

NEP 2020 AND THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: REFORMS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND OBSTACLES

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Abstract

NEP 2020 is a landmark reform that will affect the higher education sector in particular. This paper examines the significant reforms that were proposed under NEP 2020: restructuring higher education institutions into multidisciplinary universities, introducing holistic and flexible learning frameworks, the Academic Bank of Credits, the Multiple Entry and Exit System, and the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India. It further discusses the policy's vision to internationalize higher education that places India at the global academic standard, benchmark, and ranking. NEP 2020 thus aimed at improving access, equity, quality, and innovation while promoting research, skill development, and global competitiveness through these initiatives. Notwithstanding its transformative potential, NEP 2020's implementation faces significant challenges related to financial constraints, regulatory restructuring, digital divides, and differences in state-level preparedness. This paper concludes that NEP 2020 has a comprehensive and progressive blueprint for modernizing Indian higher education, but its success is contingent upon sustained investment, collaborative governance, and timely resolution of structural and administrative barriers.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Reforms, Multidisciplinary, Academic Bank of Credits,

Introduction

Education has always been central to national development, serving as the most powerful instrument for driving social, economic, and cultural transformation (Kurien & Chandramana, 2020). Since independence, India has recognised education as a vital tool for

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fostering social justice, promoting economic growth, and modernising the education system (Aithal & Kakde, 2024). Over the years, numerous educational reforms have been implemented to enhance the system and ensure it aligns with the country's developmental objectives. The initial National Education Policy (NEP 1968) was established based on the suggestions of the Kothari Commission (1964–66). It highlighted the importance of national unity, equal access to education, and the implementation of a common school system. The advancement, concentrating on increasing educational access, Enhancing adult literacy, and promoting women's empowerment through education. This policy was subsequently revised in 1992 to respond to the new challenges presented by a swiftly evolving society. Acknowledging the necessity for a policy tailored to the context of the 21st century, the Union Cabinet approved the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 on July 29, 2020. This groundbreaking policy proposed a progressive and innovative vision for reshaping the entire educational framework, especially in higher education. NEP 2020 recognised the vital importance of higher education in fostering both individual and societal well-being and in contributing to India's comprehensive development. By focusing on flexibility, interdisciplinary learning, research, and innovation, the policy aims to position India's higher education system as globally competitive and socially responsible (Rashmi & Prakasha, 2023). One of the key modifications in NEP 2020 is the creation of a Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) that will serve as an overarching organisation for the entire higher education framework, with the exception of legal and medical education. As Kurien & Chandramana (2020) point out, NEP 2020 introduces fundamental changes, such as the establishment of HECI, multidisciplinary universities, and the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), aimed at reshaping higher education. The NEP-2020 introduces fundamental changes to the existing education system, emphasising establishing multidisciplinary universities and colleges, aiming to enable students to choose combinations of subjects across disciplines with multiple entry-exit options through the Academic Bank of Credits. Besides this, universities and colleges should support students and researchers in

improving their experiences by creating a National Research Foundation that endorses high-quality, peer-reviewed research and effectively initiates academic studies at these institutions. Aithal & Kakde (2024) indicate that NEP 2020 seeks to increase access and equity in higher education via flexible curricula and skill development. According to Rashmi & Prakasha (2023), these reforms, more so the way higher education institutions can implement interdisciplinary learning and innovations, have the potential to change the outlook of higher education in India. This reflects the general goal of NEP 2020 in modernising higher education through innovation and research. However, IJABS (2023) postulates that there are challenges found, which include infrastructure, teacher training, and the digital divide, that would influence how these reforms will be put into practice.

Objectives

1. To explore key initiatives such as the Academic Bank of Credits and the Multiple Entry and Exit System, and their implications for flexibility in learning.
2. To examine the proposed regulatory regime under HECI and its role in
3. Bringing about transformation in the governance of higher education.
4. To assess the internationalization strategies commended by NEP 2020 for
5. Improving India's global academic competitiveness.
6. To identify the major challenges and constraints in higher education associated with the implementation of NEP 2020.

Methodology

The study relies solely on secondary data. An interpretative methodology is utilised, gathering and analysing qualitative data by reviewing research articles from journals, reports from various organisations and commissions, books, articles found in international, national, and local publications, as well as online documents.

Major Reforms Proposed in Higher Education

Restructuring of Higher Education Institutions

A key strategy introduced by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 to prevent fragmentation in higher education is the creation of large multidisciplinary higher education institutions. By the year 2040, it is envisioned that all HEIs in India will adopt a multidisciplinary model, equipped with complete academic and administrative autonomy, while single-discipline institutions will gradually be phased out. The traditional affiliation system is set to be abolished, and colleges will be motivated to gain autonomy and transition into degree-granting, multidisciplinary institutions. The policy emphasises the important role of the private sector in widening higher education options and maintaining quality and accessibility. HEIs are anticipated to deliver multidisciplinary education at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, merging teaching, research, and community engagement. They are also expected to make contributions to professional fields, train future educators, and foster innovations in school education. To enhance diversity and excellence, HEIs will be classified as research-intensive universities, teaching-intensive universities, or autonomous degree-granting colleges. Moreover, the policy seeks to elevate the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education from approximately 26.3% (in 2018) to a minimum of 50% by 2035, demonstrating a strong commitment to inclusion, quality, and the growth of higher education in India.

Multidisciplinary and Holistic Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlights the importance of providing a comprehensive and multidisciplinary education that aims to cultivate all aspects of human development—including social, moral, emotional, physical, intellectual, and aesthetic—in a cohesive way. This educational framework seeks to foster balanced individuals who possess the necessary skills and values for the 21st century across a wide range of fields, such as arts, humanities, social sciences, languages, sciences, vocational training, professional studies, and technical disciplines. The policy aims to establish at least one substantial multidisciplinary Higher Education Institution (HEI) in

every district by the year 2030. To accomplish this, all HEIs are encouraged to incorporate credit-based courses, projects, and hands-on learning opportunities focused on areas like environmental education and value-based education. Environmental education will cover topics such as climate change, waste management, sanitation, conservation of biodiversity, pollution management, forest and wildlife protection, and sustainable development practices. In contrast, value-based education will aim to instill ethical, humanistic, and constitutional values — such as truth, peace, non-violence, love, scientific mindset, social responsibility, and active citizenship — through community involvement and service-learning activities. Additionally, NEP 2020 supports practical learning experiences, urging students to engage in internships with local industries, artisans, businesses, and research establishments to improve their employability, creativity, and social consciousness. This integrated and experiential approach to learning aspires to develop responsible citizens who can contribute significantly to both national and global progress.

Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)

ABC is one of the most discussed and eagerly awaited initiatives under the new NEP 2020, which serves as an online repository for the credits amassed by learners, managed by the University Grants Commission. It aims to offer academic flexibility to students, allowing those in higher education to gather credit points by transitioning through different academic levels, such as certificate, diploma, postgraduate diploma, undergraduate, and postgraduate degree programs. This system provides multiple opportunities for entry and exit, enabling the pursuit of lifelong learning. Students will have the opportunity to leave higher education programs and return later, depending on their preferences, needs, and available resources. The ABC model enables students to take a break from their studies without forfeiting their earned credits and allows them to re-enroll within a designated timeframe, thus ushering in a transformative era driven by modern technology in the education sector. It will consequently offer students' academic flexibility through its innovative approach to credit accumulation, akin to a savings account where individuals deposit

and manage their hard-earned funds. Such initiatives will enable institutions to allow their students to explore a wide range of courses based on their preferences and interests, including music, dance, drama, and animation, alongside engineering and medical disciplines. Students will have the opportunity to earn minor degrees while working on their major programs and can choose to enter and exit courses according to their preferences (Jebaraj, 2021).

Multiple Entry and Exit System (MEES)

The Multiple Entry and Exit System is in the nature of a comprehensive reform within higher education under NEP 2020 and provides students with opportunities to pause and begin their studies when personal, professional, or financial conditions allow for entry or re-entry at will into the academic pipeline. As per NEP 2020, undergraduate programs will be of three or four years' duration, with multiple exit and re-entry points along with appropriate certification. A certificate will be provided after the completion of one year of study in a chosen discipline or vocational field, a diploma after two years, and a Bachelor's degree after three years. Students who complete a four-year program with a research component will receive a Bachelor's degree with Research, provided they undertake a substantive research project as specified by their higher education institution. In addition, the Policy has introduced the ABC (Academic Bank of Credits), a national-level digital repository that securely stores the students' academic credits acquired from recognised higher education institutions. These can later be transferred and accumulated to ensure academic mobility and continuity across universities and colleges. The MEES framework's structure lends flexibility while addressing the pressing challenge of dropout rates by allowing learners to acquire meaningful credentials at every stage of their academic journey. This will align education with lifetime learning principles, skill development, and employability so that students can effectively adapt to the changing demands at work. With it, higher education would become more oriented toward students, inclusive, and responsive to individual aspirations and socio-

economic realities.

Establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI)

A major modification in NEP 2020 is the suggestion to establish the Higher Education Commission of India, which will serve as a governing body for higher education, with the exception of medical and legal education. The revamped regulatory framework for higher education will guarantee that separate and empowered entities carry out distinct functions related to administration, accreditation, financing, and the establishment of academic standards. These four functions will be organised as independent verticals under the umbrella of a single institution, known as India's Higher Education Commission (HECI).

Internationalization of Education

NEP 2020 encompasses a major effort by the Government of India to raise higher education to world-class standards by bringing in international best practices, leveraging technological innovation, and encouraging high-quality academic frameworks. It also has among its central aims making India a global knowledge hub that will provide for better cross-border academic exchange and increase the international visibility of Indian institutions. The NEP 2020 outlines a set of forward-thinking approaches toward the internationalization of higher education. Among these are permitting top-performing foreign universities to establish campuses in India and supporting leading Indian institutions as they move toward establishing campuses overseas, which will foster reciprocal global engagement. The policy advocates for seamless transfer of academic credits through globally compatible credit frameworks such as the Academic Bank of Credits to ease the mobility of students across institutions and countries. Furthermore, NEP 2020 stresses the need for international research collaborations, faculty and student exchange programs, and jointly or dually awarded degrees to build a robust academic ecosystem for India. But above all, it also emphasises the imperative of technology-enabled learning, internationalization of curricula, and global

research networks to make Indian higher education competitive, inclusive, and innovation-driven in the 21st century.

Challenges in Implementation

Financial Constraints

Carrying out extensive reforms—such as multidisciplinary universities, enhanced digital infrastructure, recruitment of high-quality faculty, and investment in research—necessitates significant financial resources. Numerous states and institutions encounter budget constraints, hindering the complete realisation of these initiatives.

Collaboration Among the States

Given that education is a concurrent subject, many states operate their own school boards, which means that state governments need to step up to effectively implement this decision. Furthermore, the proposal to establish a National Higher Education Regulatory Council as the primary governing authority may face resistance from the states.

Regulatory Transition Challenges

The transition to a single regulatory framework under the Higher Education Commission of India presents enormous challenges on structural and administrative levels. Revamping well-entrenched bodies such as the UGC, AICTE, and NAAC into professional verticals requires wide-ranging policy alignment, legal restructuring, and operational clarity. Besides, the facilitation of coordination between the central and state governments with their diversity of priorities, capabilities, and regulatory environments remain an enormous challenge. This level of complexity reduces the pace of reform and introduces uncertainties for institutions in the transition to the new regulatory architecture.

Multidisciplinary Integration Issues

This transition from specialized or single-discipline institutions to a fully multidisciplinary university is not easy and is a gradual process.

It requires comprehensive curricular restructuring, hiring and training of faculty who can teach and collaborate across diverse disciplines, and significant upgrading or expanding of institutional infrastructure. These structural changes are at least as difficult as fostering a culture that values interdisciplinary thinking and collaboration, with long-standing academic practices, departmental boundaries, and institutional mindsets needing revision.

Conclusion

The NEP 2020 embodies one of the most transformative and forward-looking reforms in the history of Indian higher education. Its emphasis on flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, research orientation, and global engagement reflects the philosophy for an inclusive, learner-centric, and 21st-century-oriented education system. From the restructuring of higher education institutions to the Academic Bank of Credits, the Multiple Entry and Exit System, and, finally, the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India, NEP 2020 strives to dismantle the old structures and aims at a coherent and progressive academic ecosystem. This policy also aims at positioning India as a global knowledge hub by encouraging international collaborations, cross-border academic mobility, and the internationalisation of curricula and research.

But the realisation of this vision depends considerably on overcoming persistent challenges accompanying such large-scale reforms. Financial constraints, limited institutional capacity, regulatory transitions, coordination between central and state governments, and disparities in digital and physical infrastructure remain significant bottlenecks for uniform implementation across the country. Overcoming these would need sustained political will, collaborative governance, strong investment, and continuous capacity building at all levels of the system.

In spite of these challenges, the NEP 2020 holds immense potential for transforming the higher education landscape in India. Done well, the reforms can establish institutions that are academically vibrant, socially responsible, globally competitive, and capable of cultivating a

generation of learners prepared with the knowledge, skills, and values required to advance the cause of national development. Ultimately, the NEP 2020 lays a sound foundation for establishing higher education as a dynamic driver of innovation, equity, and human progress, thereby reinforcing India's long-run aspiration to emerge as one of the most prominent knowledge societies in the world.

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