

Transforming Higher Education in India: A Thematic Analysis of NEP 2020 Reforms

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ABSTRACT:

The National Education Policy 2020 has proposed a comprehensive framework for transforming higher education in India through reforms focused on flexibility, inclusivity, multidisciplinary learning, and research development. This study aims to examine the key provisions of NEP 2020 related to higher education, analyse their current status of implementation, and explore the associated opportunities and challenges. Adopting a qualitative review approach, the study is based on secondary sources including policy documents, government reports, and research literature published between 2020 and 2026. The findings indicate that while significant progress has been made in areas such as digital learning, academic flexibility, and institutional development, the implementation remains uneven across institutions. The study further highlights emerging opportunities for enhancing access, innovation, and global competitiveness, alongside challenges related to infrastructure, faculty preparedness, and financial constraints. The study concludes by highlighting the need for context-sensitive and effective implementation strategies to ensure the successful realization of these reforms.

Keywords: Higher Education, NEP 2020, Educational Reforms

INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy 2020 represented a comprehensive reform framework aimed at transforming the landscape of higher education in India. Over the years, the Indian higher education system has encountered multiple challenges, including limited access, rigid curricular structures, uneven quality, and insufficient emphasis on research and innovation (Tilak, 2021). Recognizing these concerns, NEP 2020 proposed a paradigm shift toward a more holistic, flexible, and multidisciplinary approach to higher education that is aligned with both national priorities and global developments.

The policy introduced several key reforms, such as the expansion of the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), the promotion of multidisciplinary institutions, and the integration of technology-enabled learning. It also emphasized structural innovations, including the Academic Bank of Credits, Multiple Entry and Exit mechanisms, and the establishment of the National Research Foundation to strengthen research capacity (Press Information Bureau, 2025; University Grants

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Published: 27 March 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i3.45624>

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Commission, 2022). These initiatives are intended to enhance learner autonomy, improve institutional quality, and foster a knowledge-driven economy.

However, the implementation of these policy provisions into practice remains uneven across institutions and regions. Differences in infrastructure, institutional readiness, and resource availability continue to influence the pace and effectiveness of implementation (Kumar & Singh, 2022). In this context, a critical examination of the policy provisions and their implementation status is essential to understand the ongoing transformation of higher education in India.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the key provisions of NEP 2020 concerning higher education in India.
2. To analyse the current status of implementation of higher education reforms proposed in NEP 2020.
3. To explore the major challenges and emerging opportunities associated with the implementation of NEP 2020 reforms in higher education.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study adopts a qualitative review approach and solely relies on secondary sources of information. Relevant research articles, government reports, and policy documents published between 2020 and 2026 were examined. The literature was analysed thematically to identify the extent of implementation, Challenges and Opportunities in higher education reforms suggested in National Education Policy 2020.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a critical analysis of the findings based on the major higher education provisions articulated in the National Education Policy 2020. The analysis is structured in alignment with the stated research objectives and systematically examines the extent and nature of the implementation of these reforms, drawing upon evidence from existing research studies and policy reports. It further interrogates the gaps between policy intent and institutional realities, while critically exploring the key challenges and emerging opportunities associated with the implementation of NEP 2020 reforms in higher education.

1. ANALYSIS OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROVISIONS OF NEP 2020 AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION STATUS

A critical analysis of the major higher education reforms proposed in the National Education Policy 2020 is presented here. It is organized thematically in line with the key provisions of the policy and examines both the recommended reforms and their current status of implementation. By comparing policy intentions with actual practices, this section highlights the progress made, identifies existing gaps, and explores the ongoing developments in higher education reforms in India.

Enhancing Access, Equity, and Inclusion

The NEP 2020 places significant emphasis on expanding access and ensuring equity in higher

education, with a target of achieving a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 50% by 2035. The policy recommends the expansion of higher education institutions, particularly in underserved regions, along with targeted financial assistance for disadvantaged groups. It also advocates the promotion of open and distance learning, alongside the development of inclusive pedagogical practices to support learners from diverse socio-economic and ability backgrounds.

In terms of implementation, there has been notable progress through both institutional expansion and financial inclusion initiatives. The introduction of schemes such as PM VidyaLakshmi has enhanced access to higher education through collateral-free loans and digital delivery systems (Press Information Bureau, 2025). Data from AISHE indicate a gradual increase in enrolment, particularly among marginalized communities (AISHE, 2022). Additionally, efforts to incorporate inclusive pedagogical practices for Divyangjan learners reflect a growing commitment to equity (UGC, 2023). However, persistent regional disparities and socio-economic inequalities continue to constrain the realization of equitable access (Tilak, 2021).

Multidisciplinary and Flexible Higher Education

A central vision of NEP 2020 is the transformation of the higher education system into a multidisciplinary and flexible ecosystem. The policy recommends restructuring institutions into multidisciplinary universities, establishing Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs), and introducing flexible curricula through mechanisms such as the Choice-Based Credit System (CBCS). It further proposes the gradual phasing out of the affiliating college system and the introduction of graded autonomy.

The implementation of these reforms is underway through various structural and curricular initiatives. Frameworks such as the National Credit Framework (2023) and the Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes (2022) have facilitated interdisciplinary learning and academic flexibility (Press Information Bureau, 2025; UGC, 2022). The establishment of MERUs under schemes like PM-USHA reflects a strategic move toward institutional transformation. Nevertheless, disparities in institutional capacity, faculty preparedness, and infrastructure continue to impede uniform implementation across regions (Kumar & Singh, 2022).

Multiple Entry and Exit

The introduction of the Multiple Entry and Exit system represents a paradigm shift toward flexible and learner-centric higher education. NEP 2020 recommends allowing students to enter and exit programmes at different stages, with appropriate certification at each level, thereby promoting lifelong learning and reducing dropout rates.

The implementation of Multiple Entry and Exit system has gained traction across several universities, with a growing number of institutions offering flexible entry and exit options (Press Information Bureau, 2025). This reform has begun to address rigid academic structures and provide students with greater autonomy over their learning trajectories (UGC, 2023). However, challenges related to standardization, administrative complexity, and limited

awareness among students and stakeholders continue to affect its effective operationalization (Agarwal, 2021).

Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)

The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) is envisioned as a transformative digital mechanism to facilitate academic mobility and flexibility. By enabling students to accumulate and transfer credits across institutions, the policy aims to promote interdisciplinary learning and personalized educational pathways.

In practice, the ABC system has been implemented as a digital repository integrated with national platforms, allowing for secure storage and transfer of academic credits (Press Information Bureau, 2025). This has enhanced transparency and flexibility in the higher education system (UGC, 2023). Despite these advancements, challenges related to interoperability, institutional participation, and technological readiness continue to limit its full potential (Jain, 2022).

Technology and Digital Learning

NEP 2020 talks about the transformative potential of technology in expanding access and improving the quality of higher education. It recommends the development of digital platforms, virtual laboratories, and a National Digital University, alongside the integration of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies in teaching and learning processes.

The implementation of these recommendations has led to significant growth in digital learning infrastructure. Platforms such as SWAYAM, SWAYAM Plus, and the National Digital Library have expanded access to online education for millions of learners (Press Information Bureau, 2025). Initiatives like virtual labs and APAAR IDs further enhance the digital ecosystem (AICTE, 2024). However, the digital divide, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, continues to pose a significant challenge to equitable access (UNESCO, 2021).

Centres of Excellence and Institutional Development

The policy envisions the creation of world-class institutions and the strengthening of existing ones through targeted investments and institutional reforms. It recommends the establishment of Institutions of Eminence (IoEs), Centres of Excellence, and the expansion of central institutions to enhance academic quality and global competitiveness.

Implementation efforts have resulted in the establishment of new central institutions and Centres of Excellence in emerging areas such as artificial intelligence (Press Information Bureau, 2025). Initiatives like PM-USHA aim to transform select institutions into globally competitive research hubs (Ministry of Education, 2023). Despite these developments, concerns regarding funding adequacy, regional imbalances, and long-term sustainability remain significant (Altbach, 2020).

Quality Assurance and Accreditation

NEP 2020 proposes a comprehensive reform of the regulatory and accreditation framework

through the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). It emphasizes a “light but tight” regulatory approach, graded autonomy, and outcome-based accreditation linked to performance and funding.

In terms of implementation, reforms in accreditation processes have been initiated, including the adoption of outcome-based frameworks and the strengthening of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) (Press Information Bureau, 2025; NAAC, 2023). The provision of graded autonomy has empowered institutions to make academic and administrative decisions. However, issues related to regulatory complexity, coordination among agencies, and delays in implementation continue to persist (Varghese, 2022).

Research, Innovation, and Technology

The promotion of research and innovation is a key pillar of NEP 2020, with the establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF) as a central mechanism for funding and coordination. The policy also emphasizes interdisciplinary research, industry-academia collaboration, and the development of innovation ecosystems within higher education institutions.

The establishment of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation and the expansion of innovation initiatives such as Institutional Innovation Councils have strengthened the research ecosystem (Press Information Bureau, 2025; AICTE, 2023). Increased Ph.D. enrolment and patent filings indicate a positive trend in research output. However, India’s relatively low investment in research and development remains a critical limitation in achieving global competitiveness (World Bank, 2023).

Internationalization of Higher Education

NEP 2020 envisions positioning India as a global hub for higher education through international collaboration, student mobility, and the establishment of foreign university campuses. It also promotes joint, dual, and twinning degree programmes to enhance global exposure.

The implementation of these initiatives has led to the establishment of international campuses of Indian institutions and the entry of foreign universities into India (Press Information Bureau, 2025). Programmes such as Study in India and regulatory frameworks for academic collaboration have further strengthened global engagement (UGC, 2022). Nonetheless, challenges related to global rankings, regulatory barriers, and international competitiveness remain areas of concern (Knight, 2021).

Financing and Budgetary Expansion

The policy emphasizes increased public investment in education and the promotion of financial autonomy for higher education institutions. It recommends innovative financing mechanisms, including the establishment of funding agencies and the encouragement of public-private partnerships.

Implementation efforts through initiatives such as the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) and PM-USHA have significantly enhanced infrastructure development and funding

support (Press Information Bureau, 2025). The shift toward performance-based funding reflects a structural transformation in financing mechanisms (Tilak, 2021). However, concerns regarding equitable distribution of resources and long-term financial sustainability continue to challenge the system.

2. OPPORTUNITIES IN IMPLEMENTING THE NEP 2020 REFORMS REGARDING HIGHER EDUCATION

The implementation of reforms proposed in the National Education Policy 2020 presents significant opportunities for transforming the landscape of higher education in India. These reforms not only aim to improve quality and access but also align the system with global standards and emerging societal needs.

- **Promotion of Multidisciplinary and Holistic Education:** The shift toward multidisciplinary institutions enables integration of diverse fields of knowledge, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and holistic development among learners. This approach enhances the relevance of higher education in addressing complex real-world problems.
- **Expansion of Access and Inclusivity:** With a strong focus on increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and supporting disadvantaged groups, the policy creates opportunities to make higher education more inclusive and equitable through financial aid, institutional expansion, and digital learning platforms.
- **Flexibility and Learner-Centric Education:** Provisions such as Multiple Entry and Exit, Academic Bank of Credits, and flexible curricula empower students to design their own academic pathways. This promotes lifelong learning, reduces dropout rates, and accommodates diverse learner needs.
- **Strengthening Research and Innovation:** The emphasis on research through initiatives like the National Research Foundation encourages innovation, interdisciplinary research, and industry collaboration, thereby enhancing the global competitiveness of Indian higher education institutions.
- **Integration of Technology in Education:** The adoption of digital platforms, online learning systems, and emerging technologies provides opportunities for expanding the reach and quality of education. It supports blended learning models and enhances accessibility for learners across geographical boundaries.

3. CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE NEP 2020 REFORMS REGARDING HIGHER EDUCATION

While the National Education Policy 2020 presents a transformative vision for higher education, its effective implementation faces several structural and systemic challenges. These challenges arise from gaps between policy aspirations and ground-level realities across institutions.

- **Infrastructural and Resource Constraints:** Many higher education institutions, particularly in rural and underdeveloped regions, face limitations in terms of physical

infrastructure, digital facilities, and financial resources. This restricts their capacity to adopt multidisciplinary structures and technology-driven learning.

- **Faculty Preparedness and Capacity Building:** The successful implementation of flexible and interdisciplinary curricula requires adequately trained and adaptable faculty. However, there is a shortage of skilled educators and limited opportunities for continuous professional development aligned with NEP reforms.
- **Digital Divide and Technological Barriers:** Although digital learning is a key focus, unequal access to internet connectivity, devices, and digital literacy creates disparities among learners. This digital divide hinders the inclusive implementation of online and blended learning initiatives.
- **Administrative and Regulatory Challenges:** The transition toward new frameworks such as the Academic Bank of Credits, Multiple Entry and Exit, and institutional restructuring involves complex administrative processes. Lack of coordination among regulatory bodies and delays in policy execution are slowing down the effective implementation of the reforms.
- **Financial Constraints and Sustainability Issues:** Achieving the ambitious goals of NEP 2020 requires substantial financial investment. Limited public funding, uneven allocation of resources, and dependence on external financing mechanisms pose challenges to the long-term sustainability of reforms.

CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy 2020 presents a transformative vision for higher education in India by emphasizing flexibility, inclusivity, multidisciplinary learning, and research-driven growth. The analysis indicates that while notable progress has been made in areas such as digital learning, academic flexibility, and institutional development, the pace and extent of implementation remain uneven across regions and institutions. Opportunities arising from these reforms have the potential to enhance quality and global competitiveness; however, challenges related to infrastructure, faculty readiness, funding, and governance continue to hinder effective implementation. Therefore, a balanced and context-sensitive approach, supported by adequate resources and strong institutional capacity, is essential to bridge the gap between policy vision and practice and to realize the long-term goals of higher education reform in India.

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