

## From Policy to Practice: A Critical Evaluation of Nep 2020 And Holistic Development in Indian Higher Education

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### Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative shift in India's educational landscape, aiming to restructure the system with the demands of the 21st century. A central objective of the policy is the promotion of holistic development, encompassing not only cognitive growth but also social, emotional, ethical, and skill-based competencies. In the context of higher education, NEP 2020 advocates multidisciplinary learning, flexibility in academic pathways, integration of vocational education, and a shift from rote-based pedagogy to critical and experiential learning. This paper critically examines the implementation of NEP 2020 in higher education institutions and evaluates whether it has effectively contributed to the holistic development of learners as envisioned in the policy framework. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, relying on secondary data from government reports, policy documents, academic literature, and institutional practices. It explores key reforms such as the introduction of the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme, Academic Bank of Credits, multidisciplinary curriculum structures, and changes in assessment mechanisms. The findings indicate that while the policy framework is conceptually robust and aligned with global educational goals, including the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), its implementation remains uneven across institutions. The study concludes that NEP 2020 has laid a strong foundation for achieving holistic development in higher education, but its impact is still evolving. The realization of its objectives depends significantly on sustained institutional commitment, capacity building, and systemic reforms.

**Keywords:** NEP 2020, Higher Education, Academic Reforms, India

### 1. Introduction

Education has long been a vital instrument for individual empowerment and national development. In today's rapidly evolving global knowledge economy, higher education is expected to go beyond information transmission and foster critical thinking, creativity, innovation, and socio-emotional competencies. However, the Indian higher education system has historically faced structural and pedagogical limitations that hinder these broader goals. A major criticism is its reliance on rote learning and examination-centric approaches, which prioritize memorization over understanding. This often produces graduates with theoretical knowledge but limited critical thinking, problem-solving, and practical skills. Additionally, issues such as fragmentation of the system, weak emphasis on research and innovation, and limited institutional autonomy have been identified as key structural weaknesses. Systemic challenges further constrain quality and inclusivity. Public expenditure on education remains around 3–3.5% of GDP, well below the recommended 6%, leading to infrastructural deficiencies, limited resources, and regional disparities in access and outcomes. The digital divide further intensifies these inequalities. In response, the Government of India introduced the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 as a comprehensive reform framework. It aims to shift from rote-based learning to a holistic, multidisciplinary, and learner-centric approach, emphasizing academic flexibility, vocational integration, research and innovation, and the development of cognitive, emotional, ethical, and practical competencies. Despite its ambitious vision, implementation has been mixed. While progress is evident in curriculum flexibility and multidisciplinary learning, key reforms—such as the multiple entry-exit system and industry-academia integration—remain unevenly adopted. Persistent challenges including inadequate faculty preparedness, infrastructural constraints, and bureaucratic inertia continue to limit effective execution, creating a gap between policy vision and ground reality. Against this backdrop, this study addresses the research question: To what extent has the implementation of NEP 2020 in higher education institutions in India contributed to the holistic development of learners as envisioned in the policy framework? By critically examining both the structural reforms and their practical

execution, this paper evaluates whether NEP 2020 has moved beyond intent to achieve meaningful transformation, contributing to the broader discourse on educational reform in India.

## **2. Literature Review**

1. Scholarly Perspectives on NEP 2020 The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is widely viewed as a transformative reform in India's education system, marking a shift from content-based learning to a flexible, multidisciplinary, and learner-centric approach. It aims to break rigid disciplinary boundaries by integrating arts, sciences, and vocational education, fostering a more inclusive academic structure. Scholars such as Niradhar Dey (2022) highlight its emphasis on institutional restructuring, academic flexibility, and research, distinguishing it from earlier policies like the 1986 framework. However, critical perspectives exist. Poonam Batra (2020) questions its alignment with equity and social justice, while R. Govinda (2020) stresses that effective governance and implementation are crucial to its success. Studies also point to challenges such as limited funding, infrastructural gaps, poor coordination, and institutional resistance, suggesting that NEP 2020's impact depends largely on execution.

2. Scholarly Views on Holistic Education and Development Holistic education—central to NEP 2020—focuses on developing cognitive, emotional, social, ethical, and practical skills. Scholars argue this approach is essential in today's complex, interdisciplinary world. NEP supports this through inquiry-based, experiential, and multidisciplinary learning, promoting creativity, critical thinking, and overall development. The policy also emphasizes vocational and skill-based education to improve employability, with its multidisciplinary model enabling diverse competencies. However, scholars caution that true holistic development requires changes in teaching methods, assessment systems, and institutional culture; otherwise, it may remain theoretical.

## **3. Gaps in Existing Research**

Despite extensive discussion, key gaps remain in NEP 2020 research. Most studies focus on its vision rather than empirical implementation, especially in higher education. Research often isolates specific aspects like curriculum or digital learning, lacking a comprehensive evaluation of holistic development. Additionally, regional and institutional disparities are underexplored, despite India's diverse educational landscape. There is also a lack of long-term studies assessing outcomes, leaving the effectiveness of NEP 2020 in achieving holistic development uncertain. This study addresses these gaps by critically examining NEP 2020's implementation in higher education, focusing on its impact on holistic development and bridging the gap between policy intent and practice.

## **4. Objectives of the Study**

The present study aims to critically examine the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in the context of higher education in India, with a specific focus on its intended goal of holistic development. The key objectives of the study are:

1. To analyze the major reforms introduced under NEP 2020 in higher education.
2. To examine the extent and nature of its implementation across higher education institutions.
3. To evaluate the impact of these reforms on the holistic development of learners.
4. To identify the challenges and limitations in translating policy vision into practice.

## **5. Research Methodology**

The present study employs a descriptive and analytical research design to critically evaluate the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and its implications for holistic development within Indian higher education. The study is exploratory in nature and is primarily based on qualitative interpretation of secondary data sources.

Data for the study were collected from multiple authoritative and scholarly sources to ensure conceptual depth and analytical reliability. These sources include government policy documents,

particularly the *National Education Policy 2020*; reports published by educational agencies and regulatory bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) and AISHE; peer-reviewed journal articles; research papers; and credible academic commentaries related to higher education reforms in India.

The study adopts a qualitative analytical framework consisting of three interrelated approaches. First, policy analysis has been employed to examine the philosophical orientation, structural reforms, and objectives proposed under NEP 2020. Second, comparative analysis has been utilized to assess the gap between policy vision and its practical implementation across higher education institutions. Third, thematic analysis has been applied to identify recurring themes associated with holistic development, multidisciplinary learning, institutional preparedness, digital transformation, inclusivity, and governance challenges.

The study further interprets the emerging patterns within the broader socio-economic and institutional realities of Indian higher education. Particular attention has been given to the relationship between policy reforms and learner outcomes in terms of cognitive, emotional, ethical, and skill-based development.

Although the study relies exclusively on secondary data and therefore lacks primary empirical validation, this methodological approach enables a comprehensive and critical understanding of the evolving implementation landscape of NEP 2020. The methodology is appropriate for examining policy-level transformations and identifying structural trends, institutional gaps, and emerging challenges associated with holistic education reforms in India.

## **6. Conceptual Framework: Holistic Development in the Context of NEP 2020**

Holistic development in contemporary education refers to the integrated growth of learners across intellectual, emotional, ethical, social, and practical dimensions. Unlike conventional models that primarily emphasize academic achievement and examination performance, holistic education seeks to nurture well-rounded individuals capable of critical thinking, ethical reasoning, emotional resilience, creativity, and social responsibility. In the context of higher education, holistic development extends beyond disciplinary knowledge to include the cultivation of adaptable, skilled, and socially conscious citizens prepared to respond to the complexities of the twenty-first century. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 positions holistic development at the centre of educational transformation in India. The policy advocates a paradigm shift from rote memorization and fragmented learning toward multidisciplinary, learner-centric, and experiential education. By emphasizing flexibility, creativity, critical inquiry, vocational integration, and value-based learning, NEP 2020 aims to develop the full spectrum of human capabilities and align higher education with global educational standards and societal needs.

The conceptual foundation of holistic development under NEP 2020 may be understood through four interconnected dimensions: cognitive, emotional, ethical, and skill-based development. Together, these dimensions constitute the broader educational vision proposed by the policy.

## **7. Dimensions of Holistic Development**

### **a) Cognitive Development**

Cognitive development refers to the enhancement of intellectual abilities such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, creativity, and problem-solving. NEP 2020 promotes inquiry-based, discussion-oriented, and experiential pedagogies intended to encourage independent thinking and innovation. The policy also emphasizes multidisciplinary learning environments that enable students to engage with diverse knowledge systems and broaden their intellectual perspectives.

### **b) Emotional Development**

Emotional development encompasses self-awareness, empathy, emotional intelligence, resilience, and interpersonal competence. NEP 2020 recognizes the importance of supportive and inclusive educational environments that foster mental well-being and social sensitivity. Co-curricular engagement, peer interaction, counseling mechanisms, and student support services are increasingly viewed as essential components of higher education institutions.

**c) Ethical Development**

Ethical development focuses on the cultivation of moral values, social responsibility, constitutional principles, and cultural awareness. The policy emphasizes the integration of ethics, value-based education, and civic consciousness within academic curricula. Through this approach, NEP 2020 seeks to prepare learners not only as professionals but also as responsible citizens committed to social harmony, justice, and national development.

**d) Skill-Based Development**

Skill-based development involves the acquisition of practical competencies, vocational expertise, employability skills, and industry-oriented training. NEP 2020 attempts to bridge the gap between academic learning and labour market requirements by promoting internships, vocational education, experiential learning, and industry collaboration. The emphasis on practical exposure reflects the policy's broader objective of enhancing employability and preparing students for dynamic professional environments.

**e) Conceptual Model: From Policy Vision to Educational Outcomes**

The framework of holistic development under NEP 2020 can be conceptualized as a three-stage process:

NEP Inputs → Institutional Transformation → Student Outcomes

NEP Inputs

Multidisciplinary education, academic flexibility, vocational integration, experiential learning, value-based education, and digital learning reforms constitute the primary policy inputs introduced under NEP 2020.

**f) Institutional Transformation**

The implementation of these reforms requires structural and pedagogical transformation within higher education institutions, including flexible curricula, choice-based credit systems, continuous assessment methods, interdisciplinary teaching, faculty development, and stronger industry linkages.

**g) Student Outcomes**

The intended outcomes include critical thinking ability, emotional intelligence, ethical consciousness, employability skills, adaptability, creativity, and the development of a balanced and socially responsible personality.

This conceptual framework highlights that holistic development cannot be achieved solely through policy formulation. Rather, its realization depends upon the effectiveness of institutional implementation, faculty preparedness, administrative support, and socio-economic accessibility.

At a broader level, NEP 2020 represents a philosophical shift in the purpose of higher education—from standardized and examination-oriented learning toward human-centred development that values individuality, creativity, inclusivity, and lifelong learning. However, the success of this transition depends significantly on institutional capacity, governance structures, digital infrastructure, and equitable access to educational opportunities. Weaknesses at any stage of implementation may restrict the achievement of intended holistic outcomes.

Therefore, while NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for educational transformation, its effectiveness ultimately depends on bridging the gap between conceptual vision and practical execution within the diverse realities of Indian higher education.

### **8. Implementation of NEP 2020 in Higher Education: Ground Realities**

The implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in Indian higher education has progressed in a gradual and uneven manner. Although the policy proposes a transformative framework aimed at restructuring the higher education system, the transition from policy formulation to institutional practice reveals both significant progress and substantial challenges. The implementation landscape reflects varying levels of institutional readiness, infrastructural capability, administrative efficiency, and pedagogical adaptation across the country.

#### **a) Academic Reforms: Flexibility and Structural Transformation**

One of the most significant reforms introduced under NEP 2020 is the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUGP) accompanied by the multiple entry-exit system. Several central universities and UGC-affiliated institutions have adopted these reforms to enhance academic flexibility and learner mobility. Similarly, the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) has been operationalized to facilitate credit accumulation and transfer across institutions. However, implementation remains inconsistent across higher education institutions. Many state universities have adopted the FYUGP structure without fully operationalizing academic flexibility or credit mobility. Procedural ambiguities regarding entry-exit provisions and limited interoperability among institutions continue to restrict the effective functioning of the system. Consequently, while structural reforms have formally begun, comprehensive institutional integration remains incomplete.

#### **b) Curriculum Transformation and Multidisciplinary Education**

NEP 2020 strongly advocates multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary education as a means of broadening intellectual engagement and promoting holistic learning. Institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology have incorporated humanities and social science components within technical education, while many universities have introduced interdisciplinary electives, value-added courses, and skill-based modules.

Despite these developments, multidisciplinary implementation often remains superficial. Departmental compartmentalization, limited faculty diversity, rigid administrative structures, and restricted course combinations continue to constrain meaningful interdisciplinarity. In many institutions, multidisciplinary education exists more as a curricular addition than as a deeply embedded academic culture.

#### **c) Skill Integration and Industry Linkages**

The policy places considerable emphasis on vocational education, internships, project-based learning, and industry-academia collaboration. Initiatives such as the inclusion of "Professors of Practice" seek to strengthen industry participation within higher education.

Nevertheless, the integration of employability-oriented learning remains uneven. Industry partnerships are concentrated largely in urban and well-funded institutions, while rural and state universities often lack adequate industry exposure and internship opportunities. Furthermore, skill-oriented courses are frequently treated as supplementary components rather than core academic priorities, thereby limiting their transformative potential.

#### **d) Assessment Reforms and Pedagogical Shifts**

NEP 2020 proposes a transition from rote memorization and examination-centric evaluation toward competency-based, continuous, and experiential assessment systems. In response,

several universities have introduced internal assessments, project work, presentations, and open-book examinations.

However, the broader examination culture remains predominantly traditional. Faculty training in innovative pedagogical and evaluative methods is still limited, and many institutions continue to prioritize marks-oriented learning over conceptual understanding and practical application. As a result, pedagogical transformation has progressed more slowly than structural reform.

**e) Institutional Governance and Regulatory Transformation**

The policy envisions significant governance reforms, including the restructuring of higher education institutions into research-intensive universities, teaching-focused universities, and autonomous degree-granting colleges under the proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). Accreditation mechanisms and institutional autonomy have also received greater policy emphasis.

While some progress is visible through expanded accreditation and autonomy initiatives, bureaucratic delays, financial constraints, and administrative limitations continue to hinder implementation. Governance reforms therefore remain transitional and partially operationalized.

**f) Digital Infrastructure and Educational Accessibility**

Digital transformation constitutes another major component of NEP 2020 implementation. Online learning platforms, blended education models, digital repositories, and systems such as the Academic Bank of Credits have increased the technological integration of higher education.

However, significant infrastructural disparities persist between urban and rural institutions. Limited internet connectivity, inadequate digital infrastructure, and socio-economic inequalities continue to restrict equitable participation in digital learning environments. The digital divide therefore remains a critical challenge to inclusive implementation.

## 9. Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has initiated a significant transition in Indian higher education by redefining the objectives and structure of learning toward holistic development. The policy reflects a paradigm shift from conventional, examination-oriented education toward a multidisciplinary, learner-centric, and skill-oriented framework aimed at preparing students for the social, economic, and technological demands of the twenty-first century. The analysis demonstrates that notable progress has been achieved in areas such as curriculum flexibility, multidisciplinary education, vocational integration, experiential learning, and digital transformation. Reforms including the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUGP), Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), and multiple entry-exit provisions have introduced greater academic mobility and flexibility within higher education institutions. Similarly, the growing emphasis on internships, project-based learning, and skill-oriented education indicates a broader effort to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and employability.

However, the findings also reveal that the implementation of these reforms remains uneven and fragmented across institutions and regions. While central universities and premier institutions have shown relatively greater preparedness in adopting NEP reforms, many state and rural institutions continue to face infrastructural limitations, inadequate digital facilities, faculty shortages, and administrative constraints. As a result, the transformative objectives of the policy are often realized unevenly, creating disparities in educational experiences and opportunities.

The study further highlights that structural reforms have progressed more rapidly than pedagogical and institutional transformation. In many institutions, multidisciplinary and flexible learning structures have been formally introduced, yet traditional teaching practices and examination-oriented

approaches continue to dominate classroom pedagogy. This indicates that policy adoption at the structural level does not automatically ensure meaningful transformation in educational culture and learner outcomes.

Another significant finding relates to inclusivity and equitable access. Although NEP 2020 emphasizes inclusive education through measures such as digital learning initiatives, academic flexibility, and gender inclusion mechanisms, socio-economic and regional inequalities continue to influence access to holistic educational opportunities. The digital divide, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged regions, remains a major barrier to equitable implementation. Similarly, gender-related constraints, safety concerns, and socio-cultural barriers continue to affect educational participation and continuity among women students.

The discussion also underscores the importance of faculty preparedness in achieving holistic development. Effective implementation of multidisciplinary and experiential education requires educators who are trained in innovative pedagogical approaches, mentoring practices, and inclusive teaching methods. However, insufficient faculty development initiatives and resistance to pedagogical change limit the realization of learner-centric education envisioned under NEP 2020.

Overall, the findings suggest that NEP 2020 has laid a strong conceptual and structural foundation for holistic transformation in Indian higher education. Nevertheless, the success of the policy depends largely on sustained institutional commitment, effective governance, faculty capacity-building, infrastructural investment, and context-sensitive implementation strategies capable of addressing the diverse realities of Indian higher education institutions.

## **10. Conclusion**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative policy framework aimed at redefining the nature and purpose of higher education in India. By emphasizing multidisciplinary learning, academic flexibility, experiential education, skill integration, and value-based learning, the policy seeks to promote holistic development that extends beyond conventional academic achievement. Its broader vision is to create knowledgeable, skilled, ethically grounded, and socially responsible individuals capable of responding to the complexities of a rapidly changing global society.

The study reveals that NEP 2020 has initiated substantial reforms within the higher education sector, particularly in curriculum restructuring, digital integration, skill-based learning, and institutional flexibility. These developments indicate a gradual movement toward a more learner-centric and inclusive educational system. However, the implementation process remains uneven, and the realization of holistic development continues to face multiple structural, institutional, and socio-economic challenges.

Persistent issues such as infrastructural disparities, limited faculty preparedness, weak industry-academia collaboration, bureaucratic delays, and the digital divide continue to hinder the effective execution of policy reforms. Moreover, regional inequalities and gender-based barriers restrict equitable access to the opportunities envisioned under NEP 2020. The findings therefore suggest that while the policy framework is progressive and comprehensive, its transformative potential has not yet been fully realized in practice.

The study concludes that holistic development under NEP 2020 should be understood as a long-term and evolving process rather than an immediate outcome of policy reform. Achieving the intended objectives requires sustained investment in institutional infrastructure, faculty development, inclusive governance mechanisms, and equitable access to educational resources. It also requires a deeper transformation in pedagogical culture, moving beyond formal structural reforms toward meaningful learner-centred educational practices.

In conclusion, NEP 2020 provides a strong and forward-looking foundation for the future of Indian higher education. Its success, however, depends on the extent to which policy vision can be translated into effective, inclusive, and context-sensitive implementation across diverse educational environments. The realization of holistic development ultimately requires coordinated efforts from

policymakers, educational institutions, faculty members, and society to ensure that the benefits of educational reform reach all sections of learners in an equitable and sustainable manner.

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