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EFFICIENCY OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY (NEP) 2020 ON HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the most extensive reform of India's higher education system in over thirty years, was adopted by the Union Cabinet on July 29, 2020. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are expected to become more globally competitive, multidisciplinary, flexible, and research-focused. This paper examines the effectiveness of NEP 2020's implementation across Indian HEIs six years after its introduction.

Based on government reports, independent surveys, and recent academic literature, the study concludes that while many institutions have implemented reforms such as the Academic Bank of Credits, the Choice-Based Credit System, and the four-year undergraduate programme on paper, actual outcomes remain unclear.

Issues such as insufficient funding, faculty preparedness, and digital infrastructure continue to impede efficiency, and urban and well-funded colleges have advanced more quickly than rural and under-resourced ones. Recommendations for closing this implementation gap are in Section 7.

Keywords: *NEP 2020, Higher Education, HEI, India, Policy Implementation, Efficiency*

1. Introduction

India's economic and social success has traditionally been attributed to higher education. On the recommendation of a committee led by former ISRO chairman Dr. K. Kasturirangan, India adopted the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 after operating under the 1986 education policy for more than thirty years. The strategy aims to modernise Indian education by encouraging multidisciplinary learning, flexible credit systems, vocational integration, and increased research capability. The policy rests on five pillars: Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability, and Accountability.

NEP 2020 introduced several landmark reforms in higher education, including a four-year undergraduate programme with multiple entry and exit points, an Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) for credit storage and transfer, a Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to replace regulators such as the UGC and AICTE, and a National Research Foundation (NRF) to increase research funding. The policy also aims to raise the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50% by 2035.

It is worthwhile to pose a straightforward but crucial question six years after Cabinet approval: how well has NEP 2020 been implemented in India's higher education institutions, and what does the data indicate about its practical effects thus far? This study attempts to offer a brief answer to that question using institutional data, scholarly literature, and current policy evaluations.

2. Literature Review

In general, early observers of NEP 2020 were optimistic about its objectives but cautious about how it would be implemented. Muralidharan and Singh (2021) argued shortly after the policy's release that its success would depend on funding, governance capacity, and the ability to close socioeconomic gaps between institutions.

The majority of higher education institutions have made visible advances toward reform, such as implementing flexible, credit-based courses, according to a 2026 systematic literature review of fifty peer-reviewed papers on NEP 2020. However, several of the same studies found major challenges, most commonly, limited funding, poor digital infrastructure in remote locations, and teachers who had not yet received training for the new multidisciplinary approach (Sivaraman et al., 2026).

The same review found far greater implementation effectiveness in urban institutions than in rural ones, and its authors attributed this gap to differences in internet access, administrative capacity, and staffing (Sivaraman et al.,

2026). Institutions that implemented NEP reforms gradually, as well as those that made early investments in faculty training and industry partnerships, tended to report better results than those that tried to implement everything at once (Narkhede et al., 2025, cited in Sivaraman et al., 2026).

More comprehensive policy studies published around the six-year mark of NEP 2020 paint a mixed picture at the national level. According to a 2026 assessment, uptake among students was inconsistent despite the flagship four-year undergraduate degree being offered by more than a hundred universities. For example, most students at Delhi University who had the option to drop out of their fourth year did so, demonstrating a lack of interest in one of the policy's main reforms for higher education. The same study revealed ongoing disputes over funding needs associated with NEP compliance, showing that money affects implementation as much as classroom-level changes do.

Aithal and Aithal (2020) argued that the policy's success would depend on how well institutions translated broad goals, such as multidisciplinary education and institutional restructuring, into workable, step-by-step action plans. They cautioned against treating the policy document itself as a finished blueprint.

Josphin (2023) noted that, although the policy's goal of reaching a 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio by 2035 is ambitious, achieving it will require ongoing coordination between the central government, state governments, and individual institutions rather than a one-time rollout.

Only a small percentage of Indian institutions currently hold National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) or National Board of Accreditation (NBA) recognition, despite NEP 2020 encouraging Higher Education Institutions to move toward graded autonomy and eventual accreditation. Maintaining autonomy once granted is also a major challenge for many colleges, as it requires continuous quality improvement rather than a one-time certification (Gupta, 2023).

An empirical study of NAAC quality indicators across universities in western India found measurable improvement in some accreditation indicators as institutions started to align with NEP 2020's emphasis on multidisciplinary education and research output. However, this progress was closely linked to how motivated and well-supported the faculty at each institution was, which again highlights faculty readiness as a recurring bottleneck (Inda, Srinivasulu, and Sinha, 2022).

In terms of equity, a study examining access to high-quality higher education under NEP 2020 found enduring challenges such as poor infrastructure, students' financial struggles, and limited reach in rural areas. However, it also pointed out that if funding and awareness campaigns are maintained in line with policy objectives, the policy's own recommendations—such as scholarships, special education zones, and technology-enabled learning—could considerably reduce these gaps (Banodha, Saini, and Sharma, 2024).

A chapter on equity and inclusion under NEP 2020 argued that provisions such as the three-language formula, funding patterns, and special education zones could significantly reduce educational inequality, but only if implementation issues related to funding and regional variation are directly addressed rather than being left to individual states to handle on their own (Beerannavar and Pancrasius, 2022).

Not every evaluation of NEP 2020 has been favourable. A doctoral study of the broader privatisation of Indian higher education raised concerns that graduate employability and educational quality may not be keeping pace with the growth of private universities under policies that support institutional autonomy, especially at newer private institutions (Nair, 2021).

An implementation-focused report by India's National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA, 2020) observed that, although NEP 2020 lays out a comprehensive vision across many domains, turning that vision into working systems requires detailed operational strategies for each domain, from research funding to teacher training, because a single, generic approach is unlikely to fit the diversity of Indian HEIs.

An early summary of the policy's main points, published soon after the Cabinet approved NEP 2020, noted that because education is a concurrent subject under the Indian Constitution, implementation would depend heavily on cooperation from individual state governments. This structural feature later proved to be a real source of uneven implementation (Nagaraju, 2022).

A report on positioning Indian education internationally under NEP 2020 noted that encouraging foreign institutions to set up campuses in India and promoting research collaboration could help Indian HEIs compete on the global stage. It warned, however, that this global aim would be achieved only if domestic quality and research output improved concurrently rather than as distinct, unrelated objectives (Dey, 2023).

3. Objectives of the Study

This paper has the following objectives:

1. To evaluate the degree to which Indian HEIs have adopted the NEP 2020 reforms.

2. To assess how well these reforms have improved skill development, research output, and curriculum flexibility.

3. To determine the main obstacles hindering successful implementation.

4. To offer practical recommendations for enhancing future implementation effectiveness.

4. Research Methodology

This study uses descriptive and analytical methods based on secondary sources. Data have been gathered from government policy documents, national survey reports (such as the Annual Status of Education Report), recent peer-reviewed literature reviews on NEP 2020, and reliable press coverage of policy implementation up to 2026. Rather than gathering primary data, this study synthesises available information to provide a concise, current picture of implementation efficiency in higher education.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Extent of Implementation

NEP-mandated structures have been widely, albeit superficially, adopted. As of 2026, the four-year undergraduate programme is offered by more than 100 universities. A large number of HEIs have begun to offer more flexible, multidisciplinary course combinations and have adopted the Choice-Based Credit System. Real student uptake of flagship innovations, such as the optional fourth year, has often fallen short of expectations, as shown by the fact that many students at prominent universities would sooner leave after three years than complete the research-focused fourth year.

5.2 Curriculum and Pedagogy

A sizeable number of the institutions studied claimed some success in offering multidisciplinary courses, which points to modest progress under the policy. But most of this change has been incremental rather than fundamental; schools have introduced additional electives instead of fully reorganising their curriculum. Faculty training is still a barrier, as shown by the fact that most institutions polled stated that their teaching staff lacked the resources needed to deliver multidisciplinary, competency-based learning.

5.3 Research, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship

Since 2020, government funding for research and development has increased, and NEP 2020 gives top priority to research through the National Research Foundation. There is currently little evidence of measurable increases in research productivity, patents, or industry engagement, and most institutional reporting in this area is descriptive rather than data-driven. This suggests that measurable results have not kept pace with the policy's intent in this field.

5.4 Skill Development and Employability

Vocational integration has been one of NEP 2020's more notable accomplishments; the majority of evaluated schools reported adding vocational or skill-based components to their courses and noted some improvement in industry-academia collaboration and internship placement. However, specific data on job outcomes are still difficult to obtain, and smaller local businesses may not be able to support the internships that the policy calls for.

5.5 Foundational Literacy — A Related Indicator

Although more focused on school education than on higher education, national literacy data are a useful indicator of system-wide implementation progress. The 2024 Annual Status of Education Report states that about 25% of Std III students could read material at the Std II level. While this is better than pandemic-era lows, it still falls well short of the 2025 universal goal set by NEP 2020. This fundamental gap draws attention to a broader pattern in the educational system: NEP's objectives frequently exceed the capacity for ground-level implementation. Higher education is likewise experiencing this pattern.

6. Major Challenges

- Funding gaps: NEP 2020 advises increasing public education spending to 6% of GDP, a target that has not yet been reached; most of the studies examined identified insufficient funding as the single biggest barrier to effective implementation.
- Faculty readiness: Most institutions report that faculty members require additional training to implement multidisciplinary and outcome-based curricula successfully.
- Infrastructure and digital divide: Rural HEIs still struggle with inadequate digital resources and insufficient connectivity, which leads to a significant and enduring disparity between implementation success rates in urban and rural areas.
- Administrative and political friction: Conflicts between the central government and certain states over financial requirements linked to NEP compliance, such as a sizable amount withheld from Tamil Nadu, demonstrate that political agreement is just as important to implementation effectiveness as institutional will.
- Limited outcome data: It is still challenging to determine the extent to which NEP 2020 has enhanced employability, research quality, or learning outcomes because most of the available evidence is descriptive rather than outcome-based.

7. Recommendations

1. Increase funding for HEIs to achieve the policy's financial goals, especially for rural and under-resourced institutions.
2. Invest in organised programmes for faculty development so that instructors can confidently teach competency-based, multidisciplinary courses.
3. Prioritise internet connectivity and device access in rural and semi-urban HEIs to close the digital divide before raising online-credit requirements.
4. Instead of imposing one-time mandates, adopt staged, supervised rollouts. Institutions that adopted NEP reforms gradually and with frequent evaluation reported better results.
5. To improve the effectiveness of vocational integration, strengthen industry-academia relationships, including by supporting smaller businesses to host student interns.
6. Instead of relying solely on adoption counts, establish reliable outcome-tracking systems so that institutions and policymakers can assess actual improvements in employability, research output, and learning quality.

8. Conclusion

Six years after it was announced, NEP 2020 has clearly altered the conversation around higher education in India, prompting most HEIs to experiment with flexible curricula, vocational integration, and research promotion. The efficiency of this change is still uneven, though. Structural reforms have often been formally approved without adequate funding, faculty preparedness, or digital infrastructure, especially at rural and smaller institutions.

Student opt-outs from the four-year programme, financial disagreements with states, and gaps in foundational literacy suggest that NEP 2020's long-term viability may depend more on continuous, well-funded, and regionally tailored execution than on the boldness of its design. With targeted investments in funding, teacher capacity, and

digital access, NEP 2020 still has a strong chance of increasing the effectiveness and global competitiveness of India's higher education system.

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