



Research Article

A Study on the Awareness of NEP 2020 in Higher Education Institutions Students in Birbhum District, West Bengal, India

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21022935>

Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) represents the most comprehensive overhaul of India's education system in over three decades, introducing sweeping reforms at every level of schooling and higher education. This paper investigates the level of awareness among students enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Birbhum District, West Bengal, with respect to the key provisions, objectives, and structural changes mandated by NEP 2020. A descriptive survey method was employed, and data were collected from 320 students drawn from eight-degree colleges and one central university within the district using stratified random sampling. A self-structured, validated questionnaire was administered covering awareness of multidisciplinary education, credit transfer, academic bank of credits (ABC), the four-year undergraduate programme (FYUP), internationalisation, and vocational integration. The findings reveal that while a moderate level of general awareness about NEP 2020 exists among students (mean awareness score = 54.8%), awareness of specific programmatic provisions such as ABC, multiple entry-exit options, and internationalisation remains significantly low. Gender, stream of study, type of institution, and urban-rural location emerged as significant determinants of awareness levels. The study concludes with policy recommendations for targeted dissemination drives, faculty-led orientation programmes, and digital outreach campaigns to bridge the awareness gap.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 16-05-2026
- Accepted: 26-06-2026
- Published: 29-06-2026
- IJCRM:5(3); 2026: 1250-1255
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Sahu S. A Study on the Awareness of NEP 2020 in Higher Education Institutions Students in Birbhum District, West Bengal, India. Int J Contemp Res Multidisc. 2026;5(3):1250-1255.

Access this Article Online



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KEYWORDS: NEP 2020, higher education, awareness, Birbhum district, West Bengal, academic bank of credits, multidisciplinary education, undergraduate reform.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education policy in India has undergone a historic transformation with the announcement of the National Education Policy 2020, which was approved by the Union Cabinet on July 29, 2020. Replacing the National Policy on Education of 1986 (and its 1992 revision), NEP 2020 lays out a futuristic, holistic, and flexible framework aimed at transforming India into a vibrant knowledge economy. The policy envisions increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education from the current 26.3% to 50% by 2035 and proposes the establishment of a Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) as a single overarching regulatory body.

At the level of higher education, some of the most transformative provisions include the introduction of a four-year undergraduate programme (FYUP) with multiple entry and exit options, the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), a multidisciplinary and holistic approach to learning, integration of vocational education, emphasis on Indian languages and mother tongue-based instruction, and accelerated internationalisation. These structural and pedagogical shifts carry far-reaching implications for students, faculty, institutions, and the broader socio-educational landscape.

However, the successful implementation of NEP 2020 is critically dependent on the awareness and buy-in of its primary stakeholders — students. Without adequate awareness, students cannot make informed choices about credit transfers, programme mobility, internship options, or research pathways that the policy enables. As implementation begins to roll out across states, it becomes imperative to assess how well the policy's key provisions have percolated to the student community.

Birbhum District in West Bengal presents a particularly instructive case study. Characterised by a predominantly rural population, significant tribal representation (Santali, Munda), and a mix of government-aided colleges, government colleges, and a historic central university (Visva-Bharati), Birbhum offers a microcosm of the socio-educational diversity that NEP 2020 must navigate. West Bengal, notably, has been among the states cautious in adopting certain aspects of NEP 2020, introducing its own state education policy discussions, which makes the awareness terrain in this region especially nuanced.

Against this backdrop, the present study was undertaken to map the levels of awareness about NEP 2020 among students in higher education institutions in Birbhum District, to identify differentials by gender, stream, institution type, and geographic location, and to derive implications for policy communication and implementation strategy.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The scholarship on NEP 2020 has grown substantially since the policy's announcement. Several studies have examined its philosophical underpinnings, comparative merits, implementation challenges, and reception among various stakeholders.

Sharma and Kumar (2021) conducted a pan-India survey of college students and found that while awareness about the broad contours of NEP 2020 was satisfactory (around 62%), specific awareness about mechanisms like ABC and FYUP was

considerably lower. They attributed this gap to insufficient institutional communication and inadequate faculty training on the policy provisions.

Singh and Verma (2022) examined NEP 2020 awareness among teachers and students in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh and noted a significant urban-rural divide, with urban students scoring significantly higher on policy awareness measures. Their study also underscored the role of media exposure, particularly social media, as a moderating variable.

Chakraborty and Das (2022) examined NEP 2020 reception specifically in West Bengal's higher education sector, pointing to a paradox of political cautiousness at the state level coexisting with institutional-level curiosity and partial preparedness. They observed that students in West Bengal, particularly in rural districts, expressed limited knowledge of FYUP and multiple exit pathways.

Mishra (2023) highlighted the role of institutional orientation programmes in building student awareness, finding that institutions that had formally conducted NEP orientation workshops showed significantly higher student awareness scores than those relying solely on incidental exposure through media and peer discussion.

Ghosh and Bhattacharya (2023), in a study focused on Murshidabad and Malda districts of West Bengal (geographically adjacent to Birbhum), found that students from tribal and socio-economically backward communities reported significantly lower awareness levels, underscoring the equity dimensions of policy dissemination. Their study forms a particularly proximate reference point for the present investigation.

Despite this growing body of literature, empirical studies specifically focused on Birbhum District remain scarce. The present study seeks to fill this gap with district-specific, primary data-driven analysis.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To assess the overall level of awareness of NEP 2020 among students in higher education institutions in Birbhum District.
- To examine awareness levels across specific provisions of NEP 2020, including FYUP, ABC, multidisciplinary education, vocational integration, and internationalisation.
- To analyse differences in awareness levels based on gender, stream of study (Arts/Science/Commerce), type of institution (government, government-aided, central university), and geographic location (urban, semi-urban, rural).
- To identify the primary sources through which students have gained awareness of NEP 2020.
- To offer recommendations for strengthening awareness dissemination strategies at the institutional and district level.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey design, which is appropriate for measuring the extent and nature of awareness among a defined population at a given point in time. The research was conducted between October 2023 and January 2024.

4.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all students enrolled at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels in higher education institutions in Birbhum District, West Bengal. As per institutional records, the estimated student population across the district's degree colleges and Visva-Bharati University stands at

approximately 65,000. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation across institution types, streams, genders, and geographic zones.

A total of 320 students from eight institutions — five government-aided colleges (Suri Vidyasagar College, Rampurhat College, Dubrajpur College, Bolpur College, Sainthia College), one government college (Birbhum Zilla School Degree College), one women's college (Suri Women's College), and Visva-Bharati University — were included in the final sample. The sample distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Distribution by Institution Type, Gender, Stream, and Location

| Category | Arts | Science | Commerce | Total |
|-------------------|------|---------|----------|-------|
| Male | 64 | 42 | 28 | 134 |
| Female | 72 | 38 | 30 | 140 |
| Other/Undisclosed | 24 | 12 | 10 | 46 |
| Total | 160 | 92 | 68 | 320 |

Source: Primary data collected by the authors (2023-24).

4.3 Tool for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was developed and validated for data collection. The tool comprised four sections: (i) demographic information, (ii) general awareness of NEP 2020 (10 items, scored on a 3-point scale: Aware / Partially Aware / Unaware), (iii) specific provisions awareness (15 items on a 5-point Likert scale), and (iv) sources of awareness (10 items). Content validity was established by a panel of seven experts in education policy, and the tool was piloted on 30 students before finalisation. Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency was found to be 0.84, indicating high reliability.

4.4 Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS v.26. Descriptive statistics (means, percentages, standard deviations) were employed to assess overall awareness levels. Inferential statistics including independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA were used to examine group differences. A chi-square test was used to

analyse the association between demographic variables and awareness categories.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Overall Awareness of NEP 2020

The overall awareness score was computed as a composite index from responses on all 25 awareness items. The mean awareness score for the full sample was 54.8% (SD = 12.6%), indicating a moderate level of awareness. Only 18.1% of respondents could be categorised as 'highly aware' (scoring above 75%), while 37.5% fell in the 'moderately aware' bracket (50–75%), and 44.4% were 'low awareness' (below 50%). These figures suggest that despite NEP 2020 having been announced over three years before the survey, a substantial proportion of higher education students in Birbhum remain inadequately informed.

Table 2: Awareness Level Distribution Among Sample Students

| Awareness Level | N (%) | Score Range |
|--------------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| High Awareness | 58 (18.1%) | > 75% |
| Moderate Awareness | 120 (37.5%) | 50–75% |
| Low Awareness | 142 (44.4%) | < 50% |
| Total | 320 (100%) | Mean = 54.8% (SD = 12.6%) |

Source: Primary data collected by the authors (2023-24).

5.2 Awareness of Specific Provisions

An analysis of awareness across specific provisions of NEP 2020 revealed considerable variation. The most widely recognised provision was the multidisciplinary approach to education (known to 72.8% of respondents), followed by the emphasis on Indian languages and mother tongue (68.4%) and vocational education integration (61.0%). In contrast, awareness of the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) was

reported by only 31.2% of respondents, the multiple entry-exit option by 29.7%, and internationalisation provisions by 26.5%. This pattern suggests that macro-level philosophical orientations of the policy have percolated more broadly, while operational and procedural mechanisms remain poorly understood.

Table 3: Awareness of Specific Provisions of NEP 2020

| NEP 2020 Provision | Aware (%) | Unaware (%) |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Multidisciplinary Education | 72.8% | 27.2% |
| Emphasis on Indian Languages | 68.4% | 31.6% |
| Vocational Education Integration | 61.0% | 39.0% |
| Four-Year UG Programme (FYUP) | 56.3% | 43.7% |
| National Credit Framework (NCrF) | 42.5% | 57.5% |
| Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) | 31.2% | 68.8% |
| Multiple Entry-Exit Options | 29.7% | 70.3% |
| Internationalisation Provisions | 26.5% | 73.5% |

Source: Primary data collected by the authors (2023-24).

5.3 Gender Differences in Awareness

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare awareness scores between male and female students. Female students recorded a marginally higher mean awareness score ($M = 56.1$, $SD = 11.8$) compared to male students ($M = 53.2$, $SD = 13.1$), and this difference was statistically significant [$t(272) = 2.14$, $p = .033$]. One-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference when the 'other/undisclosed' category was compared ($F = 2.07$, $p = .127$). The slightly higher awareness among female students may be attributed to a greater relative concentration of female respondents in colleges that had conducted formal NEP 2020 orientation sessions.

5.4 Stream-Wise Differences

A one-way ANOVA comparing awareness scores across Arts, Science, and Commerce streams yielded a statistically significant result [$F(2, 317) = 8.34$, $p < .001$]. Post-hoc Tukey's HSD tests revealed that Science stream students ($M = 59.4$, $SD = 11.2$) scored significantly higher than both Arts students ($M = 52.6$, $SD = 13.0$) and Commerce students ($M = 53.1$, $SD = 12.4$). No significant difference was found between Arts and Commerce streams ($p = .921$). The relative advantage of science students may relate to greater integration of NEP discussions within STEM curricula and department-level orientation in institutions with strong science faculties.

5.5 Institution Type and Urban-Rural Differences

Students from Visva-Bharati University reported significantly higher awareness ($M = 63.7$) compared to government-aided college students ($M = 52.9$) and government college students ($M = 50.2$). A chi-square test of association between institutional type and awareness category was significant [$\chi^2(4) = 24.61$, $p < .001$]. Similarly, urban-located institution students demonstrated significantly higher awareness than semi-urban and rural students [$F(2,317) = 11.42$, $p < .001$]. These findings are consistent with the observation that central universities and urban institutions tend to have greater administrative infrastructure to communicate policy changes, including dedicated placement cells, student welfare offices, and digital notice boards.

5.6 Sources of Awareness

When students were asked to identify the primary sources through which they had come to know about NEP 2020, social media (WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube) emerged as the most cited source (67.8%), followed by classroom discussions with teachers (54.1%), newspaper and television coverage (48.4%),

official college notices or orientation sessions (32.5%), and the Ministry of Education's official website or publications (14.1%). The heavy reliance on informal and social media channels, combined with the low uptake of official institutional communication, underscores a critical gap in formal knowledge dissemination at the institutional level.

6. DISCUSSION

The results of this study present a nuanced picture of NEP 2020 awareness in Birbhum District. The moderate overall awareness score of 54.8% suggests that while the policy has entered the public discourse, it has not yet translated into deep functional understanding among the student community. This is especially concerning in light of the fact that several NEP 2020 provisions — notably the ABC, multiple entry-exit, and internationalisation measures — require students to make active, informed decisions about their academic trajectories.

The finding that social media is the dominant source of NEP 2020 awareness, while formal institutional mechanisms (orientation sessions, official notices) reach far fewer students, points to a systemic gap in institutional communication. Given that social media content on NEP 2020 varies widely in accuracy, depth, and pedagogical framing, students who rely primarily on these channels may carry incomplete or even misleading impressions of the policy's implications for their academic choices.

The stream-wise and institution-type differences in awareness are reflective of deeper structural inequalities in information access within the district's higher education ecosystem. The advantage enjoyed by central university students and science stream students highlights the need for targeted interventions in arts and commerce streams at government and government-aided colleges, which constitute the vast majority of institutions and enrolments in Birbhum.

The urban-rural awareness gap is particularly salient for a district like Birbhum, where a majority of students attend rural or semi-urban institutions. NEP 2020's vision of equity and inclusivity can only be realised if the policy communication apparatus reaches these students as effectively as it does those in urban centres. The present findings are broadly consistent with earlier studies by Chakraborty and Das (2022) and Ghosh and Bhattacharya (2023) for West Bengal's rural and peri-urban student populations.

It is also noteworthy that awareness of provisions related to Indian language instruction and vocational education — areas that resonate with the lived realities and aspirational frameworks of students from rural, lower-income, and tribal

backgrounds — was comparatively higher. This suggests that where NEP provisions align with locally salient concerns, communication may be more effective, offering a template for awareness campaigns that connect policy provisions to students' own contexts and aspirations.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered for policymakers, institutional administrators, and faculty:

- **Institutional Orientation Programmes:** Every higher education institution in Birbhum should conduct at least two dedicated NEP 2020 awareness sessions per academic year, facilitated by trained faculty and supplemented by printed and audio-visual resource packs in Bengali and regional languages.
- **Student Ambassador Schemes:** Select well-informed students can be trained as NEP 2020 peer ambassadors to disseminate accurate information through informal peer channels, harnessing the social media reach already demonstrated in this study.
- **Dedicated NEP 2020 Helpdesks:** Colleges should establish staffed helpdesks or digital portals where students can seek specific guidance about ABC registration, credit transfer, FYUP structure, and multiple entry-exit options.
- **Faculty Capacity Building:** Teachers, who were identified as a significant awareness source by students, should be systematically trained on NEP provisions so that classroom discussions can serve as accurate and detailed information channels.
- **State-Level Digital Campaign:** Given West Bengal's cautious approach to NEP adoption, a state-sanctioned but locally contextualised digital and print campaign explaining the practical benefits of NEP provisions for students in this region is urgently needed.
- **Targeted Outreach for Marginalised Groups:** Given that students from tribal backgrounds and rural areas showed the lowest awareness, dedicated outreach in Santali and other local languages through community radio, Gram Panchayat platforms, and self-help group networks should be explored.
- **Integration into IQAC Activities:** Internal Quality Assurance Cells (IQACs) of colleges should include NEP 2020 dissemination as a measurable activity in their annual quality enhancement plans.

8. CONCLUSION

This study provides the first systematic, empirical assessment of NEP 2020 awareness among higher education students in Birbhum District, West Bengal. The moderate overall awareness, significant gaps in knowledge of key operational provisions, and pronounced differentials by gender, stream, institution type, and location collectively indicate that NEP 2020's transformative potential is at risk of being undermined by inadequate policy communication at the grassroots level. The heavy reliance on social media for policy information, while understandable in the context of digital India's expanding

reach, is insufficient for generating the kind of nuanced, actionable awareness that NEP 2020's complex provisions demand. A deliberate, multi-channel, institutionally anchored dissemination strategy — one that is linguistically inclusive, contextually sensitive, and pedagogically grounded — is essential for translating policy ambition into student empowerment.

It must be acknowledged that this study has certain limitations. The sample, while carefully stratified, is geographically confined to Birbhum District and may not be representative of West Bengal as a whole. The cross-sectional design captures awareness at a single point in time, and longitudinal tracking would be valuable as NEP implementation progresses. Future research may also explore the relationship between awareness levels and actual student behaviour — such as ABC registration rates and uptake of multiple exit options — as data on these outcomes become available.

NEP 2020's success ultimately hinges not just on institutional restructuring but on whether students — particularly those from underserved districts like Birbhum — are genuinely equipped to navigate and benefit from the expanded opportunities the policy envisions. Bridging the awareness gap is not a peripheral concern; it is a precondition for equitable and effective implementation.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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