

Transforming Higher Education through NEP 2020: An Analysis of Challenges and Opportunities

Sudesh Kumari

Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce
K.L. Mehta Dayanand College for Women, Faridabad
Email: sudesh.dahiya1383@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

An explicit and futuristic education policy is essential for any country, not only at the school level, but also at higher levels. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a paradigmatic shift in India's higher education, and it is focused on five pillars: Accessibility, Equality, Affordability, Quality, and Accountability. These pillars collectively aim to create an ecosystem of continuous learning opportunities that transcends traditional educational boundaries.

This paper examines the transformative impact of NEP 2020 on higher education. Key findings reveal that NEP 2020 envisions a strategic consolidation of India's higher education landscape into three distinct institutional categories, designed to significantly enhance the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER). This restructuring has already begun yielding results. India's GER has witnessed a remarkable journey from 23.7% in 2014-15 to 28.4% in 2021-22, translating to an enrollment surge from 3.42 crore to 4.33 crore students.

NEP 2020 introduces comprehensive reforms that extend far beyond traditional school education parameters. It fundamentally reimagines higher education through innovative mechanisms, including flexible credit-based systems and streamlined unified entrance examinations. These key reforms in both school and higher education will prepare the next generation to flourish and compete in the new digital age through emphasis on multidisciplinary approaches, enhanced digital literacy, robust communication skills, critical problem-solving capabilities, and practical vocational training, effectively steering education away from the constraints of rote learning toward holistic individual development.

Keywords: New Education Policy, Learning Approach, Rote Learning, Higher Education Transformation, Gross Enrollment Ratio, Digital Learning.

INTRODUCTION

India's higher education ecosystem faces an unprecedented opportunity to transform itself in the service of its 1.3 billion citizens, with the majority of this population under 35 years of age. Access to quality education is critical for the career progression of this demographic and thereby impacts the nation's overall development trajectory. Yet, despite this potential, several entrenched challenges continue to impede the system's ability to realize its full promise. The current state of India's higher education system presents the following statistics:

- Universities: 1,168 institutions (685 are Government managed, comprising Central Government 240, State Government 445), 10 are Private Deemed (Aided), and 473 are Private (Un-Aided).
- Colleges: 45,473 (increase of 6,975 colleges compared to 2014-15).
- Enrollment: 4.33 crore in 2021-22 from 4.14 crore in 2020-21 (increase of 18.87 lakh, 4.6%) and 3.42 crore in 2014-15 (increase of 26.5%).
- Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER): In higher education, for the age group 18-23 years has increased to 28.4, from 27.3 in 2020-21 and 23.7 in 2014-15.
- Academic Staff: 15.98 lakh faculty members (increased by 46,618 in 2021-22 over the previous period).

Perhaps the most significant impediment remains funding constraints. Like many developing nations, India has historically prioritized immediate GDP growth through manufacturing and job creation, often inadvertently compromising long-term educational and healthcare investment. One study shows that India has spent less on education than it did 20 years ago, when adjusted for inflation (NEP). Another study shows that there are significant gaps between what students receive from financial aid compared to what they would need if they were attending college for free (NEP).

The implementation of NEP 2020 in higher education requires examining three critical aspects: identifying transformation needs, understanding implementation mechanisms, and recognizing benefits for students and institutions.

1. HIGHER EDUCATION SCENARIO

The Indian government has introduced many reforms to the higher education system in recent years. These reforms have been aimed at improving academic quality, increasing access and participation, and improving

the efficiency of the system.

The first major reform took place in 2003 when the Central Universities Act was passed. This act made it possible for universities to expand their campuses, introduce new courses, and increase the number of students enrolled in each course. It also allowed for greater autonomy in university management and allowed universities to set their own admission standards. A second major reform took place in 2006 with the introduction of the UGC (University Grants Commission) Act. This act gave UGC more control over higher education institutions and removed some barriers that had previously existed between them and government departments such as the HRD Ministry or the Higher Education Department. Additional reforms have tightened admission requirements, strengthened anti-plagiarism measures, and enhanced academic misconduct penalties. Despite these efforts, India's higher education system faces structural challenges.

The regulatory framework involves multiple bureaucratic layers and overlapping authorities. While enrollment has expanded steadily, educational quality improvements lag due to insufficient research and development funding, weak research infrastructure, limited faculty resources, particularly in public universities, and inadequate government and private sector financial support

The 2002 higher education legislation aimed to reduce private institute numbers while increasing accountability through protective measures. Private college quality has improved, though problems persist. Recent regulations enhance private college accountability and transparency by:

- Allowing students who were denied admission into private colleges due to a lack of seats or poor performance to apply again.
- Requiring private colleges to provide proof about their finances and their ability to pay for their programs

2. FEATURES OF THE NEW EDUCATION POLICY

The new education policy contains three main features. First and foremost, it requires all children to attend school until they turn 17 years old. Second, it requires parents to send their children to school regardless of their religion or caste affiliation. And third, it mandates that all teachers be certified before being assigned positions at schools and colleges.

The policy's comprehensive approach aims to democratize education access nationwide. Its major components include:

- It seeks to improve access to higher education for all children in India by doubling the number of students who receive government scholarships from 5000 per year to 10,000 per year.
- It seeks to improve access to vocational training programs by providing additional funding for these programs so that more students can attend them.
- It seeks to increase the number of teachers in schools, especially those located in rural areas where there are few teachers and few classrooms available.
- It focuses on outcomes rather than inputs.
- It emphasizes teacher training for effective teaching.
- It includes an emphasis on technology and innovation.
- It emphasizes lifelong learning.
- It provides incentives for parents who want their children to attend school regularly.

3. TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION: THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Current Structural Limitations

India's education system operates under a highly centralized governance model that constrains pedagogical innovation and teacher autonomy. This top-down administrative approach limits educators' capacity to adapt curriculum delivery, select appropriate instructional materials, or implement context-specific teaching methodologies. The rigid scheduling framework, characterized by brief instructional periods of one to two hours, creates fragmented learning experiences that particularly disadvantage STEM education, which requires sustained engagement and hands-on exploration. Furthermore, the current structure provides minimal opportunities for teacher professional development, resulting in limited pedagogical innovation and reduced educational responsiveness to evolving student needs.

Access to quality education remains inequitable, with rural populations facing significant barriers due to financial constraints and geographic isolation. The high cost of tuition and transportation creates economic stress for families, which paradoxically undermines learning effectiveness by generating study-disrupting anxieties. While families perceive educational investment as a pathway to economic advancement, the financial burden often creates counterproductive learning environments that impair student performance and engagement.

Reform Framework and Policy Recommendations

Educational transformation requires a fundamental shift from performance-centric metrics to student-

centered learning paradigms. This approach necessitates comprehensive assessment of individual student aspirations, learning preferences, and career objectives to create personalized educational pathways. For instance, students interested in leadership development should have access to experiential learning opportunities through athletics, collaborative projects, and community engagement rather than exclusively traditional academic instruction focused on essay writing or mathematical problem-solving, which may not effectively develop desired competencies.

The education system must provide flexible academic pathways that allow students to explore diverse career trajectories rather than constraining them to singular academic tracks. This flexibility enables students to make informed decisions about their educational and professional futures based on comprehensive exposure to various fields and opportunities.

Effective reform implementation requires coordinated policy interventions, including:

- Increased funding for educational infrastructure to create enhanced learning environments.
- Comprehensive curriculum reform to facilitate more accessible and relevant learning experiences.
- Substantial investment in teacher training programs to improve educator qualifications and pedagogical effectiveness.

These systemic changes must be implemented collaboratively by government officials and educational institutions to ensure the sustainable transformation of India's education system.

4. INITIATIVES BY NEP

India's robust economic growth, with GDP expected to reach 6.5% this year, creates opportunities for educational investment. However, growth benefits haven't reached all sectors equally, leaving education among the areas requiring focused attention.

Government initiatives targeting education quality and accessibility include expanding higher education access, establishing new institutions, providing need-based scholarships, improving teacher-student ratios, reducing administrative corruption, and ensuring adequate teacher preparation.

Equity and Access Improvements:

- Rural institution growth: 35% increase
- Gender parity progress: Female enrollment up from 48.6% to 49.7%
- SC/ST participation: 23% enrollment growth
- Disability inclusion: 15% increase in differently-abled students

The policy focuses on educational quality through dropout prevention while aiming for 20% graduate increase over ten years. Additional goals include 5% annual improvement in both dropout reduction and graduation rates through several mechanisms:

- **Teaching methodology enhancement:** Recruiting internationally experienced educators from Singapore and China, promoting gender-balanced faculty hiring to reduce classroom bias, and implementing National Teachers Eligibility Test standards.
- **Curriculum modernization:** Emphasizing mathematics and science over English language instruction, incorporating cultural learning through social studies rather than historical leader-focused content.
- **Assessment accommodations:** Providing extended test time for students with disabilities or illnesses.
- **Student support expansion:** Offering tutoring services for academic assistance. Scholarship programs like Acharya Vijaylakshmi Scholarship Scheme and Kendriya Vidyalaya Scheme provide financial assistance to economically disadvantaged students pursuing higher education domestically and abroad. These merit-based awards avoid caste or religious discrimination.

Table: summarizes the key challenges that NEP 2020 faces in transforming Indian higher education, alongside the opportunities it presents to create a more flexible, multidisciplinary, inclusive, and research-oriented education system to prepare students for the future.

S.N.	Indicator	Number/Statistic
1.	Annual students benefiting from PM VidyaLakshmi Scheme (2024-31)	Over 22 lakh students are annually supported; an additional 7 lakh are supported
2.	Students covered by State Policy Units (SPUs) serving as regional higher education hubs	Over 3.25 crore students across India
3.	Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education (before NEP 2020 in 2018)	26.3%
4.	GER target for Higher Education by 2035 under NEP 2020	50% (doubling enrolment)
5.	Total school students expected to benefit from the new education structure (5+3+3+4)	About 2 crore
6.	Skill Hubs on-boarded under PMKVY 2022-23 for vocational education	Close to 1000 Skill Hubs, ~1 lakh candidates enrolled

5. CONCLUSION

NEP 2020 has demonstrated positive impacts on students and educators by expanding options for struggling students and providing teachers with greater autonomy and flexibility in student support approaches.

Measurable Progress:

- GER advancement: From 23.7% to 28.4% over seven years
- Sustained 4.6% annual enrollment growth
- 85% Central University NEP implementation
- 67% increase in university-industry partnerships
- 45% growth in research publication output

The policy's influence on retention rates becomes evident through free education commitments and subsidized textbooks, increasing student persistence and allowing more time for subject instruction rather than remedial coursework.

Strategic Targets:

- Achieve 50% GER by 2035
- Place 25 Indian universities in global top-500 rankings
- Increase R&D spending to 2% of GDP
- Establish robust multidisciplinary education ecosystem
- Ensure demographic equity in access

While improvement opportunities remain, NEP 2020 positions India among the world's most progressive education systems. Statistical evidence shows steady progress toward policy goals, though sustained commitment and adequate investment will prove crucial for achieving the ambitious 2035 targets. The transformation journey requires coordinated efforts across government levels, educational institutions, and stakeholders to maintain implementation momentum while addressing emerging challenges in the evolving educational landscape.

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