



# Opportunities and Implementation Challenges of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in Higher Education

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**Abstract-** The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is a reform of Indian education since independence, aimed at transforming higher education through multidisciplinary education, flexible access and exit, integration of research, and digital innovation. It is a plan to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education, currently about 26.28 per cent (2018-2020) to 50 per cent by 2035, and to reform a huge system of over a thousand universities and approximately forty thousand colleges into a smaller number of better-resourced multidisciplinary institutions. The paper explores opportunities generated and the challenges faced in the early years of NEP 2020 based on a qualitative, multi-institutional study of four contrasting universities, the University of Delhi (DU), the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) Bengaluru, Azim Premji University (APU) Bengaluru, and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) New Delhi. As the analysis reveals, NEP 2020 creates actual opportunities in the areas of curricular diversification, undergraduate research, and individualised learning tracks, especially in the context in which the institutional resources, faculty readiness, and organisational culture are aligned with the vision of the policy. Meanwhile, the research reveals systemic tendencies of symbolic compliance in resource-restricted contexts where there is no substantive shift in teaching-learning practices as a result of formal programme restructuring. Lack of faculty training, disparate digital and physical infrastructure, and lack of mechanisms that support equity in connection to flexible exit options all become bottlenecks. The paper states that the transformative potential of NEP 2020 can only become a reality through systematic investment in faculty development, differentiated investment to disadvantaged institutions, more explicit implementation guidelines, and effective support systems that can ensure flexibility is empowering to all students. It finds that the policy is a valuable commitment to young people in India, although the implementation of such a promise is reliant on the resolution of fundamental structural and cultural limitations in the higher education system.

**Keywords-** National Education Policy 2020; higher education; India; implementation; multidisciplinary education; Academic Bank of Credits; equity; faculty development.

## I. Introduction

Since independence, the higher education system of India has developed at a high rate to become one of the largest and most complex systems in the world, in which there are over 1,000 universities and approximately 40,000 colleges that cater to over 40 million students. Although such quantitative growth has been impressive, the quality, equity, and relevance of this growth have been of concern: low and unequal GER, inflexible and disjointed curricula, exam-based pedagogies, scarcity of research on this outside of elite institutions, and a very stratified institutional environment.



NEP 2020 addresses these issues with a broad reform agenda that aims to reimagine twenty-first-century higher education. Some of its most noticeable targets include increasing the GER in higher education (including vocational education) to 50 per cent by 2035, increased to approximately 2628 per cent in 20182019, and reorganizing all institutions into three broad categories research-intensive universities, teaching-intensive universities, and autonomous degree-granting colleges, in a single, multidisciplinary The policy proposes a four-year undergraduate programme and entry and exit points and Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) to store and transfer credits digitally across institutions to offer students unprecedented flexibility and mobility.

Although the text of the policy has been well debated, the reality of its initial implementation is much less well-known. A significant amount of the commentary so far has been of the normative intent and structural design of NEP 2020, as opposed to how the institutions actually interpret and implement the provisions. Current literature tends to render higher education an abstract and undifferentiated sector, which does not pay enough attention to the vast dissimilarity in institutional strength, culture, and student makeup that determines the results of implementation.

The present paper fills that gap, as it compiles the findings of the qualitative, multi-institutional study that is based on four universities that reflect the various segments of the Indian system of higher learning:

University of Delhi (DU) - a large, affiliating, public university, with dozens of colleges, a highly diverse student body;

Indian Institute of Science (IISc) - a research-intensive, high-end institution and pioneer of interdisciplinary undergraduate studies;

• Azim Premji University (APU) - a fairly small, philanthropic private university that is based on a clear promise of a holistic, socially engaged education;

The Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) is a centrally funded research university with a good profile in social sciences and the humanities and a tradition of critical participation in the policy process.

The research design involved a combination of policy and institutional document analysis, secondary data and literature review as well as semi-structured interviews with the faculty members and students of each institution. Rather than trying to measure success in its narrower sense, the study attempted to comprehend how various institutional contexts mediate the connection between the ambitions of NEP 2020 and its actual implementation in the classroom, the curriculum, and the experience of students.

**The main questions that will inform this paper are:**

1. What are the ways universities are understanding and implementing the main provisions of NEP 2020 on higher education?
2. What are the emerging opportunities for pedagogical and institutional change?
3. What are the barriers and limitations that are preventing substantive implementation?
4. What is this telling us about the circumstances in which wholesale education reforms can be successful?



The discussion that follows is organised into three substantive parts. The former outlines the principal characteristics of the NEP 2020 vision of higher education, especially focusing on the four-year undergraduate model, the ABC, and the aim of establishing multidisciplinary universities. The second will discuss the opportunities and good things that have been realised in the case study institutions. The third explores some of the most significant implementation issues and ways to address them within their structural context, focusing particularly on resource imbalances, faculty readiness, institutional culture, and equity. An argument is then summarised with a conclusion that gives policy and practice implications.

### **Key Argument and Discussion.**

The Vision of NEP 2020 on Higher Education.

NEP 2020 is a holistic description of the vision of higher education that takes a decisive step in abandoning the older and more discipline-limited and examination-focused model. At the structural level, the policy proposes a four-year undergraduate programme with several exit points where students may leave with a certificate after one year, a diploma after two years, a bachelor's degree after three years and an honours/honours with research degree after four years. This is accompanied by the creation of the Academic Bank of Credits, a virtual system where students are able to store and transfer the credits that they have earned in other recognised institutions, thus building customised, modular learning pathways.

On the curricular and pedagogical level, NEP 2020 focuses on multidisciplinary education, critical thinking, creativity, research capabilities, and ethical and constitutional values and makes higher education a place of self-development, democratic citizenship, and social service instead of merely credentials acquisition. It is also proposed in the policy that the existing model of affiliating college be gradually supplanted by huge, well-endowed, multidisciplinary universities and degree granting colleges, underpinned by graded autonomy and a streamlined regulatory structure

A combination of these provisions forms a broad effort to transform not only the form but also the role of Indian higher education. Their success, however, is crucially dependent upon their realisation within particular institutional contexts.

## **II. Opportunities Noted in Practice.**

Over the four case study institutions, NEP 2020 has provided a number of actual opportunities to improve education, though they may not be evenly spread.

## **III. Implementation Systematizations and Structural Constraints.**

In contrast to these opportunities, the study discovers significant and systematic implementation problems, however.

### **Capacity Gaps and resource Asymmetries.**

This is a radical difference between, say, the well-equipped setting of IISc and the limited nature of the surroundings most DU colleges and other state-funded institutions have. Although NEP 2020 predicts the appearance of large, well-resourced, vibrant



multidisciplinary institutions and suggests new sources of funds, publicly available documents note that it will take extremely significant capacity, infrastructure, and financial support to reach a 50 per cent GER by 2035. In the absence of sufficient investment in laboratories, libraries, digital infrastructures, and hostel facilities, the vision of multidisciplinary and research-based education might continue to be a pipe dream within most of the system. The lack of proper funding to the laboratories, libraries, digital facilities, and hostels means that the vision of multidisciplinary, research-oriented education will be aspirational in much of the

There are also resource constraints that impact staffing: a number of colleges have a large number of ad-hoc or contract teachers, thus long-term curriculum development and long-term innovation is challenging. The administrative offices are commonly inadequately staffed in comparison to the intricacy of ABC registration, multiple exit management, and new quality assurance requirements.

#### **Faculty Preparedness and Professional Identity.**

Faculty preparedness is possibly the most important bottleneck. Most educators have had minimal or no formal education on how to design interdisciplinary courses, oversee undergraduate research or employ formative and student-centred assessment approaches. Multiple interviewees report being requested to teach new NEP-required courses on extremely short notice with insufficient time and resources to redesign syllabi or refresh their knowledge. In such circumstances, even generous faculty members are inclined to revert to old lecture-and-exam models, crammed with old pedagogical materials in new course categories.

Besides that, NEP 2020 questions traditional professional identities founded on profound disciplinary knowledge and performance on exams. In one or two of the departments of the JNU and the DU, there are real, theoretically based anxieties that mandatory breadth can be achieved at the cost of disciplinary depth. Unless these issues are properly recognized and tackled in a constructive manner - as opposed to being seen as just a form of resistance - then they will continue to foster the current scepticism and shallow obedience.

#### **Symbolic Compliance and Policy Practice Gap.**

One pattern that is being reported consistently in DU specifically is that of the symbolic compliance: the restructuring of programmes and course catalogues on paper without the actual change in classroom practice. Theoretically, this can be explained by the idea of decoupling presented by Meyer and Rowan in which organisations with high levels of legitimacy pressure switch to new forms of organisation in a ceremonial manner without jeopardising the main operations of the organisations. Universities in the NEP environment rename themselves, introduce NEP-friendly nomenclature, and enrol students in courses about the ABC, but mostly they still receive pedagogies and assessment regimes that change little.

Symbolic compliance does not imply bad faith, but such behaviour is a natural organisational reaction to the impossibility of meeting policy requirements when the capacity is insufficient. But not addressed it will serve to subvert the very argument of



reform, and establish a disconnectage between the spectacular official numbers and the disillusioning student experiences.

#### **Digital Divide/ABC Implementation.**

The digital and ABC aspects of NEP 2020 depend significantly on the strong information technology infrastructure and access to strong connections and devices by students. Central portals and regulations have been developed but their practical implementation at the ground level is imbalanced. It has been reported publicly that a significant number of HEIs have not fully implemented ABC accounts and that students, particularly those with a rural or economic disadvantage, frequently face issues with online access, which is threatening to create a new form of inequity in the name of flexibility.

To make the ABC a tool of empowerment, but not of bureaucracy, institutions need to invest not only in software integration, but also in training, helping desks, communication in language that fits the audience, and in mechanisms to make sure the credit transfers has been honoured and understood.

#### **Equity Risks of Flexible Exit Option.**

The most valuable lesson of this study is related to the equity implications of NEP 2020 about the flexible entry and exit options. At the national level, policy documents forecast that the increase of GER to 50 per cent will mean enrolling about 7080 million students in higher education by 2035, which is enormous by the current standards. Flexible options can certainly allow experimentation or work-study mixes or temporary withdrawals without long-lasting consequences; however, this must be restricted to students who have sufficient financial, social, and academic assistance.

Nonetheless, interviews with DU and JNU students indicate that, in reality, early exit opportunities are disenfranchised by the financially pressured or the less academically prepared. Such students tend to view the three-year-exit not as a choice of the same valued alternatives but as the only feasible way based on their situation. Without good scholarship programmes, systematic advising and explicit understanding of exit-level qualification in the labour market, flexibility can therefore replicate or even enhance existing inequalities.

### **IV. Conclusion**

NEP 2020 is a bold and in most ways visionary effort to reposition Indian higher education to multidisciplinary learning, research, flexibility and inclusivity. It is correct in acknowledging that a fast moving society and economy needs graduates who can reason critically, work across disciplinary lines, and address the complex social realities and is ambitious in increasing its GER to 50 per cent before 2035. The four-year undergraduate programme, the ABC, graded institutional autonomy and the merging of institutions into multidisciplinary universities, which are the structural instruments of the policy on paper, are well-suited to these purposes.

The qualitative data provided in this paper however show that policy formulation is not the only side to the story. Institutional conditions: the accessibility of resources,



preparedness and professional identities of faculty, the richness of institutional culture, the existence (or lack) of equity-affirming infrastructure are the key factors influencing the extent of the realisation of the opportunities of NEP 2020. Already, in resource-endowed, research-driven institutions with matched cultures, NEP 2020 has facilitated significant innovation in the curricula and pedagogy. At most publicly administered colleges and universities, however, the policy has up to this point had more effect on documents than on classrooms.

This policy practice gap will need a multi-pronged approach. To begin with, a comprehensive and well-invested faculty development is essential in the event that teachers are to go beyond the show of compliance and embrace truly student-centred and research-oriented pedagogies. Second, the mechanisms of resource allocation should be redesigned in a way that disproportionate funding should be given to institutions with disadvantaged students, otherwise reforms will only maintain systemic inequalities. Third, the implementation guidelines should be more explicit and pedagogically based, and less ambiguous to permit minimal-change interpretations. Fourth, equity should be viewed as something to be designed rather than as an empty rhetorical appendix: digital platforms, flexible means of exit, institutional autonomy, and so on will all be coupled with tangible means of securing and increasing the chances of students with marginalised backgrounds.

Finally, NEP 2020 can be seen not as an ultimate plan but as a process of transformation that will need to be reconsidered over time by learning and being honest and modifying the course. Provided that policymakers, institutions, and educators are able to think of the policy as a living document and not a script to be followed, and provided that they are willing to invest in the human and material conditions that real change requires, NEP 2020 can continue to do what its authors of the policy intended: to make Indian higher education more inclusive, more intellectually vibrant, and more socially responsive. As the experience of DU, IISc, APU and JNU has demonstrated, this is not a given, but can be achieved through decisions, investments and commitments made in the next decade.

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