



Research Article

Educational Reforms under NEP 2020: Towards a Holistic, Inclusive, and Skill-Oriented Framework in India

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a historic reform in India's education system after more than three decades, aiming to align learning with the demands of the 21st century. By restructuring school education into the 5+3+3+4 framework, emphasising early childhood care, competency-based assessments, and multilingual learning, the policy seeks to move away from rote memorisation towards holistic development. At the higher education level, NEP 2020 introduces multidisciplinary institutions, multiple entry and exit options, and an Academic Bank of Credits, targeting a Gross Enrolment Ratio of 50% by 2035. With its focus on teacher training, vocational education, digital learning, research promotion, and inclusive access for disadvantaged groups, the policy envisions a knowledge-driven, skill-oriented, and globally competitive education ecosystem. While challenges such as funding, digital divide, and implementation capacity remain, NEP 2020 offers a strategic transformation that has the potential to redefine India's position in the global knowledge economy and ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as an essential requirement for individuals, communities, nations, and humanity as a whole. In contemporary discourse, it is increasingly regarded as a fundamental human right. Since the inception of the Indian Republic, successive commissions and committees on education have strongly emphasized the principle of *education for all*. However, in a country as vast, diverse, and socially stratified as India, the practical execution of educational policies has consistently posed challenges. In the 21st century context, quality higher education is expected to nurture capable, reflective, creative, and well-rounded individuals. It should provide learners with opportunities to explore their specialized interests in depth, while also cultivating values such as ethical responsibility, intellectual curiosity, scientific outlook, creativity, empathy, civic engagement, and skills relevant to contemporary global demands. A robust higher education system must promote personal growth, responsible citizenship, and economic self-reliance, while preparing graduates for meaningful roles in society and the workforce. Within this framework, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 outlines a transformative agenda for higher education in India. The policy aspires to build a system that is holistic, flexible, and multidisciplinary. It envisions multiple exit options within a five-year degree framework, stronger support for research and innovation, improved faculty development, and greater international collaboration. Anchored on the foundational pillars of *access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability*, NEP 2020 aligns with the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. With India's higher education system being the third largest in the world, after China and the United States, the policy seeks to harness this enormous demographic potential and reposition the country as a global knowledge hub. Significantly, it reaffirms education as a public good and highlights the role of the public education system as the backbone of a vibrant democracy, essential for cultural advancement, technological progress, and social development. The formulation of NEP 2020 was informed by an extensive review of earlier educational frameworks, including the Education Commission Report (1964–66), the National Policy on Education (1986, revised in 1992), and key legislations such as the Right to Education Act, 2009 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (Govinda, 2020). The reforms envisioned under NEP 2020 revolve around four central areas: curriculum restructuring to strengthen foundational learning, systemic measures to raise quality across all levels of education, reformed assessment practices, and a comprehensive transformation of governance and institutional structures. At its core, the policy emphasizes qualitative enhancement in student learning outcomes, improved employability, and greater flexibility within the system, thereby setting the stage for a paradigm shift in Indian education.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces a wide range of measures to enhance both the quality and inclusiveness

of India's education system. This study has been undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To provide a comprehensive overview and critical outline of the major provisions of the newly implemented National Education Policy 2020.
1. To examine the key differences between NEP 2020 and the previously existing education policies in India.
2. To explore the innovative strategies and structural reforms introduced in the higher education framework under NEP 2020.
3. To analyze the challenges and barriers that may hinder the effective realization of the goals envisioned in NEP 2020.

3.1 The Consolidation of the Fragmented Institutions:

A major area of intervention envisaged by the NEP–2020 is the large scale consolidation of universities and the increased emphasis on quality. The implementation of this policy will witness the quantitative scaling down of the number of institutions of higher education in the country by nearly one third of its present size today. The advantage of such a move would be a more aggregated system with just 15,000 institutions when compared to the present 40,000. The question here is whether such a system could then effectively cater to the needs of the ever growing stream of students; here the NEP–2020 takes care of this issue by stipulating individual institutional enrolments of 3000 students which is much higher than the present average individual institutional enrolment of 6933. Such a move would however require a lot of homework and the design and implementation of strategies that encompass the drafting of blue prints on how to ensure that the interests of all sectors are taken care of when consolidating individual institutions. These blue prints could be significant in avoiding major problems in this regard. Strategies should be designed in such a manner that they make provision for the rules and regulations that would govern the process of consolidation besides providing for an understanding of the obligations of all parties affected during this process of consolidation. Appropriate strategic intervention to ensure the smooth implementation of this process would also involve participatory consultations with the stakeholders involved, so as to address their apprehensions and take them into confidence.

3.2 Accessibility to All and Gender Concerns Addressed:

The National Education Policy–2020 envisages that every school going child should be in school by 2030. At present, it is estimated that nearly thirty per cent of students in India drop out of the educational network after the tenth standards. Of these, the percentage of girls and children from socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) -which include gender, socio-cultural and geographical identities and disabilities-falling out, is higher.(Kurup, 2021) The inbuilt mechanism of the NEP–2020 to set up Special Education Zones to cater to the SEDGs should be strengthened and implemented effectively after taking into account the geographical data on the population distribution of these communities. The move to setup a Gender Inclusion Fund to address gender disparities in

education should receive a wider publicity especially in areas where drop outs among girl students is higher. A special area-wise scheme for promoting education of the girl child in such areas along with concurrent attitude building exercises for the community would be an added deterrent to ensure that gender equity envisaged under the NEP-2020 is implemented in its true spirit. Adequate budgetary allocation to meet financial demands for such initiatives would be crucial in ensuring the success of the NEP-2020. Enhanced opportunity for Open Distance Learning envisaged as part of the NEP-2020 will also be an added advantage for accommodating students who have strong reasons to drop out of the formal system but will be retained in the educational system.(Jha & Parvati, 2020)

3.3 Learning –Making it a Holistic Competency Driven Affair

One of the most significant changes that the NEP-2020 seeks to achieve is a drastic change in the way children learn. This policy seeks to enable students to ‘*learn to learn*’, thus gradually weaning them away from hitherto conventional models of learning that tend to emphasize rote learning, and introduce them to a more active form of learning based on the actual experience of the situation while simultaneously providing for accommodating student interests as she moves through to the secondary level in the educational hierarchy. In order to ensure that this objective of the NEP materializes there will have to be active efforts to ensure modifications both to the curriculum as well as the pedagogy employed to accommodate active learning into the educational system. Concerted efforts prior to the implementation of the NEP-2020 will have to be taken to decide on recommendations to the curriculum, develop the curriculum and train teachers as well, on how to use appropriate pedagogical tools to achieve the desired learning outcomes that the NEP-2020 envisages.

3.4 Renaissance of the Teaching Community and Creation of a Professionally Qualified Work Force:

Teacher training at all levels spanning the entire hierarchy of the educational system is one of the significant actionable points of the NEP-2020. The aim of such an objective is to professionally train and certify teachers to meet both state and national accredited professional qualifications. Appropriate steps to set up regulatory bodies and to train and empower the teaching community as well, would prove to be decisive in ensuring the success of this objective of the NEP-2020.

3.5 Moving Towards Resource Efficiency and Accountability:

At the school level, the NEP-2020 envisages rationalizing of schools into school complexes so that there is optimal use of school infrastructure and increased collaboration between schools, while at the same time school autonomy is kept intact. Ensuring the smooth execution of this vision of the NEP-2020 will involve a huge exercise on the part of the present educational system to define the jurisdictional limits of such complexes and the *modus operandi* in cases of sharing of assets

and infrastructural resources without compromising on the interests of all involved. A blueprint on this with active involvement of various stakeholders will have to be prepared prior to the actual rolling out of the NEP-2020.

3.6 The New Focus: Consolidation and Interdisciplinary

Coming to the higher education sector, the NEP-2020 has quite ambitious targets on important indices such as the gross enrolment ratio (GER) that it seeks to double from the present 26.3 per cent (2018) to 50 per cent by 2035. The NEP-2020 also proposes the creation of four year undergraduate programmes with multiple entry and exit points embedded within an interdisciplinary approach and based on a flexible curriculum. The most significant changes that the NEP-2020 proposes is however the establishment of a single regulatory mechanism with additional functions of accreditation, standard setting for academics and streamlining funding all of which are set to be executed through independent verticals that will see the replacement of the University Grants Commission fully and the regulatory functions of various bodies such as the AICTE, the Veterinary Council of India and the Medical Council of India - to mention a few- curtailed. Major changes that are to follow consequent to the implementation of the NEP-2020 include the enhancement of the quality of education being offered by Universities through the large scale consolidation of universities. A gradual shift from the present single discipline islands of excellence to Multidisciplinary Educational and Research Universities (MERUs) on par with those seen in the West is also another major area of intervention proposed by the NEP 2020.(Pathak, n.d.) A strong framework on the ways to move towards such consolidation, while at the same time accommodating and giving the required priority to all the players in related fields of study will be required to implement the NEP-2020 in the right spirit.

3.7 Facilitating Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education

Students from socially and economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) continue to occupy a very marginalized position in institutions of higher learning as indicated by the Gross Enrolment Ratios of 22 per cent and 15.9 per cent respectively for scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities respectively. Despite inbuilt constitutional mechanisms that guarantee a financial support system for SEDGs, less than ten per cent of them actually have access to this system. The NEP, 2020 has set upon itself the noble task of making the criteria of social inclusion and accessibility an intrinsic part of the higher education system of the nation thus opening it up on a wider range than before to all citizens of the country irrespective of social and gender factors. Effective implementation of this crucial objective in the implementation strategy of the NEP, 2020 would require the calculated establishment of Special Education Zones in areas of the nation where the population of SEDGs are higher. An inbuilt mechanism in the NEP that facilitates higher enrolment of students from SEDGs especially those of financial nature are to be stream lined and monitored to ensure that all such students get the benefit that the state

guarantees them. The NEP-2020 also envisages opening up the educational institutions to a wider audience through the strengthening of the Open Distance Learning mission which would see an estimated 1.5 crore learners being catered to. Major strategic interventions along these lines would be the strengthening of infrastructure for online programmes, adequate faculty training for ensuring preparedness on the online platform. Financial considerations with regard to increased stress on the development of content for the online mode and adequate training of faculty in this area would also be an area requiring strategic intervention.

3.8 Quality and Quantity Considerations for Faculty

The transformation of the higher education sector of the country envisaged by the NEP, 2020 is mainly rooted in the quantitative and qualitative improvement of both faculty availability and quality in India. An overarching strategy that would cater to this aspect would be a major area of intervention influencing the successful implementation of the NEP -2020. It is estimated that five lakh faculty members would have to be recruited into the higher education system of the country so that the Faculty – Student Ratios (FSRs) are improved from the present 1:29 to a more optimal ratio of 1:20. Significant financial commitment would have to be forth coming for this to materialise. Development and implementation of a mandatory, modular, graded, credit linked skilling framework designed to promote continuous learning and skill up-gradation of faculty in tune with international standards of education will also have to be charted out. With regard to research funding through the proposed National Research Fund, equitable distribution across all sectors of the higher education arena through a simplified but efficient assessment process without compromising on quality would also have to be streamlined.

3.9 Vocational Education: Increased Emphasis and Integration

The NEP-2020 proposes an increased emphasis on integrating vocational education into the educational system from the middle school onwards and into the secondary school so that 50 per cent of school learners as well as those in higher education are exposed to vocational skills by 2025. Detailed skill gap analyses at the local state and the national level to map opportunities at various levels

would be crucial in deciding on focus areas for vocational education. Higher education institutions would be required to develop detailed programmes, curricula and plans of work suited to various potential stakeholders. Further, measures to link with industry and to develop vocational courses with greater market orientation/industry orientation would have to be forthcoming.(Pathak, n.d.)

3.10 Embracing the Digital Era:

A resonating theme throughout the NEP-2020 and fully in line with the developments that have overshadowed our lives this year with the COVID-19 outbreak is the digital factor. These developments along with the changes in the way learning is done world over, necessitates the adoption of information technology across all facets of education from online learning, e-delivery of learning material and e-assessments. However, all this has to be undertaken under a canvas of a conscious effort to use the digital factor judiciously keeping in mind the consequences of the effects of the digital medium on both the social as well as the psychomotor aspects of the students in the learning process. Both the development and enhancement of digital platforms, digital learning resources, digital question banks and innovative virtual learning laboratories along with financial commitments in this area will be crucial in the implementation of this phase of the NEP-2020.

3.1 Comparison of new NEP 2020 with Existing NEP:

The 1986 National Education policy focused on the modernization of the education sector using information technology. More attention was given to restructuring teacher education, early childhood care, women's empowerment, and adult literacy. It also proposed that the autonomy of universities and colleges will improve the quality of education services. But NEP 1986 failed to improve the quality of education in terms of creating graduates with employability skills and failed to generate research output in terms of patents and scholarly publications. (Kalyanpur, 2008) To compensate for the failure of previous NEPs, NEP 2020 has proposals of a liberal education to support multidisciplinary and cross-disciplinary education and research in under-graduation and post-graduation levels. Table -1 compares the improvements of some of the features of National Education policy 2020 with its previous National Education policy 1986.

Table-4.1: Comparison of National Education policy 1986 & National Education policy 2020

S. No.	National Education Policy-1986	National Education Policy-2020
1.	The role of education is the all-round development of students.	The objective is to provide Multidisciplinary & interdisciplinary liberal education.
2.	Common education structure of 10 (5+3+2)+2+3+2 is followed.	A common education structure of 5+3+3+4+4+1 is suggested.
3.	The first preliminary education starts at 6th year of a child as Primary school level.	The first preliminary education starts at 3rd year of a child as a Foundation stage.
4.	Two years higher secondary level and two years' pre-university levels were separately considered and both had board exams.	Four years' Secondary education stage is designated by clubbing Two years higher secondary level and two years' pre-university levels. Exams are suggested at the school level except for Board level exams at 10th and 12th .
5.	Two years of higher secondary level, students choose specialisation areas and subjects like Science subjects or Commerce subjects or Arts subjects	Four years' Secondary education stage contains common subjects and elective subjects. Choice is based on liberal education policy.
6.	All undergraduate and postgraduate admissions are based on the entrance exam conducted at the college level or state level except NITs & Medical Colleges.	All undergraduate and postgraduate admissions of public HEIs are based on National Testing Agency (NTA) scores conducted by the national level.

7.	Undergraduate programmes are for three to four years.	Undergraduate programmes are of four years with a provision to exit after one year with a diploma, after two years with an advanced diploma, after three years with a pass degree, and after four years with project based degree.
8.	Postgraduate education is of two years with specialization focus.	Postgraduate education is of one to two years with more specialization & research focus.
9.	Most of the Colleges in HEIs are affiliated to state universities and had no autonomy in curriculum and evaluation.	All HEIs including colleges are autonomous and there will be no affiliated colleges to state universities and autonomy in deciding curriculum and evaluation.
10.	Examination is independent of teaching. All examination and evaluation is affiliating university controlled. There is a little role of teaching faculty members in evaluating the students directly.	Examination is a part of a continuous evaluation system. Faculty members who are teaching a subject are responsible for evaluation and examinations are departmental affairs.
11.	Teaching-learning method mainly focuses on classroom training and fieldwork.	Teaching-learning method mainly focuses on classroom training, fieldwork, and research projects.
12.	In the higher education system, the expected student-faculty ratio is 20:1.	In higher education system, the expected student-faculty ratio is 30:1.
13.	In HEIs faculty members are considered as facilitators of educating students to make them competent.	In HEIs faculty members are considered as collaborators and guide of educating students to make them as innovators & creative thinkers.
14.	Students have the freedom to choose subjects across their area of study.	Students have the freedom to choose subjects outside and across their area of study.
15.	A one-year research degree leading to M.Phil. in any subject is offered to provide preliminary experience to do research.	A one year research degree leading to M.Phil. in any subject is discontinued due to the reason that students are exposed to preliminary research in their undergraduate and post-graduate courses.
16.	Pass in NET/SLET along with respective Masters degrees as an essential qualification to become an Assistant Professor in any three types of HEIs.	Ph.D. degree is compulsory along with pass in NET/SLET as an essential qualification to become an Assistant professor in any three types of HEIs.
17.	The support of research funds through UGC or any other agencies is mainly for universities rather than Colleges.	The support of research funds through the National Research Foundation and any other agencies will be equally distributed to all three types of HEIs based on a fair evaluation of the research proposal.
18.	HEIs accreditation is compulsory for availing funds and government facilities only.	HEIs accreditation is compulsory for functioning and offering the degree. Compulsory accreditation is required once for every five years for continuous operation.
19.	The graded accreditation model is followed.	Binary accreditation model will be followed which is yes or no system instead of various grades for institution.
20.	Faculty performance & accountability is linked to promotion but not linked to compensation.	Faculty performance & accountability is linked to promotion and compensation.
21.	Choice based credit system.	Liberal education based on STEAM & Competency based credit system.
22.	Only accredited & permitted Universities are allowed to offer Online Distance Learning (ODL) education.	All 3 types of HEIs which are accredited to offer ODL are permitted to offer ODL.
23.	Social engagement for every student as a part of the programme curriculum is optional.	Social engagement for each student is compulsory and should be equal to at least one full semester across the entire duration of the programme.
24.	Four years of Bachelor degree holders are not eligible for direct admission to Ph.D. programme unless they acquire Master's degree.	Four years of Bachelor degree holders with proven research performance during the fourth year can directly admit to Ph.D. programme without Masters degree in both types of HEIs.
25.	Four years of Bachelor degree holders are not eligible for direct admission to Ph.D. programme unless they acquire Master's degree.	Four years of Bachelor's degree holders with proven research performance during the fourth year can be directly admit to Ph.D. programme without Master's degree in both types of HEIs.
26.	Lateral entry is offered in some programmes. But no Multiple entries and Multiple exit facilities are available in undergraduate studies, including medical and paramedical courses.	Multiple entries and Multiple exit facilities are available in under graduation, including medical and paramedical courses.
27.	Undergraduate programmes of 3 years to 4 years depending on the type of the programme.	All undergraduate programmes are of 4 years with, in some cases, exit at 3 years is possible with a degree certificate
28.	Currently, teachers' education comprises of two years of B.Ed. programme after graduation. So secondary school teachers have to spend 5 years after their higher secondary education to teach at the secondary level	The proposed teacher's education comprises of four years of integrated B.Ed. This degree is a compulsory requirement to become faculty in the School of Education.
29.	Suggestion for improving the physical library facility, including books & journals	Suggestion for improving online library memberships including online books & online journals.
30.	Both single discipline and multidisciplinary colleges are promoted.	Only multidisciplinary colleges and universities are promoted. All single discipline colleges have to convert themselves autonomous multidisciplinary colleges or will be closed and converted into monuments or public libraries.
31.	No foreign universities are allowed to function directly in India	About 100 top ranked foreign universities will be allowed to function in India to compete with Indian universities
32.	The coursework of Ph.D. programme comprises of research methodology and core subject related study	The coursework of Ph.D. programme comprises of research methodology, Teaching & curriculum development aspects along with core subject related study
33.	No systematic and authentic funding agencies for University and College research	National Research Foundation (NRF) will be formed to fund for competitive and innovative research proposals of all types and across all disciplines.

5. Impediments in Reaping the Goal of NEP-2020:

5.1 Conversion of affiliated colleges into Autonomous Colleges:

There are many affiliated colleges to public universities which have one or two courses, a small piece of land without enough physical infrastructure (like single building colleges), less than 300 annual admissions, etc. Such colleges cannot expand their operations to become multi-disciplinary colleges and hence cannot transform themselves into autonomous colleges. Even though the UGC has made it mandatory to have a minimum of 5 acres of land to give and continue affiliation to the colleges, many universities have not strictly followed such conditions. All such government owned colleges can be converted into constituent colleges but privately owner small colleges will be either close their operation or shift to a bigger land with an acceptable level of physical infrastructure.

5.2 Transforming Undergraduate and Postgraduate courses into Research based Courses:

To transform current UG and PG courses with information oriented into research oriented is a cumbersome process. For this, first, faculty members of HEIs should develop research skills, the HEIs should develop research infrastructure, and students should be prepared as independent thinkers to create new knowledge or new analysis of existing information. Changing the mindset of all stakeholders takes time and effort from HEI administrators. Many currently available faculty members and administrative leaders in public universities are below average due to the fact of non-compliance of merit-based appointments and promotions. In such a scenario, maintaining quality and accountability is difficult in public sector HEIs.(Das et al., 2020)

5.3 Merit-based appointment & Promotion is a nightmare:

In the name of social justice, the country government allows to appoint persons for teaching, research, and administrative positions without the required merits. For example, persons without scholarly publications during last 10 years can become chairman of UGC which is a highest policy making body in HE system of the country, a person without single patent can become chairman of AICTE, and people without single scholarly publication/patent during last 5 years can become Vice Chancellors of universities and members of various HE policy committees. With such a situation, how National Education Policy 2020 with stress to merit based appointment & promotion can be successful to realize its goal?

5.4 Lobbies at Decision making Appointments and Accreditation Process:

Though, through implementing National Education policy 2020, the central government dreaming that it can transform the Indian education system to a sophisticated and progressive system for economic and social growth, the present corrupt system will continue due to strong control of corrupt individuals at all levels of current HE system. Such influence and favoritism create lobbies at appointments of top decision makers of higher education leading to the

promotion of further continuation of a corrupt system. Due to political reasons, it is difficult to remove such lobbies in appointments and hence quality in the higher education system in India. Accreditation is the primary mechanism to regulate the quality and monitor the functions of HEIs through a meta-accrediting body called the National Accreditation Council (NAC). The accreditation process checks the quality, self-governance, and autonomy against a standard benchmark and awards graded accreditation status to use enhanced autonomy and findings to grow further. Since accreditation status is an important requirement for HE organizations, influence, lobbies related corruptions will be possible. By making the criteria and parameters in such a way that only tangible matric systems should be followed to avoid illegal practices in the accreditation process.

5.5 Inadequacy of Technology and Infrastructures for better Educational Reach:

The online teaching practices need to be considered for addressing the equitable use of technology for better reach. The parallel usage of online will be an enhancer and also inexpensive. Usage of recorded lectures and notes along with chat sessions and tutorials will enhance the classes. Utilizing MOOCs, enabling spectacular teachers and to work in partnership are to be encouraged. The possibility of online under graduate courses could also be experimented. Focus on learning by doing and peer to peer learning to be considered. Utility of labs, workshops and assessment centres / providers country wide can be used while offering online courses for students spread throughout the country. The network connectivity requirement is accomplishable with the fast developing technology and the digital policy that our country is trying to achieve.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The effective realization of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 will depend largely on the coordinated efforts of its principal stakeholders—namely the central government, state governments, the National Council for Teacher Education, the National Skill Development Corporation, industry partners, as well as local schools, content creators, educational technology firms, ICT and infrastructure providers, teachers, and students. For the central government, the immediate priority lies in addressing governance-related concerns to ensure that high-level committees function efficiently and maintain close collaboration with state authorities. Equally vital will be the establishment of new institutions such as the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), the Higher Education Grants Council, and other regulatory bodies envisioned by the policy. The role of state governments is equally critical, as they must interpret and adapt NEP 2020 to local realities by setting operational frameworks and defining regulatory norms for both public and private educational institutions—from schools to universities. States will need to develop comprehensive roadmaps, identifying priority actions and sequencing reforms in a phased manner. Expert consultations will be required to design context-specific strategies for institutional restructuring,

mergers, and consolidation, with clearly defined benchmarks for five-year, ten-year, and fifteen-year timelines. Ultimately, the promise of NEP 2020 rests on how effectively these multiple actors work in harmony to implement its vision. If pursued with commitment and foresight, the policy has the potential to transform India's educational landscape and guide the nation toward becoming a global leader in knowledge, innovation, and human development.

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