



**The Future of Higher Education
in India: An Analysis of the
National Education Policy 2020**

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1.0 Introduction

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) proposes an ambitious overhaul of the entire Indian education sector (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). This overhaul was long expected as the policy was framed in 1986 and later modified in 1992 (Chopra, 2020).

Thus, for nearly three decades, no major reforms were introduced in the Indian education sector. The lack of significant reforms, coupled with the country's rapid growth, and development, stagnated the Indian education sector.

Before proceeding with the subject matter of this paper, it is pertinent to note some of the major reforms relevant to this project. The most significant of all changes is perhaps the change in perspective and a shift of emphasis from a 'westernised' concept of education to a concept of education grounded in the Indian ethos. This shift is the foundation of the policy's vision of the 'global best education system rooted in the Indian ethos' (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). The policy has focused on introducing structural reforms from the grassroots level in the Indian education sector. At the same time, it has also focused on adult education and the promotion of Indian languages, arts, and culture.

From an economic perspective, the most significant change is the unequivocal endorsement by the policy to increase public investment in education to 6% of the GDP from the current 4.43% with the aim to reach 20% of all public expenditure over ten years (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). This plan to increase public investment to 6% has also been approved by the Union Cabinet (Reuters, 2020).

In particular, the promotion of Indian languages, arts, and culture, is noticeably the most distinctive feature of the vision of the policy. Through this emphasis, the government has sought to reinvigorate Indian culture from a grassroots level, thereby downplaying the aspirational position of the English language in the education system. Therefore, by emphasising education in local and classical languages, the government attempts to tackle the language barriers in a culturally diverse country like India.

At the same time, this focus on the promotion of Indian languages, arts, and culture could also have negative repercussions. As stated above, the NEP 2020 seeks to draw away from the English language by focusing on local and classical languages. On a global level, such a focus could isolate India from the globalised world as English is one of the most widely used languages. On the other hand, on a national level, in a diverse country like India, this could potentially strain or fragment the country's national unity in the absence of emphasis on widely spoken languages like English or Hindi. The three-language formula of the NEP 2020 does not leave room for the imposition of languages.

On a broader level, the policy comprehensively lays out reforms in school and higher education along with a rough plan to execute its vision. The objective of this paper is to analyse the impact of the NEP 2020 on the higher education sector in India. At the same time, this report meticulously breaks down some of the major reforms proposed by the NEP 2020, factors them into the analysis on the problem of the brain drain and subsequently makes concluding observations.

Further, as the paper restricts itself to higher education, any analysis made in this paper wilfully assumes a holistic interpretation of the policy without explicitly diving into its intricacies. In such an endeavour, the paper only seeks to succinctly introduce, by analysis, the NEP 2020 in the context of higher education.

2.0 The Status Quo

The ailing higher education sector has been facing many problems, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the NEP 2020, the Government has recognised these crucial problems affecting the higher education sector. A few stand out and briefly encapsulate the status quo listed below -

1. A severely fragmented higher education ecosystem, with more than 50,000 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and a large percentage of commercial enterprises in which little or no education is taking place.
2. Poor learning outcomes and development of cognitive skills of students.
3. A lack of access to higher education, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

4. Inadequate mechanisms for merit-based career management coupled with the progression of faculty and institutional leaders.
5. A lack of research at most universities and colleges (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

2.1 Analysing the Status Quo

The fragmentation of the higher education system coupled with the tremendous number of HEIs and the reduction of most HEIs to commercial enterprises, have severely crippled the higher education sector. Some of the factors responsible for this are a lack of multidisciplinary education and failure or inadequacy of existing regulatory governance mechanisms (Ravi & Gupta, 2019). The trickle-down effects of these factors contribute to poor learning outcomes and the development of students. For example, if the sole focus of a standalone engineering institution is to only teach engineering without focusing on things like employability, personality development, communication, leadership skills, and the like, the outcome of its education would not include well rounded and professional individuals. In this case, it is incumbent on this engineering college to focus not only on the context in which students would be expected to apply their engineering skills or theories but also to ensure that they are equipped with the necessary life skills to grow in their profession. Hence, the lack of multidisciplinary education, the inadequacy or failure of existing regulatory and governance mechanisms leads to poor learning outcomes and development of students.

Concerning the lack of access to higher education, especially vis-à-vis the socially and economically disadvantaged strata of the Indian society, the government has sought to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) from 26.3% (2018) to 50% by 2030 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). It is also pertinent to note that the annual growth rate of GER in higher education in the last few years has been around 2% (Vaishnav, 2020). Taking into consideration the nature of such barriers, and the annual growth rate, an increase of 23.7% is nothing short of an ambitious leap.

As far as the current scenario of research in India is concerned, it is not viewed as a primary and vital function of academics. Hence, research is seldom measured in terms of grants, the number of credible papers, conferences, and the like. It thereby assumes an ancillary position in the higher education sector (Ravi & Gupta, 2019).

In this regard, another point to be taken into consideration is that research should, under ideal circumstances, be integrated into academia from the undergraduate level. This idea stems from the argument that a disposition towards research cannot be built out of thin air. A focus on building a research temperament through the fundamentals of research is crucial to have a positive impact on the qualitative and quantitative metrics of measuring research in the higher education sector.

The NEP 2020 seeks to work towards this change as it acknowledges the fundamental importance of research and its dismal state in the status quo. Therefore, the NEP 2020 also places a special emphasis on reforming research on an academic level in India.

Taking a closer look at the aforementioned points, there is an understanding that these points are plausibly the underlying contributing factors to the problems of brain drain and unemployment. The government's recognition of these systemic problems in higher education is only the first step in changing the status quo. However, addressing the problem with tangible solutions ultimately rests on the execution of the vision it has outlined in its policy.

2.2 Proposed Reforms to Progressively Change the Status Quo

With respect to the higher education sector, the Government has, amongst others, proposed the following structural reforms (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020):

1. Moving towards a higher education system consisting of large universities and colleges focused on multidisciplinary undergraduate education, with at least one in or near every district.
2. Revamping curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and student support for enhanced student experiences. In this regard, the NEP 2020 seeks to introduce regulatory reforms to give institutions leeway vis-a-vis governance

and push multidisciplinary education across universities. It also seeks to integrate technology throughout all levels of education to support students.

3. Establishment of a National Research Foundation (NRF) to fund outstanding peer-reviewed research and actively seed research in universities and colleges.
4. Having 'light but tight' regulation by a single regulator for all higher education, including professional education.
5. Governance of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) by highly-qualified independent boards having academic and administrative autonomy.
6. Creation of the National Educational Alliance for Technology (NEAT) to use technology to enhance learning, assessment, planning, and administration for school and higher education.

3.0 Analysing the Proposed Reforms

Through these reforms, the government seeks to address the problems it has identified in the higher education sector. In the NEP 2020, the government has further elucidated the reasoning behind its proposed reforms. The underlying rationale behind these reforms perhaps lies in the transformative vision of the policy itself. If we consider the higher education sector, the policy broadly focuses on reforming or rather transforming the structure and areas of focus in HEIs, their regulatory mechanisms, and governance structures.

If we look at the larger picture of the proposed reforms, especially the aforementioned reforms, we can reasonably make the following observations. Firstly, the policy seeks to end the commercialisation of education, thereby paving the way for increased accessibility. Secondly, the regulation and governance of HEIs are envisioned in a manner where they can independently grow while simultaneously ensuring that the quality of education and teaching is strictly regulated. Thirdly, the need for a 'robust ecosystem of research' has rightly been emphasized in the policy, and the requisite measures have also been laid out. Fourthly, the integration and use of technology in education is vital to equip students with skills to function and thrive in a technologically driven world. Lastly, the policy puts the focus of higher education on making holistic individuals through multidisciplinary education, a revamped

teaching pedagogy and student support. This also reinforces NGOs working in this sector, by giving them a solid policy foundation to continue their work on improving access to quality higher education.

Further, it also seeks to understand and then consider the practicalities of the status quo while applying its proposed structural reforms. Hence, to this end, the Government has also elaborated on how it seeks to implement the ambitious targets envisioned in the NEP 2020 in the last part of the policy document.

3.1 A Potential to Tackle the Problem of Brain Drain

Traditionally 'brain drain' refers to the migration of educated persons from one country, often a developing country, to another more developed country (GK Today, 2016). In the context of higher education, brain drain could also refer to students opting for higher education abroad over higher education in India. It is also pertinent to note that India is the world's second-largest source of international students, and it is also one of the fastest-growing sources of outbound students (ICEF Monitor, 2019).

Thus, if the aforementioned trends followed their current trajectory, things would not look good for India as it would lose out on invaluable human capital and the opportunity to inculcate its endemic perspective and culture on the future generation of the country. The aforementioned points can be justified by the following reasons -

1. From an economic and political perspective, the young or the future generations of a country are invaluable human capital. They are in line to assume or inherit positions of power in political structures and become a part of the economic workforce of their country. At the same time, by improving the domestic picture of education, the government can provide quality and accessible opportunities to all strata of society.
2. On a sociological level, the future generations of any society are inarguably tasked with the responsibility of the future of their society. Ensuring continuity and smooth transitions between the older generations and younger generations are essential for the said society's future. Further, ensuring that

culture, knowledge, traditions, and the like are passed on, in essence, ensures that the identity of a society is not lost after each generation.

Thus, education, specifically higher education, has a vital role in terms of preparing their future generations to competently transition and take over from the previous generation. Thus, endemic educational institutions must take precedence and importance before foreign educational institutions. Therefore, there is a need to address this particular aspect of the brain drain specifically.

The question we are faced with now is 'how does the NEP 2020 address these problems and if its proposed measures are sufficient to tackle these issues?' It is pertinent to note that the policy itself does not specifically recognise the brain drain. However, some of the proposed reforms coincidentally address the problem of brain drain.

In this regard, the policy only mentions that it seeks to promote India as a 'global study destination' which would provide premium education at affordable costs. It also expands on this by incentivising high performing Indian universities to set up campuses abroad and at the same time draw select universities from around the world to operate in India. To this end, necessary changes are sought to be made to the existing framework of laws and regulations (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

If this aim of promoting India as a 'global study destination' goes according to plan, the aspirational value of foreign education could be substantially reduced. That is, high performing Indian universities would be incentivised to set up campuses abroad, and consequently, they would be bound to uphold the highest standards of quality to become high performing universities. Countries like Malaysia and China have adopted similar models by enabling foreign universities to set up campuses and allowing students from other universities to seek admission (Mishra, 2019).

Simultaneously, if some of the best universities are allowed to operate in India, the number of students going abroad for higher education could also substantially drop. Therefore, in such a scenario this move has the potential of not only increasing the quality of higher education and their standards, but also the potential to curb the

number of outbound students. In this way, the NEP 2020 coincidentally poses a substantial solution to the problem of the brain drain vis-à-vis higher education.

3.2 Implementation of the Policy

As far as the policy itself is concerned, it does hold promise and the potential to answer some of the most systemic problems in the higher education sector. At the same time, it is the weight of the policy's ambition that has the power to bring down and make it an inconsequential policy. The vision of any policy is seen through its implementation. The NEP 2020 is ambitious by all means.

However, everything that the NEP 2020 proposes in terms of reforms hinges on implementing the policy. As is observed with a majority of policies, governments usually fail to efficiently bridge the gap between the vision of a policy and its subsequent implementation.

Some of the important steps taken by the Government to implement the NEP 2020 are as follows -

1. Creation of a permanent Indian Education Service (IES) cadre comprising a specialist cadre of the bureaucracy.
2. Yearly joint reviews on the progress of implementing the policy, in accordance with the targets set for each action.
3. Phased implementation of the NEP 2020 with prioritisation to critical and urgent actions ensuring a strong base for implementation.
4. Careful planning, joint monitoring, and collaborative implementation between the centre and states (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

At this juncture, it would also be premature and unwise to decisively comment on the impact of the policy. Hence, this paper has only restricted itself to the proposed reforms and their trajectories vis-à-vis impact as envisioned by the government and in the context of the higher education sector. Therefore, the execution of the policy and the realisation of its ambitions in the higher education sector can only be gauged by the test of time.

However, if broadly forecasting two possible outcomes of this policy, either successful implementation or unsuccessful implementation, the latter seems more daunting. The effective implementation of this policy is key to ensure a smooth transition between the status quo and the proposed system. Any inefficiency or gap in its implementation could potentially cause some problems. This policy undeniably proposes a structural overhaul of the entire education sector, including the higher education sector. Any lapses in the execution of this overhaul of the current system could create problems for all of the relevant stakeholders to transition into the new system. Hence, the implementation of the NEP 2020 must be as seamless as possible.

On the other hand, if we forecast the successful implementation of the NEP 2020 on the basis of a neutral political analysis, then the future of the higher education sector in India holds much promise. A massive structural overhaul, removal of the commercialization of education, and introduction of a multidisciplinary education could potentially tackle the problem of the brain drain in India and develop the higher education sector in India.

4.0 Concluding Remarks

If, for a moment, we ground ourselves in reality and look at the NEP 2020, it becomes pertinent to analyse the capacity of the Indian Government to implement this policy and the incentives provided to all relevant stakeholders to transition from the status quo. However, at this juncture, any analysis could be premature as it lacks the relevant data harvested from the implementation of the policy. Therefore, throughout this paper, a greater emphasis has been placed on analysing the policy through a neutral lens with the aim of understanding its implications in the Indian political and socio-economic context.

In its analysis, the paper has sought to explore the status quo and take into account the various political and socio-economic factors surrounding the NEP 2020. In the context of such analysis, the reforms proposed by the NEP 2020 were discussed and its potential implication on the problem of the brain drain was explored. Finally, the intricacies vis-à-vis the implementation of the NEP 2020 were seen in the light of

its possible implications. Throughout this paper, the future challenges and implications of the NEP 2020's policies on higher education in India were explored.

5.0 About the the Author

Kaustubh Dighe has been a research fellow with Professors Without Borders since 2019 and is currently pursuing his law degree at the Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law in India. He is passionate about advocacy and working towards the establishment of basic human rights, including the right to quality education. He believes that the right to quality education is an inalienable fundamental right of each and every person.

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