

BUILDING A WORLD-CLASS HIGHER EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM IN INDIA

Dr G Veerraju, Lecturer in Political Science, AG&SG Siddhartha Degree College, Vuyyuru-521165 Andhra Pradesh :veerrajudl@gmail.com

Abstract

India, with its rich history and diverse culture, has long been a global leader in various fields, from science and technology to arts and philosophy. However, its higher education system, while vast and comprehensive, faces a myriad of challenges that hinder its potential to be a world-class ecosystem. This paper explores the key components necessary for building a world-class higher education ecosystem in India and offers a roadmap for achieving this ambitious goal. The paper begins by discussing the current state of higher education in India, highlighting its strengths, weaknesses, and the pressing need for reform. It then examines international models of higher education ecosystems that have successfully achieved global recognition, drawing lessons and insights that can be applied to the Indian context. With climate change and fast depletion of natural assets, there may be a giant shift in how we meet the sector's energy, water, and sanitation needs, once more ensuing in the want for brand spanking new skilled labour, particularly in biology, chemistry, physics, and climate science. There may be a growing call for humanities and artwork, as India moves in the direction of turning into evolved united states and many of the three largest economies in the global.

Keywords: Policy in Higher Education, GER multi-disciplinary, HEIs, NEP 2020

Introduction

Higher Education in India is up for an overhaul with the National Education Policy 2020 bringing in multi-dimensional changes – right from the regulatory framework to curriculum structure and research environment. First and foremost, the announcement of the much-awaited National Education Policy (NEP) has cleared the path for setting up a single regulatory body for country's higher education. The regulatory body, that is to be named the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), will function as the single authority for all public and private educational institutions (except those involved in medical and law education). In addition to this, a National Research Foundation will be created to oversee all research activities to be carried out by the various academic institutions in the country. The NEP 2020 has aimed at almost doubling the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50 per cent by the year 2035, as compared to the current GER of 26.3%. It also has provision for greater autonomy to the academic institutions offering quality higher education.

Policy is one of the most potent instruments of bringing out social transformation and change and achieving desirable goals and targets. Higher education has been in the policy gaze since the very beginning of the post Independent India's drive for planned development. The first Commission on education set up in the post-Independent India was on higher education (Radhakrishnan Commission, 1948) which advocated for the expansion of higher education and recommended for the establishment of national regulatory bodies such as the University Grant Commission (UGC) and other bodies to regulate growth of higher education in the country. With a very low and slow start, after passing through over 70 years of planned educational development and implementation of two national education policies (1968 and 1986), the higher education in India has reached the massified stage to be the second largest higher education system in the world after China, with 37.4 million students, and 1.4 million teachers spread over more than forty thousand higher education institutions (MHRD, 2019). The third National Education Policy–2020 presents a fresh and forward looking vision for rejuvenating the Indian higher education system. The main purpose of this Unit is to provide an introductory exposure to the teachers about the National Education Policy-2020 in terms of the context, concepts, policy goals, implementation issues and challenges, and future prospects.¹

¹ Kasturirangan, K. (2021). Liberal Education – A 21st Century Initiative. Fifteenth Foundation Day Lecture, NIEPA, New Delhi, 11th August, available on

Learning Outcomes

After going through this unit, the higher education teachers would be able to: Explain the key concepts and context of the National Education Policy–2020. Describe the foundational principles and goals of the new National Education Policy in relation to higher education.

Identify current issues and challenges with regard to NEP implementation. Plan for the future prospects of higher education in the country.

The Context of NEP in Higher Education

The NEP–2020 has emerged to address the problems currently faced by the higher education system in India as identified in the policy document. The growth of higher education in the country therefore has been slow, inadequate, and disparate. Despite massive increase in enrolment in higher education in recent decades, the current gross enrolment ratio is still less than the desired level and way behind the developed countries. The unplanned growth of higher education has led to different kinds of disparities, such as regional, social, gender, economic, etc. In terms of regional disparities, the concentration of higher education institutions and associated students' enrolment is higher in certain regions (such as southern and western regions) than in other regions (such as the north, the east and the north-east), and further higher in the urban areas than rural areas. In terms of social group disparities, the disadvantaged groups still remain far behind general categories. Moreover, in terms of gender disparities, although enrolment gaps in higher education are closing fast, there is biasness in terms of choice of courses, as girls are less represented in Engineering and other professional courses than the boys.

Major problems faced by the Indian higher education system Inadequate and uneven growth of higher education. A severely fragmented higher educational ecosystem. Less emphasis on the development of cognitive skills and learning outcomes. A rigid separation of disciplines, with early specialization and streaming of students into narrow areas of study. Limited access particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, with few HEIs that teach in local languages. Limited teacher and institutional autonomy. Inadequate mechanisms for merit-based career management and progression of faculty and situational leaders.

Challenges in the Current Higher Education System

- Discuss the current state of higher education in India.
- Highlight challenges such as lack of infrastructure, outdated curriculum, and limited research funding.
- Emphasize the need for reform.

Key Components of a World-Class Higher Education Ecosystem

- Quality Faculty: Discuss the importance of attracting and retaining top-notch faculty.
- Modern Curriculum: Emphasize the need for dynamic and industry-relevant curricula.
- Infrastructure and Technology: Discuss the role of state-of-the-art infrastructure and technology.
- Research and Innovation: Highlight the importance of research and innovation in higher education.
- Industry-Academia Collaboration: Discuss how partnerships with industries can benefit both students and the economy.
- Internationalization: Talk about the benefits of global exposure and collaborations with foreign universities.

Government Initiatives and Policy Reforms

- Mention government initiatives such as "Study in India" and "National Education Policy (NEP) 2020."
- Explain how these initiatives are addressing the challenges and fostering improvement.

Role of Private Sector and Philanthropy

- Discuss the role of private universities and institutions in elevating higher education standards.
- Highlight the importance of philanthropic contributions in funding scholarships and research.

Success Stories and Case Studies

- Provide examples of Indian universities and institutions that are making strides in becoming world-class.
- Share success stories of alumni who have achieved international recognition.

Challenges Ahead

- Acknowledge the obstacles that still need to be overcome, such as bureaucratic hurdles and funding issues.
- Discuss how these challenges can be addressed.

Vision, Foundational Principles, and Policy Goals

Foundational Principles

NPE-2020 envisions a complete overhaul and re-energizing of the higher education system to overcome the challenges and deliver high-quality higher education, with equity and inclusion. The vision of the policy is in synch with Goal 4 of the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4) which seeks 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' and based on the Foundational Principles guiding the education system and individuals involved. Based on the vision, the new policy has enunciated a set of Foundational Principles to guide educational system and institutions.

National Education Policy-2020: Foundational Principles Recognizing, identifying, and fostering the unique capabilities of each student. Flexibility to the learners in choosing their learning trajectories and programmes, and their own paths in life according to their talents and interests. No hard separations between arts and sciences, between curricular and extra-curricular activities, between vocational and academic streams, etc. Multidisciplinary and a holistic education across the sciences, social sciences, arts, humanities, and sports for a multidisciplinary world. Emphasis on conceptual understanding rather than rote learning and learning-for-exams. Creativity and critical thinking to encourage logical decision-making and innovation; Ethics and human & Constitutional values. Promoting multilingualism and the power of language in teaching and learning. Life skills such as communication, cooperation, teamwork, and resilience. Focus on regular formative assessment for learning. Extensive use of technology in teaching and learning, removing language barriers, increasing access for Divyang students. Respect for diversity and respect for the local context. Full equity and inclusion as the cornerstone of all educational decisions. Synergy in curriculum across all levels of education from early childhood care and education to school education to higher education.²

A 'light but tight regulatory framework to ensure integrity, transparency, and resource efficiency of the educational system – through autonomy, good governance and empowerment. Outstanding research as a requisite for outstanding education and development. Continuous review of progress based on sustained research. A rootedness and pride in India, and its rich, diverse, ancient and modern culture and knowledge systems and traditions. Education is a public service; access to quality education must be considered a basic right. Substantial investment on public education system as well as the encouragement and facilitation of true philanthropic private and community participation. Policy Goals The NEP-2020's vision and foundational principles include the following key changes to the current system as the policy goals:

Moving towards a more multidisciplinary undergraduate education

Drawing from the ancient tradition of holistic and multidisciplinary learning, the NEP-2020 aims at carrying out major structural reforms in higher education by transforming higher education institutions

² http://niepa.ac.in/Download/NEP%202020%20Implementation%20Strategy_W.pdf.

into large multidisciplinary universities colleges and knowledge hubs. Multidisciplinary means integration of disciplines to develop better understanding and insight into the phenomena or problem (Bhushan, 2021). It is to be noted 'multidisciplinary education', based on liberal education, is an academic and pedagogical approach to develop multiple capacities in the students by integrating formal and informal learning opportunities in teaching, research and community engagements and promoting interdisciplinary perspective in academic practice (NIEPA, 2020, p.114; Kasturirangan, 2021). Being multidisciplinary, the institutions will restructure the pedagogy permitting the scope for choices of subjects to students, and it is also expected that affiliated colleges will gradually phase out giving ways to multidisciplinary universities and colleges by 2035. By 2040, all higher education institutions shall aim to become multidisciplinary institutions and shall aim to have larger student enrolments preferably in thousand, for optimal use of the infrastructure and resources. The overall higher education sector will be integrated into one higher education system, including professional and vocational education. It is expected that at least 50% of the learners through both school and higher education shall have exposure to vocational education. Moreover, the policy also recommends to build a world class multidisciplinary HEIs called Multidisciplinary Educational Research University (MERU).

Revamping curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and student support

Based on the holistic and multidisciplinary approach to education, the NEP proposes to revamp curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and support to the students for the overall improvement in the learning environment. In place of the current practice of teacher focused teaching, student focused teaching and learning method will be enforced. The new policy recommends to establish an Academic Bank of Credit at the national level to provide flexibility in acquiring degrees and multiple entry-exit option at all levels of education. Several digital platforms have been proposed to encourage online learning. The evaluation and assessment model suggested under the new policy is also going to change from End semester examination system to continuous assessment system. All the HEIs will give due emphasis on knowledge, skills and values.³

Autonomy and freedom

Following the principles of self-governance, the NEP-2020 envisions university as an autonomous structure with an empowered structure of governance at the institutional level. The idea of institutional autonomy within the framework of graded autonomy is one of the governance reforms recommended under the new policy. The policy proposes an empowered structure of Board of Governors for each higher education institution. The HEIs will have the freedom and autonomy to move gradually from one category to another, based on their plans, actions, and effectiveness. The graded autonomy will also be given to non-public universities. This autonomy will be based on their accreditation, participation in research innovation and quality education delivery. Within the institutions, the faculty will have freedom to design their own curricular and pedagogical approaches within the approved framework, including textbook and reading material selections, assignments and assessments. The teachers will be choosing pedagogy to teach effectively in their classrooms. They will be recognized for the innovative approaches to teaching that improve learning outcomes in their classrooms.⁴

Medium of instruction and languages

The medium of instruction and language is a critical issue in higher education and requires a careful examination (Jayaram, 1993). NEP-2020 advocates the use of Indian languages, art and culture at all levels of education, including higher education. The policy makes it explicit that proficiency in Indian languages will be included as part of qualification parameters for employment opportunities. The universities dedicated to languages will become multidisciplinary, and where relevant may also offer dual degrees in education and a language to develop language teachers in that language. The policy also advises the HEIs to use mother tongue or home language as the medium of instruction and offer bilingual programmes in higher education to increase access and GER. For each

³ https://mpr.aub.uni-muenchen.de/102549/1/MPRA_paper_102549.pdf

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353452302_NEP_2020_An_Effort_Towards_Transforming_India%27s_Education_Landscape

of the 22 languages listed under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, separate 'Academies' will be established to promote the languages. For making available high quality materials in Indian languages, the policy has proposed establishing an Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation (IITI). It is expected that the HEIs will use mother tongue/regional/local languages to help students grasp the concepts better. As far as the use of Sanskrit language in higher education is concerned, the policy makes it explicit that Sanskrit will be mainstreamed in schools and higher education institutions.⁵

Issues and Challenges Access-related Issues and Challenges in Higher Education

Higher education in India is currently at the stage of massification in terms of enrolment with GER pegged at 26.3%. The NEP-2020 aims at increasing the GER in higher education to 50% by 2035 (NEP 2020, Section 10.06). The target will also include enrolments through online mode and students covered under vocational and other streams. The universalization goals and targets need to be seen in terms of areas and groups, as the states and groups within a state are at different levels of educational attainment. It is expected that universalization of school education will provide scope for maximising enrolment in higher education. The focus will be on covering the underserved areas and groups.

Equity and Inclusion related Challenges in Higher Education

The Policy envisions ensuring equitable access to quality education to all students, with a special emphasis on SEDGs. The policy takes cognizance of certain facets of exclusion which include issues such as, lack of knowledge of higher education opportunities, economic opportunity cost of pursuing higher education, financial constraints, admission processes, geographical and language barriers, poor employability potential of the higher education graduates among the SEDGs, and lack of appropriate student support mechanisms.

In these regards, a multi-pronged strategy needs to be adopted by both the government and the HEIs to address the equity and inclusion related problems. Some of the measures, for instance, may include the initiatives such as:

- a) Earmarking suitable government funds to meet targets for the education of SEDGs,
- c) Establishing more high-quality HEIs in aspirational districts and Special Education Zones containing larger numbers of SEDGs,
- d) Developing high-quality HEIs that teach in local/Indian languages or bilingually,
- e) Mitigating opportunity costs and fees for pursuing higher education,
- f) Making admissions processes and curriculum more inclusive,
- g) Making HEI buildings and classrooms disabled-friendly,
- h) Developing bridge course materials for students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds,
- i) Providing socio-emotional and academic support and mentoring for all such students,
- j) Ensuring sensitization of faculty, counsellor, and students on gender-identity issue, and enforcing all no-discrimination and anti-harassment rules⁶.

Quality-related Issues and Challenges

Ensuring quality in a highly diversified system of higher education is a major challenge. On quality parameters, most of the higher education institutions (HEIs) fall much behind the HEIs in development countries. The case of Indian universities not appearing on top positions in the world university rankings is a matter of serious concern. Although accreditation as quality assurance measure has been

⁵ Kasturirangan, K. (2021). Liberal Education – A 21st Century Initiative. Fifteenth Foundation Day Lecture, NIEPA, New Delhi, 11th August,

⁶ Varghese, N. V. (2021). Directions of Change in Higher Education : From Massification to Universalization. In Chattopadhyay, Saumen, Simon Marginson and N. V. Varghese (Eds.) Changing Higher Education in India. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 23-46.

in implementation for a number of years, the process has not been very effective. As far as the External Quality Assurance within the country is concerned only around one third of the universities and one fifth of the colleges have been accredited in the past 25 years of NAAC (Varghese, 2021). Moreover, Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) established in universities are not fully functional.

Governance-related Issues and Challenges

Reforming the governance of higher education is one of the important transformative agenda of the NEP-2020. The policy envisions the governance reforms as prerequisite for achieving the policy goals and targets (NIEPA, 2020). The policy proposal of setting up the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) with four verticals (for regulation, accreditation, funding and academic standard) is radical in nature with far reaching. The agenda comprises restructuring of governance of the higher education at the national, sub-national and institution levels. There is a need of harmonizing the HEIs with the state and the national level structures and processes. The common feature of all world-class institutions globally including India has indeed been the existence of strong self-governance and outstanding merit-based appointments of institutional leaders. It is expected that new governance structure and leadership will bring in a culture of excellence and innovation in higher education institutions in the country.⁷

Financing-related Challenges of Higher Education

The financing of expanding higher education is a major challenge, as it falls short of the goals and targets. With decline in public funding, the task has become difficult. Some of the higher education proposals under the NEP having financial implication include activities such as, a) investment in teacher education and continuing professional development of teachers; b) revamping of colleges and universities to foster excellence; c) cultivating research; d) use of technology and online education. The policy commits to raise the public expenditure on education to the recommended level of 6% of GDP as envisaged by the 1968 policy.

Future Prospects of Higher Education in India

The NEP-2020, launched after over three decades since the last NEP (1986), will guide development of higher education in the country for a very long period of time. The NEP-2020 envisages universalizing higher education, facilitating institutional restructuring and consolidation based on multidisciplinary approach and following flexible pathways of learning, making use of the technological developments and introducing new regulatory and governance structures. The major focus is on improving learning outcomes and achieving quality with equity.

Further Expansion to Universalize Higher education

With 2040 as the deadline to fulfil the policy goals and targets, the NEP aims that all higher education institutions (HEIs) shall be doubling the GER of HEI from the current level of 26.3 % GER to 50%. The proximity to universalization of higher education is linked with the universalization of school education with students completing the full cycle of education from the foundation stage to the higher education stage. As the states and social groups are at different stages of their participation, the states and the groups will be having their own trajectories of achieving the policy goals. Despite the transition rate from secondary to higher education level being high, unless school education is sufficiently expanded in the educationally less developed states and groups, the national goal of universalization of higher education may not be realized.

Institutional Restructuring and Consolidation – Towards Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education with Multi Entry and Exit

The NEP-2020 proposes to follow 'holistic and multidisciplinary education' and to transform existing institutions into multi-disciplinary institutions with due emphasis on teaching and research - Research University, Teaching University, and Multidisciplinary Autonomous Colleges. The policy also

⁷ Government of India (2020). National Education Policy2020.

recommends to develop world class Multidisciplinary Education and Research University (MERU) and to put an end to the system of affiliated colleges over a period of next 15 years. The flexible pathways to learning in higher education will have flexibility of curricular choice as an important element of the restructuring of pedagogy. Besides being multidisciplinary, a higher education institution under the NEP is also supposed to have a minimum of 3000 student enrolment. As large number of HEIs are small size located in rural areas, having single discipline and running under private management, it may not be easy to consolidate colleges under the same management.

Quality Enhancement through New Accreditation System and Research

Quality in higher education is a major concern as reflected in the national and international rankings. The NEP-2020 emphasizes on enhancing the quality of higher education system. The quality assurance efforts also have not succeeded to accredit a majority of institutions. The new policy suggests setting up of a meta-accreditation agency called the National Accreditation Council (NAC) with a set of accreditors at the lower levels to create an ecosystem of accreditation. It is expected that these decentralized efforts of expanding accreditation facilities will increase the number of institutions accredited in the coming years⁸.

New Governance of Higher Education

The new policy has proposed transforming the governance system in higher education by setting up a single regulator as Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) with four verticals: National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC) for regulation, national Accreditation Council (NAC) for accreditation, Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) for funding and General Education Council (GEC) for academic standard. The idea of creating a single regulator with four verticals has been termed as 'light but tight' as it incorporates checks-and-balances in the educational governance system avoiding concentrations of power. All the professional bodies, except medical and law stream of education will be under the HECI. The private and public sector institutions of higher education will have the same set of regulations. Through a suitable system of graded accreditation and graded autonomy, and in a phased manner over a period of 15 years, all HEIs in India will aim to become independent self-governing institutions pursuing innovation and excellence.

It is envisaged that all HEIs will be incentivized, supported, and mentored during this process, and shall aim to become autonomous and have such an empowered BoG by 2035. The BoG shall be responsible and accountable to the stakeholders through transparent self-disclosures of all relevant records. It will be responsible for meeting all regulatory guidelines mandated by HECI through the National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC).

Internationalization in Education

The NEP-2020 call for creating avenues for having larger number of international students studying in India and providing opportunities to students interested in studying abroad, will go a long way toward towards internationalization in education and putting India on the world education landscape. The policy points out that high performing Indian universities will be encouraged to set up campuses in other countries, and similar, selected universities, e.g., those figuring among the top 100 universities in the world ranking will be facilitated to operate in India. A legislative framework facilitating such entry will be put in place, and such universities will be given special dispensation regarding regulatory, governance, and content norms on par with other autonomous institutions of India.

Conclusion

In building a world-class higher education ecosystem in India is not just a noble aspiration but a critical necessity for the country's future growth and development. As we have explored in this article, there are several key components and strategies that need to be considered to achieve this goal. First and foremost, investments in infrastructure and resources are imperative. Modernizing existing

⁸ https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

universities and colleges, establishing new institutions, and ensuring they have state-of-the-art facilities and technology is essential. Adequate funding must be allocated to support research, innovation, and faculty development. Equally important is the need for reforms in curriculum and pedagogy. The education system should be more flexible, allowing students to pursue a wide range of disciplines and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Encouraging interdisciplinary studies and experiential learning can significantly enhance the quality of education. Collaboration between academia and industry is another crucial aspect. Establishing strong partnerships can lead to practical training opportunities for students, relevant research projects, and job placements. This synergy between education and industry can bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Furthermore, focusing on inclusion and diversity is vital. Access to quality education should not be limited by socio-economic factors, and affirmative action should be taken to ensure underprivileged and marginalized groups have equal opportunities. Lastly, regulatory reforms should be aimed at reducing bureaucracy and promoting autonomy in educational institutions. This will encourage innovation and entrepreneurship within universities, allowing them to adapt to changing global trends. In summary, building a world-class higher education ecosystem in India requires a multi-faceted approach involving investment, reform, collaboration, inclusion, and regulatory changes. By addressing these aspects comprehensively, India can position itself as a global leader in higher education, nurturing the talents of its youth and contributing to its socio-economic progress on a global scale. The journey may be challenging, but the rewards for the nation's future are immeasurable.

References

1. Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD 2019). All India Survey of Higher Education. Department of Higher Education, Government of India, New Delhi.
2. Government of India (2020). National Education Policy 2020.
3. https://www.mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf, MHRD, New Delhi.
4. Jayaram, N. (1993). Language Question in Higher Education: Trends and Issues.
5. Higher Education, Vol. 26, 93-114.
6. Kasturirangan, K. (2021). Liberal Education – A 21st Century Initiative. Fifteenth Foundation Day Lecture, NIEPA, New Delhi, 11th August, available on
7. <http://niepa.ac.in/download/Foundation%20day/15th%20NIEPA%20Foundation%20Day%20Lecture.pdf>.
8. NIEPA (2020). NEP 2020: Implementation Strategies. NIEPA, New Delhi,
9. http://niepa.ac.in/Download/NEP%202020%20Implementation%20Strategy_W.pdf.
10. Varghese, N. V. (2021). Directions of Change in Higher Education: From Massification to Universalization. In Chattopadhyay, Saumen, Simon Marginson and N. V. Varghese (Eds.) Changing Higher Education in India. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 23-46.