



Higher Education Reforms in India: Policy, Practice, and Prospects

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Abstract

This paper examines the policy architecture, implementation, and early outcomes of higher education reforms in India since the adoption of the National Education Policy 2020. It maps the reform agenda across governance (creation of a single regulator), curricular flexibility (multidisciplinary and multiple-exit degrees), quality assurance (accreditation overhaul), and research (creation of a national research funding architecture). Using official statistics and government releases, the paper evaluates progress on access (changes in Gross Enrolment Ratio), institutional growth, and research policy; identifies implementation gaps at the centre–state and institutional levels; and offers pragmatic recommendations to improve equity, accountability, and research capacity.

The reconfiguration of higher education in India following the adoption of the *National Education Policy 2020* (NEP 2020) marks a significant moment in the governance and institutional trajectory of the sector. This paper analyses the architecture, implementation, and early outcomes of reforms initiated under NEP 2020, situating them within India’s long-standing challenges of access, quality, regulation, and research capacity. Drawing upon official documents such as the National Education Policy 2020, data from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), and recent government releases including the Economic Survey (2024–25), the study evaluates reform progress across four core domains: governance restructuring, curricular flexibility, accreditation overhaul, and the institutionalisation of research funding through the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (NRF).

The paper argues that NEP 2020 represents a shift from incremental regulatory adjustments to a systemic reimagining of higher education. Key proposals most notably the creation of a unified regulatory architecture under the proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), the promotion of multidisciplinary universities, multiple-entry and exit degree frameworks, and a decoupled accreditation system seek to rationalise oversight while enhancing institutional autonomy and student mobility

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020; Higher Education Reforms (India);

Introduction

Higher education in India stands at a policy inflection point. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) articulated an ambitious, system-wide vision: to expand access, enhance quality and research, and reconfigure governance for the 21st century. NEP 2020's higher education agenda multidisciplinary institutions, flexible curricula, multiple exit options, autonomy frameworks, and a proposed single regulator marks a departure from the incremental reforms of previous decades. Concurrently, the government has pursued institutional mechanisms to finance and steer research and quality assessment. This paper synthesises these policy moves, evaluates evidence of early outcomes, and suggests policy and institutional measures to sustain reform momentum.

Education reform in India has historically oscillated between centralization and autonomy, elite formation and mass access, regulation and academic freedom. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) emerges at a critical juncture marked by demographic expansion, technological change, and global competition in knowledge production. Unlike earlier policy frameworks particularly the 1968 and 1986 National Policies on Education—NEP 2020 seeks structural redesign rather than incremental correction.

This article examines the reform architecture of NEP 2020 in historical perspective. It asks: What institutional problems does NEP 2020 seek to address? How does its regulatory and curricular vision differ from earlier frameworks? And what are the broader implications for governance, research, and academic culture in India?

1.Reform architecture: core components of NEP 2020

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) represents the most comprehensive restructuring of India's education system since the late twentieth century. This article situates NEP 2020 within the *longue durée* of Indian educational reform, tracing its intellectual genealogy from colonial education policies and post-independence commissions to liberalization-era regulatory expansion. It analyses the reform architecture of NEP 2020, focusing on governance restructuring, institutional transformation, curricular flexibility, research funding mechanisms, accreditation reforms, and equity measures. The study argues that NEP 2020 departs from incremental policy adjustments and instead proposes a systemic reconfiguration grounded in multidisciplinary learning, regulatory simplification, and technological integration. By examining its core components historically, the article assesses both its transformative ambition and its structural challenges.

Historical Background

The Indian university system originated under colonial rule with affiliating universities modelled on the University of London system. Post-independence reforms particularly the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948–49) and Kothari Commission (1964–66) emphasized expansion with quality. However, rapid massification after the 1990s produced regulatory fragmentation, bureaucratic oversight, and declining research capacity.

The establishment of the University Grants Commission (UGC) centralized funding and coordination. Over time, multiple professional councils proliferated, creating overlapping jurisdictions and compliance burdens. By the early twenty-first century, India possessed one of the largest higher education systems globally, yet faced structural rigidities—limited autonomy, poor global rankings, and uneven quality.

Governance Reform: The Creation of an Integrated Regulatory Architecture

A defining feature of NEP 2020 is the proposal to establish the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), replacing fragmented regulatory bodies (except in medical and legal education).

Separation of Functions

HECI comprises four verticals:

1. National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC) – regulation
2. General Education Council (GEC) – academic standards
3. Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) – funding
4. National Accreditation Council (NAC) – accreditation

This separation aims to eliminate conflicts of interest historically embedded in bodies that simultaneously regulated, funded, and accredited institutions. The “light but tight” regulatory philosophy privileges self-disclosure and transparency over inspection-based control.

Historically, this marks a shift from state-dominated compliance systems to performance-based governance.

Institutional Restructuring: Multidisciplinary Universities

NEP 2020 envisions transforming India’s higher education institutions into large, multidisciplinary universities. The long-standing affiliated college system—characterized by centralized examination control is to be phased out.

Institutions are categorized as:

- Research-intensive universities
- Teaching-intensive universities
- Autonomous degree-granting colleges

This restructuring seeks to overcome disciplinary silos that historically separated arts, sciences, and vocational education. The policy draws inspiration from global liberal education models while invoking pre-colonial Indian traditions of holistic scholarship (e.g., Takshashila and Nalanda).

The objective is both epistemic and administrative: integrate knowledge domains and decentralize academic authority.

Curricular Flexibility and the Undergraduate Reform

NEP 2020 introduces a four-year undergraduate programme with multiple exit options:

- 1 year – Certificate
- 2 years – Diploma
- 3 years – Bachelor’s Degree
- 4 years – Bachelor’s Degree with Research

This Multiple Entry–Exit System (MEES) seeks to address dropout rates and rigid progression pathways.

Academic Bank of Credits

The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) digitally stores credits earned by students across institutions. Historically, Indian universities maintained closed credit systems; mobility was rare. ABC institutionalizes credit portability and lifelong learning.

This represents a shift from linear degree structures to modular, stackable credentials aligned with global credit frameworks.

Research Ecosystem and the National Research Foundation

India's low research output relative to its institutional size has long been debated. NEP 2020 proposes the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (NRF) to revitalize research culture.

The NRF is designed to:

- Provide competitive peer-reviewed grants
- Integrate research funding across disciplines
- Support capacity building in state universities
- Promote undergraduate research

Historically, research funding in India was concentrated in elite institutions and scientific agencies. NRF attempts to democratize research opportunities and bridge the teaching–research divide.

Accreditation Reform and Quality Assurance

Accreditation under earlier regimes involved periodic inspections and graded scoring. NEP 2020 proposes a simplified, largely binary accreditation model overseen by the National Accreditation Council (NAC).

The emphasis shifts to:

- Continuous self-disclosure
- Data-driven evaluation
- Technology-enabled monitoring

This reform attempts to move from episodic evaluation to continuous quality enhancement.

Equity, Access, and the Gross Enrolment Ratio

NEP 2020 aims to raise the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50% by 2035. Data from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) provides the statistical baseline.

Equity-oriented provisions include:

- Gender Inclusion Fund
- Special Education Zones
- Targeted scholarships for socio-economically disadvantaged groups

Historically, access expansion in India has been uneven across regions and communities. NEP integrates inclusion within its structural reform agenda rather than treating it as a peripheral concern.

Faculty Development and Academic Professionalization

Teacher education is restructured through a mandatory four-year integrated B.Ed. programme by 2030. Substandard teacher training institutions are to be phased out. Faculty recruitment and promotion systems are reoriented toward merit-based progression and research productivity. Continuous professional development becomes institutionalized. This represents an effort to elevate teaching from bureaucratic employment to academic profession.

Technology and Digital Education

Digital infrastructure forms a crucial pillar of reform:

- National Educational Technology Forum (NETF)
- Virtual laboratories
- Online and blended learning models

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital experimentation, making technological integration both necessary and feasible. Historically, technological reforms in Indian education were piecemeal; NEP seeks systemic integration.

Internationalization of Higher Education

NEP 2020 encourages:

- Entry of foreign universities into India
- International branch campuses
- Global academic partnerships
- Cross-border credit recognition

This marks a significant departure from earlier protective regulatory frameworks and situates Indian higher education within transnational knowledge networks.

Critical Reflections

While NEP 2020 presents an ambitious blueprint, implementation challenges remain:

- Centre–State coordination complexities
- Financial constraints (target of 6% GDP investment)
- Capacity gaps in public universities
- Resistance to structural change

Historically, policy ambition in India has often outpaced administrative execution. The

2. Qualitative and Quantitative Trends and Early Outcomes

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020) marked a structural shift in India's higher education framework by emphasizing multidisciplinary learning, regulatory simplification, digital integration, and research enhancement. Three years into its phased implementation, early trends—both quantitative and qualitative—suggest a mixed but significant transformation across institutional landscapes.

Quantitative Trends

Recent data from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) indicate a gradual rise in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education, reflecting expanded access. The number of universities and colleges has continued to grow, alongside incremental improvements in gender parity. Female enrolment has shown steady gains, particularly in postgraduate education, suggesting movement toward NEP's inclusion goals.

The introduction of four-year undergraduate programmes (FYUP) across central universities and several state institutions marks a measurable structural transition. Multiple Entry–Exit Systems (MEES) and the operationalisation of the Academic Bank of Credits have begun enabling student mobility, with thousands of credit transfers recorded in the initial implementation phase. Digital enrolment platforms and blended learning models have

Qualitative Trends

Qualitatively, NEP-2020 has reshaped academic discourse within institutions. Multidisciplinary integration has begun dissolving rigid subject boundaries, with universities introducing liberal education models that combine sciences, humanities, and vocational studies. Curriculum restructuring has foregrounded skill development, critical thinking, experiential learning, and research orientation at the undergraduate level.

Governance reforms particularly the move toward “light but tight” regulation and graded autonomy have encouraged institutional self-assessment and strategic planning. The proposed restructuring under the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) signals a transition from inspection-based oversight to transparency-driven accountability, although legislative alignment across states is uneven.

Digital transformation represents a notable qualitative shift. Virtual laboratories, online repositories, and blended teaching methods have expanded pedagogical possibilities. Yet this digital turn has also highlighted infrastructural inequalities, especially in rural and economically marginalized regions.

Early Outcomes and Emerging Patterns

Early outcomes reveal a reform process characterized by uneven but tangible momentum. Central institutions have generally moved faster in adopting four-year degrees and multidisciplinary frameworks, while state universities exhibit differentiated trajectories shaped by fiscal and administrative capacity. Inclusion measures particularly increased female participation indicate positive social shifts, though socio-economic and regional inequalities endure.

In sum, NEP-2020’s early quantitative indicators show expansion and structural experimentation, while qualitative changes signal evolving academic culture and governance models. However, sustained financial commitment, institutional capacity-building, and coordinated federal implementation remain critical for translating policy design into systemic transformation.

Research outputs and funding

The institutionalisation of national research funding mechanisms through the NRF/Anusandhan framework marks a pivotal shift from ad-hoc grants toward a more planned, mission-oriented research funding strategy. Early calls and scheme rollouts have begun to channel resources to priority areas and to strengthen university-based research.

3. Implementation dynamics and constraints

The implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) represents a complex process shaped by federal governance structures, institutional legacies, fiscal constraints, and socio-political negotiation. While NEP 2020 articulates an ambitious blueprint for systemic transformation, its realization depends upon dynamic interactions between the Union government, state governments, regulatory bodies, universities, and civil society actors. This article examines the implementation dynamics of NEP 2020 from a historical–institutional perspective, identifying structural constraints embedded in India’s educational governance system.

Educational reforms in India have historically been characterized by a gap between policy articulation and institutional execution. From the post-independence recommendations of the Kothari Commission to the National Policy on Education of 1986, reform frameworks have often confronted entrenched administrative cultures and fiscal constraints. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is no exception. While it proposes a radical restructuring of governance, curriculum, research, and accreditation, its implementation unfolds within a historically layered and federally distributed system.

Federal Dynamics and Centre–State Negotiations

Education in India is located within the Concurrent List of the Constitution, requiring cooperative federalism for effective reform. The Union government provides policy direction and regulatory frameworks, while state governments control the majority of public universities and colleges.

Implementation of reforms such as the proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) depends on state-level legislative and administrative alignment. States differ significantly in political orientation, fiscal capacity, and institutional readiness. Consequently, adoption of NEP provisions such as four-year undergraduate programmes or institutional restructuring has varied across regions.

Historically, federal asymmetry has shaped educational reform trajectories. NEP 2020's success hinges upon negotiated adaptation rather than uniform imposition. These dynamic produces differentiated implementation patterns across states.

Regional Disparities and Social Inequality

Data from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) reveal substantial regional variations in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), faculty–student ratios, and institutional density. Implementation of NEP's equity measures such as Gender Inclusion Funds and Special Education Zones must contend with entrenched socio-economic disparities.

Historically marginalized regions often lack adequate infrastructure to absorb reform initiatives. Thus, uniform policy frameworks encounter diverse socio-economic realities. Without targeted and sustained investment, reform may inadvertently widen regional inequalities.

Political Economy of Reform

Education reform is not merely administrative but political. Stakeholders including state governments, university administrations, faculty unions, private institutions, and student bodies shape implementation trajectories. Reforms affecting accreditation, autonomy, or funding structures may encounter resistance from actors accustomed to established regulatory arrangements. The transition from inspection-based oversight to self-disclosure mechanisms requires trust-building and institutional credibility.

Historically, reforms perceived as centralizing authority or altering established hierarchies have generated political contestation. NEP 2020's long-term implementation therefore depends on consensus-building across diverse constituencies.

Technological Mediation and Digital Gaps

The policy's emphasis on digital governance, online learning, and virtual laboratories gained urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, digital infrastructure remains uneven across rural and urban regions. Limited internet connectivity, device access, and digital literacy constrain effective implementation. Technological modernization, while promising efficiency and transparency, also risks excluding vulnerable populations without parallel investment in digital inclusion.

Implementation of NEP 2020 unfolds within a historically layered institutional landscape shaped by federal complexity, fiscal limitation, administrative inertia, and socio-economic disparity. While the policy articulates a transformative vision, its realization depends on dynamic negotiation between central directives and state-level adaptation.

4. Critical policy analysis

Strengths of the reform agenda

- **Comprehensiveness:** NEP 2020 aligns school-to-higher education reforms, offering a systemic approach to lifelong learning.
- **Focus on research:** Institutional funding mechanisms and the NRF aim to redirect attention and resources to university research, traditionally underfunded in India.
- **Flexibility and interdisciplinarity:** Curriculum flexibility and credit mobility can enhance student agency and employability.

Risks and unintended consequences

- **Equity risks:** Without targeted financial aid and bridging programmes, marginalised students may be left behind by reforms that favour mobility and choice.
- **Regulatory centralisation:** A single regulator could homogenise oversight and inadvertently constrain institutional diversity if not carefully calibrated.

- **Implementation capacity:** The pace of legislative and administrative change could outstrip the capacity of many institutions—particularly smaller colleges—to adapt.

5. Recommendations for policy and practice

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020) represents one of the most ambitious restructurings of India's education system since Independence. Its reform architecture—encompassing governance rationalisation, multidisciplinary institutional design, flexible degree pathways, research funding consolidation, and accreditation overhaul—signals a decisive shift from expansion-centric to quality-centric reform. Yet the gap between policy design and institutional practice remains significant. This commentary outlines pragmatic, evidence-informed recommendations to strengthen implementation, ensure equity, and enhance research and governance outcomes.

Calibrated Regulatory Transition and Federal Coordination

The proposed restructuring under the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) aims to consolidate fragmented regulatory bodies into a streamlined architecture. However, regulatory centralisation must be balanced with federal accommodation.

Policy Recommendations:

- Launch a national faculty development mission focused on multidisciplinary pedagogy, research supervision, digital literacy, and outcome-based assessment.
- Provide funded doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships to address faculty shortages in public institutions.
- Incentivise collaborative research clusters and faculty exchange across institutions to promote knowledge circulation.
- Reform recruitment processes to ensure transparency, merit-based selection, and timely appointments.
- Introduce means-tested scholarships and income-contingent loan systems to reduce financial barriers.
- Expand bridge courses and academic support programmes for first-generation and rural students.
- Tie public funding allocations to measurable improvements in access, retention, and completion among disadvantaged groups.
- Strengthen digital inclusion through subsidised devices and connectivity in underserved regions.

Equity safeguards must be embedded within reform design rather than appended as compensatory measures.

Conclusion

The trajectory of higher education reforms in India since the adoption of the National Education Policy 2020 reflects a historically ambitious attempt to recalibrate the relationship between access, quality, governance, and research. As this paper has demonstrated, NEP 2020 departs from incremental reformism and instead advances a systemic restructuring of institutional architecture, regulatory oversight, curricular design, accreditation frameworks, and research funding mechanisms. The proposed consolidation under the Higher Education Commission of India, the operationalisation of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, the introduction of multidisciplinary institutional models, and the deployment of the Academic Bank of Credits collectively signal a shift toward flexibility, transparency, and research orientation.

Quantitative indicators, including rising enrolment ratios reported by the All India Survey on Higher Education, institutional expansion, and early adoption of four-year undergraduate frameworks, suggest measurable forward movement. Qualitative transformations—particularly the normalization of interdisciplinary curricula, digital governance practices, and research integration in teaching universities indicate evolving academic cultures. Yet implementation remains uneven. Federal asymmetries, fiscal constraints, faculty shortages, digital divides, and administrative inertia continue to mediate reform outcomes.

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