARD unlike the commercial FinTech actors has a development orientation and understands that the development of meaningful Financial Inclusion will not be possible with technology deployment alone. The Education it needs for this is paid off by Sustained Education, Building Trust, and Contextual Understanding—areas where academic institutions can be the catalytic ones.

One of the best examples of this collaboration is the long association of NABARD with State Agricultural Universities (SAUs) like Acharya N.G. Ranga agricultural University and Tamil Nadu Agricultural University where common programs are executed for training the rural youth and farmers in digital banking, mobile wallets and formal credit processes. These programs are mostly located within Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) and Rural Development Centres, making communication easy. IIMs and rural management institutes like IRMA (Institute of Rural Management Anand) and Xavier School of Rural Management (XSRM); are also partners with NABARD to develop curricular modules and training materials for financial literacy programs. In addition, these programs are specific not only to the end users (e.g., self-help group members, micro-entrepreneurs) but also to the banking correspondents and rural branch staff to build a whole ecosystem approach.

Additionally, the Centre for Financial Literacy (CFL) program of NABARD has also collaborated with colleges and Universities to mobilize the trained volunteers as community facilitators. They are, however, sometimes drawn from post-graduate programs of developmental studies and management with a skill mix that integrates academic training with field exposure. Evaluating impact, an important, but understated part of the grassroots interventions is also helped by academic partners.

Despite the value of these efforts, challenges persist. Many collaborations are still project-based, funded through NABARD's Financial Inclusion Fund (FIF) or CSR mechanisms, and lack institutional continuity. Additionally, there is limited integration of these learnings into formal policy feedback loops or academic publications, meaning that knowledge remains tacit and localized.

Nevertheless, NABARD's approach demonstrates a scalable and contextually grounded model of academic collaboration. By leveraging the social capital and analytical capacity of academic institutions, NABARD has been able to extend digital financial services to hard-to-reach rural populations, while simultaneously building institutional ecosystems for sustained impact.

This case highlights the importance of aligning development finance institutions with academic actors—not merely as trainers or evaluators, but as co-creators of inclusive financial systems that are community-informed, data-aware, and developmentally rooted.

### **3.3 Case Study: Pay Nearby and Policy Think Tanks – Data-Driven Models for Financial Inclusion**

Pay Nearby is a pioneering Indian FinTech company operating in the last-mile financial services sector. Established with the vision of making financial services accessible to every Indian, especially those in tier-2 to tier-6 towns and rural regions, Pay Nearby leverages a vast agent-based network of Kirana shops, local vendors, and micro-entrepreneurs to offer banking, insurance, and digital payment services. What distinguishes Pay Nearby's approach is its deep reliance on data and research-driven insights, often developed in collaboration with policy think tanks and social research institutions.

One such collaboration has involved partnerships with grassroots financial inclusion organizations and policy research platforms like D91 Labs (a public research initiative) and collaborations on white papers with entities such as the MSC (MicroSave Consulting) and IFMR LEAD. These collaborations have focused on generating user behaviour data, evaluating cash-to-digital transitions, and testing new financial products targeted at low-income segments.

In 2021, Pay Nearby released a comprehensive white paper titled "Financial Inclusion at the Last Mile", informed by ethnographic and data analytics research. This work drew on survey and usage data from over 1 million users, developed in collaboration with external researchers to assess how gender, location, income level, and literacy impact the adoption of digital financial tools. The insights influenced subsequent product iterations, such as vernacular user interfaces, biometric KYC support, and assisted insurance products tailored for gig workers and migrant labourers.

More recently, Pay Nearby has been engaging in pilot interventions with state-level think tanks and academic field researchers to evaluate the role of trust in digital services. Through structured focus groups, they have examined barriers to adoption in tribal belts of Odisha and Jharkhand, as well as in northeastern India—areas where standard DFI strategies have often failed. These insights have helped shape localized agent training modules and the design of culturally relevant awareness campaigns, using pictorial and audio formats for illiterate users.

This model is more action research than traditional academic-industry MoUs. Pay Nearby as an intermediary (translating field data into actionable design recommendations) and think tanks as implementation mechanisms at scale. For example, such collaborations are rarely long-term and underfunded by projects with project-specific grants or CSR funding, therefore making it difficult to conduct longitudinal impact analysis.

In the case of Pay Nearby however, the research partnerships they yielded were apt at operationalizing digital inclusion. Through the company, we obtain reach and infrastructure; research partners bring contextual intelligence, behavioural insight, and theory of change perspective which informs the product design into the delivery cycle.

The broader implication here is clear: Although it is scale blind that will keep inclusive FinTech from succeeding, evidence-based localization up front is only possible with meaningful collaboration with knowledge institutions especially those grounded in the field realities and the human-centered design principles.

### **3.4 Case Study: Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (DISHA) and State Universities – Building Grassroots Digital and Financial Literacy**

This was done under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) in India as a part of the country's Digital India initiative, by launching The Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (DISHA) also called National Digital Literacy Mission (NDLM). The core aim of the platform was to enable at least one person in a household to be able to operate digital devices and access online services, which are connected to banking and payments as well as financial inclusion.

The central strategy consisted of public-private partnerships with NGOs and CSCs (common service Centres) but a lesser-known but crucial part was the inclusion of the role of integration of academic institutions particularly the state universities and regional colleges in the training and outreach. While these collaborations were around digital literacy, we also talked about the theme of finances through things like digital wallets, adequate Aadhar-linked bank accounts, using UPI, and identifying online fraud.

For example, in states like Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra, universities like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, and Lucknow University were formally enlisted as training partners. Digital literacy ambassadors, mostly being student volunteers from departments of social work, IT, or rural development; led sessions in rural schools, panchayat offices, and community centers. NSS (National Service Scheme) cells coordinated these activities in their partial funding, some of which were dependent on partial university outreach budgets and government program support.

The delivery was not the only academic role. The simplified training materials were designed by faculty members in regional languages and frameworks for impact assessment to assess behavioural change post training were developed. They also supported “train the trainer” programs, whereby trained local CSC operators and NGO staff, would build up a pedagogical capacity to teach beginners basic digital and financial skills.

This academic involvement was one of many outcomes, but a notable one was the creation of hyper-localized, culturally contextual pieces of content. For instance, visual modules depicting digital payments were modified to fit local symbols and use local dialects to help make material accessible to first-time technology users, especially women and older citizens.

The DISHA–university model did not lack challenges typical to projects of this kind. Continuity was undermined by the dependence of the program on short-term targets and on getting grant funding. However, financial and administrative structures within the Universities were not dedicated enough to sustain involvement later than project cycles. Outcomes were not always reported in academic literature, hence these efforts lacked visibility in national policy discourse.

However, it is a good template for the ability to quickly achieve significant scale in financial literacy 'campaigning' based on technological access and academic insight. By enabling educational institutions to be more than an outreach arm, its inclusion of intelligent contributions by the education institutions in the development sector made DISHA the first stepping stone to embedding digital and financial literacy in India's developmental education landscape.

### **3.5 Case Study: IIM Ahmedabad's FinTech Innovation Ecosystem – Academia and Industry Converge for Financial Inclusion**

Under the Centre for Digital Financial Inclusion (CDFI) and the Centre for Innovation Incubation and Entrepreneurship (CIIE.CO), the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIM-A) has kept a leadership position towards the Financial Inclusion and FinTech initiatives. Out of these initiatives, these have gone on to become active collaboration platforms featuring active collaboration between academia, FinTech startups, legacy financial institutions, and regulatory bodies to solve real-world access, trust and scale problems of the Indian financial ecosystem.

IIM-A's CDFI conducts research as well as field studies on digital payments, behavioural finance, and inclusive banking models. It co-designs and tests financial tools for the underserved with its banking partners, NBFCs, and payment service providers. These are not merely consultative but actual partnerships – through joint field experiments, pilots, and workshops often through rural cooperatives, SHG networks, or urban informal workers' associations.

At the same time, IIM A's startup incubator CIIE.CO has been at the foundation of startups like FinTech startups RupeePower, Razorpay, and Kaleidofin, several of them deeply invested in inclusive finance. However, the incubator's unique and strong point is that it is a blended support model with a combination of capital, strategic mentoring, and academic insights. The hub hosts industry challenges sponsored by organizations such as NPCI (National Payments Corporation of India) or SBI which put forth challenges for students and entrepreneurs to develop inclusive financial solutions for low-income and digitally semi-literate users.

CIIE.CO's Bharat Inclusion Initiative, supported by corporate and philanthropic funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Omidyar Network, and J.P. Morgan among others, was one such initiative. In terms of funded startups, it's mostly funded two dozen startups focused on digital lending, micro insurance, and savings tools for Bharat, a metaphorical and geographic name for rural and semi-urban India. IIM-A faculty and field practitioners have co-led these ventures through their action research methodologies.

The systematic integration of research, incubation, and policy work makes IIM-A's model unique. Faculty often get involved with startups, and research products directly into the product design cycle. At the same time, regulators are provided white papers and policy briefs to support regulated evidence-based policymaking. For example, a study undertaken by CDFI was referred to in the discussions MeitY held to further digital payments in rural India.

However, the initiative is not without constraints. Multiple challenges disrupt inclusive technologies from scaling beyond early adopters, sustaining the interests of investors in low margin, high impact, and continuously balancing investor metric evaluation with social impact metrics.

I conclude that the FinTech ecosystem at IIM Ahmedabad is a mature academic-industry collaboration model, where academic institutions are providing knowledge rather than being knowledge providers, and they are co-creators and conveners. It embodies a replicable framework for the inclusion of India's digital financial architecture by joining innovation, scholarship, and entrepreneurship.

#### **4. FINDINGS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

The analysis of academic-industry collaborations for digital financial inclusion (DFI) in India reveals several emergent themes that are consistent across contexts, actors, and regions. These findings not only highlight the strengths of existing initiatives but also expose structural gaps and future opportunities for systemic impact.

A consistent finding across all cases is the mutual value generated when academia and industry collaborate. Academic institutions provide rigorous research capabilities, contextual understanding, and user-centered design principles, while industry partners offer operational scalability, infrastructure, and market responsiveness. At IIT Madras, for instance, the collaboration with RBIH demonstrated how research institutions can conceptualize inclusive technology solutions, while RBIH enabled their deployment and real-world testing.

Similarly, IIM Ahmedabad's ecosystem nurtured FinTech ventures with an embedded social mission, made possible by integrating business incubation with academic research. These models affirm that theory and practice when aligned, can produce context-sensitive, high-impact financial innovations.

The cases of NABARD and DISHA underscore the critical role of regional and vernacular engagement. Financial inclusion is not just about technology access but about building trust, literacy, and familiarity with formal systems. Universities and colleges, embedded within local contexts, were able to translate financial literacy into regional languages, adapt delivery for cultural relevance, and engage through trusted social networks like SHGs and community centers.



Despite successful examples, most collaborations examined in this study were short-term, project-based, or CSR-funded, lacking continuity and institutional memory. Academic inputs are often underutilized or treated as auxiliary to implementation, with a limited role in monitoring, evaluation, or strategy. For instance, in the PayNearby case, while think tanks helped shape product design, sustained academic involvement was missing beyond the pilot phase.

Moreover, universities face structural barriers, such as a lack of flexible funding, administrative delays, and limited incentives for faculty to participate in applied research.

These factors lead to fragmentation, with valuable insights and innovations failing to scale or integrate into policy frameworks.

Another theme is the absence of dedicated intermediary platforms that can facilitate and sustain academic-industry partnerships. Where collaborations succeeded, such as through RBIH or CIIE.CO, it was because of clear institutional facilitators who could translate research into action, mediate expectations, and provide structured support.

In the absence of such platforms, initiatives depend too heavily on individual champions and are vulnerable to discontinuation. There is a pressing need for national-level frameworks or innovation labs that formalize these partnerships with dedicated funding, policy support, and knowledge-sharing infrastructure.

Across all five cases, there is a growing trend toward data-informed and user-centric innovation, especially in inclusive finance. From Pay Nearby's behavioral insights to IIM-A's action-research ventures, academic research is slowly being recognized as a vital input in shaping digital financial tools for low-income users.

However, this remains the exception, not the rule. Without institutionalized collaboration, research continues to be underleveraged, often disconnected from the innovation and deployment cycle. Bridging this gap will require institutional reforms within academia (to support applied research) and within industry (to recognize the long-term value of research partnerships).

## 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Digital financial inclusion (DFI) in India has evolved through an ambitious ecosystem of state-backed digital infrastructure, entrepreneurial FinTech innovation, and mission-driven outreach programs. However, as this study has shown, a significant gap persists in how academic institutions and industry stakeholders collaborate—or fail to collaborate—to address systemic financial exclusion.

The case studies presented—from IIT Madras and RBIH, NABARD's grassroots capacity building, and PayNearby's evidence-based innovations, to DISHA's university-led literacy campaigns and IIM Ahmedabad's inclusive FinTech hub—illustrate both the possibilities and limitations of current academic-industry partnerships. These collaborations, when structured with purpose and supported by policy, demonstrate transformative potential. They offer culturally contextual, scalable and user-sensitive financial solutions that neither academia nor industry can fully realize in isolation.

However, these engagements are currently sporadic, project-bound, and often personality-driven rather than embedded in institutional mandates. A systemic lack of incentives, coordination platforms, and long-term funding models inhibits the continuity and impact of such partnerships. The industry tends to expect short-term outcomes rather than long-term capacity building, and academic expertise is often underutilized other than to play training or evaluation roles.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study strongly suggest that India's financial inclusion strategy must institutionalize

academic-industry collaboration as a key rather than a secondary component. However, the government, through bodies such as MeitY, NITI Aayog, and RBI, can act as a catalytic role in starting this movement by:

- Providing funded mandates for universities to develop region-specific DFI content and conduct behavioral research;
- Creating public data repositories accessible to academics for deeper insight into financial behavior and barriers;
- Offering incentives for industry players to engage with academic partners through grants, policy credits, or regulatory support;

There are a few more recommendations to strengthen Academic-Industry collaboration for Digital financial inclusion in India.

#### **1. Institutionalize Financial Literacy Outreach via Universities**

Universities should assume an active role in educating underserved populations through community outreach programs, offering free workshops on digital banking, UPI usage, cybersecurity, and budgeting. This is especially critical in Tier 2/3 towns and rural belts where trust and knowledge gaps persist.

#### **2. Leverage NEP 2020's Value-Added Courses (VACs)**

Under NEP 2020, many universities now offer 'Financial Literacy' as a value-added-course (VAC). These courses should be integrated with real-world exposure—through internships, service-learning, or field labs in partnership with fin techs or cooperative banks—to better equip students and communities alike.

#### **3. Develop University–Industry–Panchayat Triads for Rural DFI program.**

Set up rural digital financial labs in partnership with local Gram Panchayats where faculty and students work with fintech firms and self-help groups (SHGs) to train citizens on digital payments, Direct benefit schemes (DBT) and grievance redressal systems. Industry can provide funding, smartphones, or network support.

#### **4. Public Wi-Fi and Digital Access Drives**

Encourage CSR-backed initiatives where industry provides free Wi-Fi hotspots or subsidized mobile devices to rural users via university field channels. This ensures digital readiness among marginalized groups and reduces exclusion from tech-led banking.

#### **5. Financial Innovation Labs within HEIs (Multistakeholder)**

Establishing multi-stakeholder financial innovation labs that embed universities and think tanks as co-creators, not consultants. These labs should not just conduct research but also prototype user-friendly DFI tools, conduct usability tests in local dialects, and provide policy briefs to district administrations. Embed think tanks, regulators (like RBI's FI Cell), and startups as co-creators.

#### **6. Gamified and Vernacular Digital Literacy Tools**

Universities, especially technical and design schools, should collaborate with startups to develop vernacular apps, comics, or gamified modules to teach DFI basics—ideal for low-literacy populations. These tools can be rolled out via Common Service Centers (CSCs).

#### **7. Student-Led Financial Health Fellowships**

Establish student fellowships for DFI action research. Undergraduates and postgraduates from economics, social work, or commerce can spend semesters with NBFCs or digital banking agents, documenting field data and offering localized solutions.

#### **8. Industry-Backed Incentives for Digital Onboarding**

Partner with banks and wallet providers to create reward-based learning systems (e.g., discounts or mobile top-ups for attending sessions) delivered through campus campaigns or community sessions.

#### **9. Incorporate Financial Inclusion in Business & Policy Curriculum**

As the article suggests, embed Community Finance modules in management and public policy programs. Use case studies from PMJDY, UPI, and Pay Nearby as teaching tools to ensure students graduate with real-world DFI insights.

#### **10. Policy Dialogue Platforms between Academia, Fintech, and Regulators**

Host quarterly conclaves that bring together students, fintech CEOs, RBI officials, and social innovators to discuss real barriers to DFI—from KYC friction to language exclusion. These dialogues could lead to white papers and prototypes.

In the academic world, institutions must change, too: support applied and field-based research, establish centers focused on inclusion innovation, and include the foundation of Community Finance in the business and public policy curricula.

Ultimately, achieving universal and equitable digital financial inclusion in India is not merely a technological or financial endeavor. It is an intellectual, cultural, and institutional challenge—one that demands the concerted, creative partnership of academia and industry. As this paper demonstrates, such collaboration is not only desirable, but essential for building inclusive financial futures that are sustainable, context-aware, and citizen-centric.

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