

# National Education Policy 2020 and the Transformation of Higher Education in India

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**Abstract—** The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, approved by the Union Cabinet of India on 29 July 2020, is the third comprehensive education policy since independence and the first major reform of the education sector in thirty-four years. It replaces the National Policy on Education, 1986, and proposes sweeping structural, curricular, and regulatory changes across school and higher education. This paper examines the transformative dimensions of NEP 2020 for higher education in India, situating the policy within the existing academic literature on Indian higher education reform. Using a descriptive-analytical method grounded in secondary sources, the paper reviews the policy's key provisions — multidisciplinary education, flexible curricula, the Academic Bank of Credits, a single regulatory body, internationalization, and technology integration — and evaluates their potential to reshape access, equity, and quality. The paper also identifies implementation challenges, including resource constraints, faculty preparedness, and institutional resistance, and concludes with recommendations for effective policy translation.

**Keywords:** National Education Policy 2020, Higher Education, Multidisciplinary Education, Academic Bank of Credits, Educational Reform, India

India approved the National Education Policy 2020, a policy document intended to holistically transform both school and higher education by the year 2040. The policy replaces the 1986 National Policy on Education (as modified in 1992) and was framed after an extensive multi-stage consultation process that began with the T.S.R. Subramanian Committee report of 2016 and culminated in the Draft NEP prepared under the chairmanship of Dr. K. Kasturirangan.



Figure 1. Overview of NEP 2020 Higher Education Framework

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education is widely recognized as the primary engine of a nation's social mobility, economic productivity, and democratic citizenship. In India, the higher education system has for decades struggled with problems of fragmented disciplinary silos, rigid degree structures, uneven regulatory oversight, and a persistent gap between classroom learning and employable skill. Against this backdrop, the Government of

NEP 2020 envisions an education system rooted in Indian ethos while aligning the country with the demands of a rapidly changing, technology-driven, and globally competitive knowledge economy. For higher education specifically, the policy sets an ambitious target of raising the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to 50 percent by 2035, restructuring undergraduate

education around multidisciplinary study, and consolidating a fragmented regulatory landscape under a single umbrella body. This paper undertakes a focused examination of these higher-education provisions, reviews the growing body of scholarly commentary that has emerged since 2020, and critically assesses the policy's transformative potential and the obstacles that stand in the way of its realization.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial and rapidly growing body of Indian academic literature has engaged with NEP 2020 since its release, most of it converging on the theme that the policy represents an ambitious but administratively demanding attempt to modernize Indian higher education.



Figure 2. Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) Workflow

Several scholars have focused on the policy's core structural reforms. The National Education Policy 2020 envisions an India-centric education system that contributes directly to transforming the nation sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society by providing high-quality education to all, and it introduces the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) as a virtual mechanism to store credits earned by students

throughout their educational life — a feature designed to enable multiple entry and exit points and reduce dropout penalties (Gupta & Choubey, 2022). Related scholarship on the Academic Bank of Credits notes that the scheme permits a minimum credit shelf life of seven years, enhancing flexibility for students by accommodating changes in their educational pathways and personal circumstances, while also enabling interdisciplinary academic mobility across institutions through an appropriate credit-transfer mechanism (Gupta & Choubey, 2022).

On the question of curricular philosophy, Tamrakar, Tamrakar, and Thakur (2024) argue that NEP 2020's emphasis on multidisciplinary education reflects the underlying belief that a broad-based educational system is essential for nurturing innovation, creativity, and critical thinking, and that by allowing students the flexibility to choose subjects across fields through the Academic Bank of Credits, the policy seeks to dismantle rigid barriers between academic disciplines. The same study further observes that this restructuring is intended to bridge theory and practice by weaving together arts, sciences, and vocational training into a single, application-oriented framework.

A parallel strand of literature examines the governance and regulatory dimensions of the policy. Research on institutional autonomy under NEP 2020 has drawn attention to the policy's proposal to replace multiple regulatory bodies with a unified Higher Education Commission of India, and to extend greater academic and administrative autonomy to colleges and universities that meet defined quality benchmarks (International Journal of Novel Research and Development, 2024). Complementing this, work on postgraduate credit systems notes that NEP 2020 aims to develop a more flexible, multidisciplinary, and inclusive education system that remains rooted in Indian foundations while meeting international education standards, with interdisciplinary learning and credit-transfer mobility identified as the policy's central transformative features for higher education.

The internationalization dimension of NEP 2020 has also received sustained scholarly attention. Recent survey-based research indicates that student awareness of NEP significantly predicts its perceived benefits, and that these perceived benefits in turn strongly shape students' perceptions of India's readiness for global academic engagement, with technological features such as online assessments, blended learning, MOOCs, and the Academic Bank of Credits being positively received by respondents. This empirical finding lends bottom-up, student-

level support to the policy's stated ambition of positioning India as a preferred global study destination and integrating Indian higher education more closely with international benchmarks (Vanita, 2024).

Scholars have also examined the implications of NEP 2020 for the teaching profession. Literature-based analyses of faculty transformation identify multidisciplinary, deeper student engagement, distributed leadership, lifelong learning, technology adoption, and the reconception of faculty as curriculum designers as the critical dimensions along which teacher roles must evolve under the new policy framework (Upadhyay, 2022), underscoring that the success of structural reform is contingent on parallel transformation in pedagogic practice and faculty capacity.

At the same time, a body of stakeholder-perception research complicates any straightforwardly optimistic reading of the policy. Mixed-methods studies comparing the views of students, teachers, and subject experts report that while subject experts tend to view the policy's expansive vision favorably, students and teachers voice more measured or mixed assessments, pointing to gaps between policy ambition and ground-level implementation capacity, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse regions of the country (Sahu, 2021). Similarly, exploratory studies using SWOC (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges) and stakeholder-analysis frameworks applied to specific institutional contexts have found that while the policy creates considerable opportunity for curricular innovation, its effective translation depends heavily on institutional readiness, financial investment, and administrative capacity at the state and institutional level (Devi, 2022; Kalyani, 2020).

Taken together, this literature suggests a broad scholarly consensus that NEP 2020 constitutes a genuinely transformative policy framework in its design — multidisciplinary, flexible, technology-enabled, and internationally oriented — while simultaneously flagging significant, empirically documented concerns about implementation capacity, resource adequacy, and the pace of institutional change (Ranjan, 2023). This paper builds on that consensus by offering an integrated analysis of the policy's higher-education provisions and the conditions necessary for their realization.

#### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the key provisions of NEP 2020 relevant to the restructuring of higher education in India.
2. To analyze the transformative potential of these provisions for access, equity, quality, and internationalization in higher education.
3. To identify the principal challenges likely to affect the implementation of NEP 2020 in higher education institutions.
4. To offer recommendations for the effective translation of policy into institutional practice.

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical research design based entirely on secondary data. Sources include the official NEP 2020 policy document published by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, and peer-reviewed academic articles, journal papers, and policy commentaries published between 2020 and 2026. Content analysis was used to identify recurring themes in the literature — structural reform, curricular flexibility, regulatory consolidation, internationalization, technology integration, and implementation challenges — which form the analytical framework for the discussion that follows. As a policy-analysis study, the paper does not involve primary data collection; its conclusions are therefore interpretive and are intended to synthesize, rather than supersede, the empirical work already undertaken by other researchers.

#### KEY PROVISIONS OF NEP 2020 FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

NEP 2020 introduces a wide-ranging set of reforms for higher education institutions (HEIs), several of which mark a decisive departure from the structure established under the 1986 policy.

**Multidisciplinary and Flexible Curricula.** The policy replaces the rigid single-discipline undergraduate degree with a four-year multidisciplinary undergraduate programme offering multiple exit options — a certificate after one year, a diploma after two years, a Bachelor's degree after three years, and a Bachelor's degree with Research after four years. Students are encouraged to combine subjects across the arts, sciences, humanities, and vocational streams, moving away from narrow specialization toward a broad-based liberal education model.

**Academic Bank of Credits (ABC).** To operationalize flexibility, NEP 2020 establishes a digital Academic Bank of Credits that stores and transfers academic credits earned by students across

institutions, enabling multiple entry and exit points without loss of previously earned credit. This mechanism is designed to reduce dropout costs and accommodate diverse student circumstances, including financial hardship, migration, and career reorientation.

Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). The policy proposes to replace the existing multiplicity of regulatory bodies — including the University Grants Commission and the All India Council for Technical Education — with a single overarching regulator, comprising four independent verticals for regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standard-setting. This is intended to reduce regulatory overlap and conflict of interest while preserving institutional autonomy.

Institutional Restructuring and Autonomy. NEP 2020 envisions the phasing out of the affiliating-college system over a fifteen-year period, with colleges evolving into autonomous degree-granting institutions. It also calls for the consolidation of higher education institutions into large, multidisciplinary universities and clusters, each ideally housing more than 3,000 students, to overcome the fragmentation of India's higher education landscape.

Research and Innovation. The establishment of a National Research Foundation is proposed to fund, mentor, and promote quality research across disciplines, with the explicit aim of building a research culture within universities that have historically been teaching-focused rather than research-intensive.

Internationalization. NEP 2020 encourages high-performing Indian universities to set up campuses abroad and permits select foreign universities to establish campuses in India, alongside greater emphasis on international student mobility, credit recognition, and collaborative research.

Technology Integration. The policy calls for the creation of a National Educational Technology Forum and greater use of digital infrastructure, online and blended learning formats, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to expand access, particularly for learners in remote or underserved regions.

Equity and Inclusion. Through Special Education Zones, gender-inclusion funds, and scholarship schemes, the policy seeks to widen access to historically underrepresented groups, including students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, persons with disabilities, and learners in aspirational districts.

## NEP 2020 AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS

The provisions summarized above collectively signal an intent to shift Indian higher education from a rigid, input-driven, and heavily siloed system toward one that is flexible, outcome-oriented, and integrated with global academic practice. Several dimensions of this transformation merit closer analysis.

First, the shift toward multidisciplinary and modular degree structures represents a genuine philosophical reorientation. By dismantling the strict separation between science, arts, commerce, and vocational streams, the policy aligns Indian higher education more closely with liberal-education models common in leading global universities, and creates space for students to develop cross-cutting competencies — critical thinking, communication, and adaptability — that are increasingly valued in a rapidly changing labour market. The multiple entry-exit framework, supported by the Academic Bank of Credits, additionally addresses one of the most persistent problems in Indian higher education: high dropout rates driven by financial distress, migration, or personal circumstance. Where a student under the earlier system lost an entire year's academic investment upon withdrawal, NEP 2020 allows that investment to be banked and later resumed, which is likely to have meaningful equity implications for first-generation learners and economically disadvantaged students.

**Table I. Major Higher Education Reforms under NEP 2020**

| Reform                       | Expected Impact           |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Multidisciplinary Education  | Holistic learning         |
| Academic Bank of Credits     | Student mobility          |
| Four-Year UG Programme       | Research orientation      |
| HECI                         | Simplified regulation     |
| National Research Foundation | Strong research ecosystem |
| Digital Learning             | Wider access              |
| Internationalization         | Global competitiveness    |
| Equity Measures              | Inclusive education       |

Second, the proposed consolidation of regulatory functions under the Higher Education Commission of India addresses a long-standing structural inefficiency. India's higher education sector has historically been governed by a patchwork of bodies with overlapping and occasionally conflicting mandates, producing regulatory friction that slows institutional innovation. A single, functionally differentiated regulator has the potential to streamline approvals, reduce compliance burden, and create a more coherent quality-assurance ecosystem — provided that the transition is managed without simply relocating existing bureaucratic bottlenecks into a new institutional form.

Third, the internationalization agenda marks a significant departure from the traditionally inward-looking orientation of Indian higher education governance. Allowing foreign universities to establish campuses in India, and enabling Indian institutions to expand abroad, has the potential to increase competitive pressure on domestic universities to improve quality, while also stemming the outflow of talented students who currently pursue overseas education. Empirical research on student perceptions suggests that awareness of these internationalization measures is already associated with more favorable perceptions of India's global academic standing among current students, indicating an early, positive reception of this dimension of the policy even before large-scale implementation has occurred.

Fourth, the technology-enabled components of NEP 2020 — blended learning, MOOCs, and digital credit infrastructure — proved particularly salient in the years immediately following the policy's release, as Indian higher education institutions had only recently navigated the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic experience exposed both the potential and the limitations of technology-mediated higher education in India, including significant disparities in digital access between urban and rural learners. NEP 2020's technology provisions can be read as an attempt to institutionalize the lessons of that period, though their success depends heavily on continued investment in digital infrastructure and connectivity in underserved regions.

Finally, the policy's equity provisions and its ambitious GER target signal an explicit commitment to widening access alongside improving quality — two goals that have historically been in tension within Indian higher education policy. Whether this tension is successfully resolved will depend less on the design of the policy itself than on the scale and consistency of public investment, since NEP 2020's own recommendation to

raise public expenditure on education to 6 percent of GDP has yet to be fully realized in national and state budgets.

#### CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS IN IMPLEMENTATION

Despite its transformative ambition, NEP 2020 faces substantial implementation challenges that the existing literature has consistently flagged.

**Financial constraints.** The policy's recommendations — new regulatory infrastructure, expanded digital access, research funding, and faculty development — require sustained public investment that, as of the mid-2020s, remains below the policy's own recommended benchmark of 6 percent of GDP.

**Federal and administrative complexity.** Education is a concurrent subject under the Indian Constitution, and implementation therefore requires coordination between the Union government and state governments, several of which have raised concerns regarding language policy, administrative autonomy, and financial burden-sharing. This has produced uneven adoption across states.

**Faculty preparedness.** The shift to multidisciplinary, outcome-based, and technology-integrated pedagogy requires large-scale faculty retraining. Existing faculty, trained and socialized within single-discipline departmental structures, may face difficulty adapting to interdisciplinary teaching, curriculum design responsibilities, and new assessment models within the available implementation timeframe (Upadhyay, 2022).

**Institutional capacity and infrastructure gaps.** Many of India's higher education institutions, particularly smaller affiliated colleges in non-metropolitan areas, lack the physical infrastructure, library resources, and digital connectivity necessary to deliver the flexible, technology-enabled model envisioned by the policy.

**Digital divide.** The policy's technology-driven components risk widening, rather than narrowing, educational inequality if access to reliable internet connectivity and digital devices remains uneven between urban and rural, and between economically advantaged and disadvantaged, student populations.

**Regulatory transition risk.** The proposed dissolution of long-standing bodies such as the University Grants Commission in favor of the Higher Education Commission of India involves significant legal and administrative restructuring; delays or

ambiguities in this transition could create regulatory uncertainty for institutions during the changeover period.

Stakeholder-perception studies underscore that these implementation concerns are not merely theoretical: student and teacher respondents in several regional studies report only partial awareness of specific NEP provisions, alongside concerns about whether institutional capacity can keep pace with policy ambition, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse states (Sahu, 2021).

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

NEP 2020 represents the most far-reaching attempt in over three decades to reform Indian higher education, proposing a coherent vision built around multidisciplinary learning, curricular flexibility, regulatory consolidation, internationalization, and technology integration. The academic literature reviewed in this paper broadly affirms the transformative intent and design coherence of the policy while simultaneously documenting substantial gaps between that design and the realities of implementation capacity across India's vast and heterogeneous higher education landscape.

Realizing the policy's transformative potential will require sustained and adequately funded implementation efforts. Specific recommendations arising from this review include: phased and context-sensitive rollout that accounts for variation in institutional capacity across states and institution types; substantial investment in faculty development programmes to build capacity for multidisciplinary and outcome-based teaching; targeted infrastructure and connectivity investment to prevent the digital components of the policy from exacerbating existing inequalities; close monitoring of the transition to the Higher Education Commission of India to minimize regulatory disruption; and periodic, independent evaluation of implementation outcomes against the policy's own stated targets, including the 50 percent GER goal for 2035. Future empirical research tracking institutional-level implementation over the coming decade will be essential to assess whether NEP 2020's ambitious vision for the transformation of Indian higher education translates into measurable improvements in access, equity, and quality.

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