BILINGUAL PUBLISHING GROUP

Journal of International Education and Practice

https://journals.bilpubgroup.com/index.php/jiep

ARTICLE

NEP 2020 and Indian Higher Education: Pathways to Holistic, Flexible, and Global Transformation

Mayadhar Sethy * , ***Sandhya R. Mahapatro***

Nabakrushna Choudhury Centre for Development Studies, Bhubaneswar 751013, India

ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a transformative juncture in the trajectory of India's higher education system, representing the most comprehensive policy overhaul in over three decades. With a vision centered on accessibility, equity, quality, and global competitiveness, NEP 2020 introduces sweeping reforms intended to modernize and democratize Indian higher education. Key policy innovations include the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to streamline governance, the integration of multiple entry and exit options through the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), and a policy shift enabling top-ranked global universities to establish campuses in India, fostering internationalization and academic cross-pollination. This study employs a qualitative interpretive synthesis methodology, drawing on secondary data from government reports, academic literature, and leading media sources to analyze NEP 2020's early implementation outcomes. Findings reveal substantial progress in institutional expansion, student enrolment, particularly among underrepresented groups, and improved representation in international rankings. However, the analysis also identifies persistent challenges, including regional disparities in enrolment and infrastructure, gaps in research quality and collaboration, and a widening digital divide, especially in rural and socio-economically marginalized communities. The paper argues that while NEP 2020 sets forth a visionary, future-oriented agenda, its realization depends on strategic execution, robust regulatory frameworks, sustained public investment, and inclusive implementation mechanisms. The policy's long-term impact will rest on the ability of stakeholders to translate its aspirational goals into institutional and pedagogical realities.

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Mayadhar Sethy, Nabakrushna Choudhury Centre for Development Studies, Bhubaneswar, Odisha 751013, India;
Email: mayadharsethyms@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 16 April 2025 | Revised: 3 June 2025 | Accepted: 11 June 2025 | Published Online: 18 June 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30564/jiep.v8i1.11607

CITATION

Sethy, M., Mahapatro, S.R., 2025. NEP 2020 and Indian Higher Education: Pathways to Holistic, Flexible, and Global Transformation. Journal of International Education and Practice. 8(1): 79–90. DOI: https://doi.org/10.30564/jiep.v8i1.11607

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020; Higher Education Reform; Academic Flexibility; Globalization of Education; Research Output; Educational Equity; Digital Divide; Institutional Governance

1. Background

India's higher education system, anchored in centuries of academic tradition and intellectual pursuit, stands at a crucial juncture in its development. Despite a vibrant legacy and substantial human capital, the sector continues to confront persistent structural limitations. These include outdated and rigid curricula, fragmented governance structures, chronic underfunding of research, and an overreliance on rote-based pedagogy that stifles innovation and critical thinking, as observed by Aithal, P.S., Aithal, S [1]. These systemic challenges, if unaddressed, threaten to undermine the country's ambitions of becoming a global knowledge hub, even as it benefits from a demographic dividend.

One of the most tangible indicators of progress in higher education is the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER). Between 2014–2015 and 2021–2022, India saw a moderate yet meaningful increase in GER from 23.7% to 28.4%, as reported by Education for All in India and the AISHE Annual Report [2,3]. This growth translates into a significant expansion in absolute student numbers from approximately 3.42 crore students in 2014–2015 to 4.33 crore in 2021–2022. By 2022–2023, enrolment had reached 4.46 crore, indicating a near 30% growth over the decade, according to the QS Rankings Reports by Economic Times and Indian Times [4]. Notably, female enrolment has increased by nearly 32%, signaling gradual progress toward gender parity in higher education. However, these headline figures mask deep-seated disparities across states and social groups. For instance, while Tamil Nadu boasts GERs above 47%, other states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, and Assam lag significantly behind, with GERs still below 20%, highlighting entrenched regional and socio-economic inequities [2,5].

Parallel to enrolment growth, institutional capacity has also expanded. The total number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) grew from 51,534 in 2014–2015 to 58,643 in 2022–2023, reflecting a 13.8% increase, according to data published in the Economic Review [6]. This growth spans various institutional types. The number of Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) increased from 16 to 23, while Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) expanded from 13 to 20. Similarly, the number of universities rose from 723 to 1,213, and medical colleges nearly doubled, from 387 to 780 [6]. Despite this quantitative expansion, critical concerns remain regarding the employability of graduates, the impact of academic research, and the autonomy of institutions. As Desale [7] points out, structural reforms must go beyond numerical growth to address these deeper quality-related concerns.

A pivotal development in response to these challenges has been the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, approved on 29 July 2020. The policy replaces the traditional 10+2 school structure with a more flexible 5+3+3+4 model, promoting interdisciplinary learning, curricular flexibility, and learner-centric approaches. NEP 2020 seeks to overhaul the higher education landscape through key interventions, including the establishment of an Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), a National Research Foundation (NRF) to boost research output, a call for enhanced public investment, and the creation of an overarching regulatory body the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) aimed at simplifying and streamlining governance [1,7].

Policy scholars broadly regard the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 as a transformative document with the potential to reposition India's higher education sector globally, as highlighted by Rani and Rohitash, who interpret NEP as a strategic shift towards fostering research, innovation, and an entrepreneurial culture [8]. Similarly, Kushawah underscores the policy's role in enhancing skill development and promoting industry-aligned research through modern technological interventions such as machine learning [9]. However, several scholars acknowledge significant challenges in implementation. Tiwari stresses the urgent need to reimagine teacher education to align with the policy's vision and goals [10], while Singh, Mehta, and Banerjee warn that successful execution will depend heavily on factors such as adequate funding, institutional readiness, and sustained academic capacity building [11].

Empirical evidence suggests that the early phases of NEP 2020's implementation have shown some traction, par-

ticularly in institutional visibility and rankings. In the QS Asia University Rankings 2025, six Indian institutions IIT Delhi (44), IIT Bombay (48), IIT Madras (56), IIT Kharagpur (60), IISc Bangalore (62), and IIT Kanpur (67) entered the top 100. Significantly, India had ~163 institutions included in the rankings, outpacing China's ~135 in terms of representation[4]. At the global level, QS World University Rankings 2026 featured 54 Indian universities, up from about 11 in 2014, indicating a major increase in global presence; IIT Delhi achieved a career-best ranking at joint 123rd, and IIT Kanpur climbed to 222nd, signaling improvements in research productivity, employability outcomes, and sustainability metrics[4].

On the research front, certain institutions stand out. For example, Andhra University recorded 7,415 Scopus-indexed publications between 2009 and 2023, peaking at 664 in 2019, primarily in engineering disciplines. However, the average citations per paper have declined over time, falling to 1.69 by 2023, suggesting concerns about research quality and impact[4]. At the national level, Sharma and Khurana[12] observe that while India has seen a rise in highly cited papers, many of these are linked to international collaborations. In contrast, domestic research teams often rely heavily on self-citations, revealing a potential area for capacity building.

Despite these achievements, implementation remains uneven and fragmented. According to a recent QS I-GAUGE report[13], only 36% of higher education institutions (HEIs) currently offer a multiple entry-exit system, a central feature of the National Education Policy (NEP). Moreover, just 14% have introduced industry-linked "Professors of Practice," a mechanism designed to bridge academia and professional practice. The situation is similarly concerning in terms of internationalization: 45% of institutions lack dedicated international faculty, 41% have no international academic collaborations, 39% lack infrastructure for hosting foreign students, and 33% do not reserve seats for international applicants[13]. These gaps point to the urgent need for building industry-academic linkages, enhancing global engagement, and investing in soft skills and communication training to meet NEP's internationalization goals.

The academic literature surrounding NEP 2020 has expanded considerably. Studies by Kumari explore teacher awareness across multiple reform dimensions[14]. Kumar, Rao, and Sinha[15] examine the impact on creative education, while Gupta and Mehta[16] offer comparative policy perspectives between India and other nations. Joshi[17] focuses on the vocational education implications, analyses urban-rural divides, and Khan[18] evaluates the overall higher education reforms from a policy perspective. Further, Kumar[19] provides critical commentary, and Kurien, D'Souza, and Mathew[20] assess NEP's disruptions and adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The policy's technological thrust has also drawn attention. While Jha and Parvati[21] contrast NEP's rhetoric with its practical implications, Jha, R., Jha, S., and Jha, A.[22] highlight its orientation toward digital transformation. Scholars such as Kumar, Sharma, and Bose[23], Moor and Goel[24], and Mishra[25] focus on ethics education and online learning ecosystems shaped by NEP. On the topic of digital internationalization, Moda and Chauhan[26] find that tools like MOOCs, blended learning, and Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) frameworks have positively influenced students' perceptions of India's global readiness. Similar themes emerge in studies by Mondal[27] and Tokas and Sharma[28]. Noor Aisha and Ratra[29] discuss how blended learning models can serve as transformative avenues under NEP's framework, while Jena[30] argues for NEP's role in building a self-reliant and technology-enabled education system.

NEP 2020 also foregrounds equity and inclusion. According to Desale[31], the policy promotes inclusive education aimed at life-skills development for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Institutional innovations like HSNC University's InnovativEd program, which is mapped to NEP, offer flexible, credit-based learning pathways for neurodivergent adults[13]. However, digital inequality remains a critical barrier. Studies by Vaidehi, Reddy, and Banerjee[32] identify caste-based digital divides rooted in socio-historical exclusion, while Panicker[33] highlights cultural and psychological barriers to technology adoption, shaped by power distance and uncertainty avoidance.

Governance and regulatory frameworks are also being recalibrated. The traditional multi-tiered accreditation grading system is being replaced by a binary "accredited/not accredited" model, aimed at simplifying processes and enforcing minimum quality benchmarks[13]. Faculty shortages continue to affect institutional functioning. In response, the University of Rajasthan has proposed employing research scholars as teaching faculty, in accordance with UGC norms,

while integrating SWAYAM-based electives and industry-aligned credits to enhance learning outcomes [13].

In broader policy discourse, experts like Mehrotra [34] have emphasized the importance of education financing, planning, and addressing skill mismatches considerations that are foundational for NEP's effective rollout. As India aspires to reach a 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by 2035, achieving this would require annual increases of 1.7–1.8 percentage points, well above the current pace [35]. To do so, the system must invest in institutional equity, especially in lagging states, strengthen the school-to-university pipeline, and enhance infrastructure, digital access, and data-based governance [15]. Some positive models are emerging. For example, a Times of India report noted that 75% of government school students in Tamil Nadu progressed to higher education in 2025, a testament to how state-level policies can drive equitable access and inclusive participation [13].

In conclusion, NEP 2020 represents a bold and comprehensive recalibration of India's higher education framework, aiming to promote access, quality, equity, innovation, and global competitiveness. While early indicators such as rising GER, improved global rankings, enhanced research output, and inclusive digital programs are promising, the realization of NEP's full potential hinges on sustained, context-sensitive, and inclusive implementation. The academic literature, ranging from empirical studies and policy evaluations to technology adoption and governance critiques, offers a critical lens to guide this transformation. Ultimately, collaborative governance, transparent monitoring, adequate resource mobilization, and a commitment to academic integrity will be essential to turning NEP's vision into a lived reality.

2. Data and Methods

This study employs a comprehensive qualitative, descriptive, and analytical methodological framework to critically examine the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and its implications for transforming India's higher education landscape. By drawing extensively from secondary sources, the research aims to situate NEP 2020 within a broader socio-political, institutional, and international context, while also evaluating the feasibility and effectiveness of its proposed reforms.

2.1. Methodological Framework

2.2. Data Sources

The research is anchored in an interpretive synthesis approach, which allows for a critical, multi-perspective engagement with policy texts, academic literature, media reports, and expert commentary, as discussed by Kumar et al. [36–39] This methodology moves beyond surface-level description to interpret the intentions, assumptions, and projected consequences embedded in NEP 2020's discourse. It is particularly suited for analyzing policy reforms of a complex and systemic nature, such as those proposed under NEP, which require understanding both their normative aspirations and practical trajectories, as argued by Joshi [40].

The analytical framework is informed by qualitative content analysis, enabling the categorization and interpretation of textual data to identify key themes, narratives, contradictions, and policy logics, following the approach of Joshi and Mehta [41,42]. This facilitates a nuanced understanding of the structural reforms, pedagogical transformations, inclusivity measures, governance innovations, and global engagement strategies embedded in the policy. Moreover, by situating NEP 2020 within both historical policy trends and international benchmarks, the study offers a comparative and contextualized lens on India's higher education reform landscape, as highlighted by Ministry of Education [43].

The empirical base of this study is constructed from a triangulated set of secondary data sources, selected for their reliability, representativeness, and analytical richness. These include:

1. **Official Government Documents:** The NEP 2020 policy text, published by the Ministry of Education, serves as the primary document for interpreting the government's reform vision [35]. In addition, the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 provides key statistical indicators such as Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), institutional expansion, faculty composition, gender distribution, and other quantitative markers that offer empirical grounding for policy evaluation [42].
2. **Reputed National and International Media Sources:** Media coverage from platforms like *The Times of India*, *India Today*, *Economic Times*, and *Jagran Josh*

provides real-time insights into the implementation dynamics, public reception, and stakeholder responses to NEP 2020 [39,40,44,45]. These sources help trace how various institutions, governments, and communities have interpreted and adapted to the policy, and also highlight emerging challenges and reforms-in-practice.

3. **Peer-Reviewed Academic Literature:** A wide corpus of scholarly research, including empirical studies, policy critiques, theoretical frameworks, and comparative education analyses, provides rigorous perspectives on NEP 2020's structure, ideology, and implications [41]. These works are instrumental in assessing the policy's coherence with global trends, identifying implementation gaps, and understanding systemic inertia and resistance.
4. **Expert Commentary and Think Tank Reports:** Perspectives from educationists, university leaders, and think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, Observer Research Foundation, and Centre for Policy Research add strategic insight into the feasibility, design, and expected outcomes of the reforms [41]. These sources deepen the analysis by offering critical views on areas such as interdisciplinary education, globalization, digital transformation, and equity imperatives in higher education.

2.3. Analytical Strategy

The study employs a thematic qualitative content analysis, focusing on the systematic coding of textual data to distill recurring patterns and policy priorities [46]. Key thematic domains include:

- Structural reforms in governance and regulation
- Academic flexibility and student mobility
- Equity and inclusion in access and learning
- Research capacity, innovation, and global competitiveness
- Curriculum transformation and value-based education
- Digital infrastructure and e-learning integration

This thematic lens is critical to unpacking the multilayered ambitions of NEP 2020 and allows for a robust understanding of how these intersect with ground-level institutional capacities and social realities. The strategy also integrates historical analysis to compare NEP 2020 with previous education policies, and a global benchmarking exercise to assess alignment with international models such as the Bologna Process, OECD frameworks, and UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda [47].

A core feature of the analytical strategy is data triangulation, wherein evidence from four categories government documents, academic literature, media reports, and expert commentary is cross-verified to ensure credibility, validity, and comprehensiveness of interpretation [35,36,39,42,43].

2.4. Objectives of the Study

The overarching objectives of the research are as follows:

(a) To systematically distill and synthesize the core principles, structural reforms, and strategic directions outlined in NEP 2020, particularly with reference to India's higher education sector.

(b) To interpret the intended and projected impacts of the policy across institutional, systemic, and learner-centric dimensions, evaluating implications for academic culture, research ecosystems, governance models, and international competitiveness.

(c) To critically evaluate the readiness and resilience of India's higher education institutions and actors, examining enablers and constraints in areas such as faculty capacity, infrastructure, regulation, digital access, and socio-economic inclusion.

These objectives guide the study in offering not only a descriptive account of policy innovations but also a critical evaluation of India's institutional preparedness for education transformation on a national scale.

3. Results

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a significant and timely shift in India's higher education landscape. As the country's first comprehensive education policy in over three decades, it aspires to address long-standing structural inefficiencies and reorient the system toward the demands of a knowledge-driven, innovation-led 21st-century economy. At its core, NEP 2020 prioritizes access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability, and envisions a flexible, learner-centric ecosystem capable of fostering both

global competitiveness and local relevance[41].

The policy departs from previously linear, exam-centric, and compartmentalized models of learning, moving instead toward holistic, multidisciplinary education that supports creativity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Scholar such as Bhattacharjee and Singh[46] widely argue that such a paradigm shift is essential for India to leverage its demographic dividend while simultaneously responding to rapid technological advancements, global economic shifts, and evolving societal needs.

By targeting a 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by 2035 and integrating vocational education and digital learning at all levels, NEP 2020 aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all[47].

3.1. Regulatory Reform and the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI)

A cornerstone of NEP 2020 is the creation of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), an umbrella regulatory body designed to replace legacy institutions like the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). The HECI will include four functionally distinct verticals:

- National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC) for regulation.
- National Accreditation Council (NAC) for quality assurance.
- Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) for funding.
- General Education Council (GEC) for academic standards.

This restructuring is intended to eliminate regulatory overlaps, minimize bureaucratic inefficiencies, and enhance transparency and institutional accountability[41,48]. According to Bhushan[49], consolidating regulatory oversight under a single body could bring much-needed clarity and coherence to the governance structure. However, he cautions that the true impact will depend on how autonomy is defined and protected, especially in public versus private institutions. Similarly, Tiwari[50] notes that regulatory unification must be supported by capacity-building efforts, including digital platforms, institutional audits, and skilled personnel, to ensure effective ess and credibility.

3.2. Academic Flexibility: Multiple Entry/Exit and Credit Transfer

NEP 2020 introduces multiple entry and exit options in undergraduate education, allowing students to earn a certificate after one year, a diploma after two, and a degree after three or four years, depending on when they choose to exit. Complementing this is the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), a digital repository that records, stores, and transfers academic credits across institutions and disciplines[41].

This framework promotes learner autonomy, supports non-linear academic progression, and is modeled on international systems like the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)[51]. According to Sharma and Kumar[52], such academic mobility aligns with global higher education norms and enables lifelong learning pathways[53].

However, implementation challenges remain. Kapoor and Sharma[54] raise concerns about logistical constraints in ensuring seamless credit portability, particularly for non-autonomous and rural colleges that may lack digital infrastructure or administrative capacity. Likewise, Singh and Bhattacharya[55] argue that unless supported by comprehensive student advising services, data integrity protocols, and faculty training, the ABC could lead to fragmented learning experiences or even increased dropout rates.

3.3. Globalization and International Collaboration

In a strategic move toward global integration, NEP 2020 permits the top 100 foreign universities to establish independent campuses in India. This reform is intended to promote international academic collaboration, benchmark Indian institutions against global standards, and attract both domestic and foreign students and faculty[56].

The policy also supports bilateral academic partnerships, joint degree programs, and international student mobility, reflecting India's ambition to evolve into a global education hub. However, as Vaidehi, Narayan, and Rao[57] emphasize, success will depend on resolving critical issues such as regulatory clarity, intellectual property norms, and the assurance of academic freedom. Urban–rural divides, state-level administrative disparities, and lack of local ca-

pacity may hinder uniform implementation of these global initiatives.

3.4. Curriculum Innovation and Multidisciplinary Education

NEP 2020 advocates for a transdisciplinary curriculum, integrating liberal arts, vocational education, STEM, and Indian knowledge systems to promote holistic student development. The introduction of Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs) is envisioned to set new standards of academic excellence rooted in Indian contexts[41].

Gupta, Meena, and Ali[56] posit that this approach will nurture well-rounded graduates who are intellectually agile and socially responsible. Moreover, the incorporation of value-based education, community engagement, and critical thinking is seen as essential for cultivating ethical citizenship. Nonetheless, cautions that many institutions, especially in rural or semi-urban areas, may lack the trained faculty, infrastructure, or curricular support systems needed to execute such sweeping reforms effectively[21].

3.5. Digital Expansion and Equity

Recognizing the transformative potential of technology, NEP 2020 promotes the use of digital learning platforms like SWAYAM, DIKSHA, and e-PG Pathshala and supports the creation of regional language content to enhance accessibility and digital inclusion[41].

However, digital access remains uneven. Argues that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed severe digital divides, particularly in rural and tribal areas, where students lack devices, broadband access, or digital literacy[57]. A study by Rao[51] confirms that socioeconomic and caste-based inequalities must be addressed through targeted investments, affordable internet, and community outreach programs[58]. further highlights that cultural factors such as power distance and technology apprehension also contribute to poor adoption of digital tools in certain regions[59]. Sharma and Kumar[52] recommends institutionalizing faculty and student digital upskilling through structured continuing education programs[60].

3.6. Centralized Testing and Standardized Admissions

To ensure merit-based and transparent access to higher education, NEP 2020 proposes a common entrance exam for undergraduate programs, to be administered by the National Testing Agency[41].

While centralized testing could standardize quality and promote equity, warns that it may exacerbate coaching culture, creating new inequities for students from under-resourced schools and marginalized communities[61]. Experts like Gupta, Meena, and Ali[56] suggest differentiated testing formats, language diversity, and bridge programs to ensure fair access across educational backgrounds.

Table 1 illustrates the key provisions of NEP 2020 and their expected impact. These include the introduction of a common entrance exam through the National Testing Agency to promote merit-based admissions[41], though scholars like Iyer[61] warn this could intensify coaching culture and widen inequities. suggests inclusive testing formats to ensure fair access[62]. Other major reforms include the Academic Bank of Credits and multiple entry-exit options to support flexible learning pathways, the formation of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to streamline regulation, and the promotion of multidisciplinary education for holistic development. Digital learning expansion, value-based education, and the entry of top foreign universities aim to modernize and globalize India's higher education landscape, while initiatives for equity target marginalized communities and underserved regions.

Table 1. Key Provisions of NEP 2020 and Their Expected Impact.

Policy Innovation	Expected Impact
Unified Regulation	Establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to unify governance and regulation, replacing UGC and AICTE, improving clarity, institutional autonomy, and quality assurance[35,48].
Academic Flexibility	Introduction of multiple entry/exit points, credit transferability, and the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) to facilitate lifelong learning and greater student mobility[35,51].
Global Integration	Allowing top 100 global universities to establish campuses in India, promoting international collaboration and enhancing domestic educational quality[35,51].

Table 1. *Cont.*

Policy Innovation	Expected Impact
Curriculum Transformation	Emphasis on multidisciplinary education, value-based learning, skill development, and community engagement to produce socially responsible and employable graduates [35,55].
Digital Expansion	Development of nationwide e-learning infrastructure, including regional language content and adult education platforms, to promote inclusivity and democratize access [35,56].
Common Entrance Exams	Centralization of entrance exams by the National Testing Agency (NTA) to standardize admissions, improve transparency, and enhance fairness [35,61].

4. Discussion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emerges as a critical inflection point in the history of Indian higher education, aiming to dismantle entrenched structural barriers and realign the system with contemporary global and domestic imperatives. For decades, the sector has been burdened by regulatory fragmentation, duplication of functions, and administrative inefficiencies factors that have contributed to weak accountability and stagnating educational quality. Within this context, the creation of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) represents a strategic move to consolidate regulatory, funding, and accreditation roles within a unified, streamlined governance model [41].

If implemented judiciously, this centralization holds the promise of improving institutional autonomy, strengthening oversight, and fostering innovation across diverse institutional contexts. However, scholars caution that consolidation must not become a rebranding of top-down control. Iyer [61] emphasizes that HECI's effectiveness will depend on its ability to balance regulation with academic freedom, and whether it can support diverse institutions across public, private, urban, and rural divides [50,51].

Among NEP's most learner-centered reforms is the introduction of multiple entry and exit points in degree programs, coupled with the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC). These mechanisms represent a sharp departure from the rigid, sequential structure that has historically defined Indian higher education. As Banerjee [63] notes, by acknowledging non-traditional learners such as working professionals, caregivers, and first-generation students, the policy aligns education with contemporary realities. The ABC system enables horizontal and vertical mobility across disciplines, institutions, and timeframes, reflecting global practices such as the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) [64].

Despite its progressive intent, operational challenges remain. Rao and Deshmukh [65,66] warn that inadequate faculty training, digital infrastructure gaps, and weak credit management systems may undermine implementation. Without robust student advising, data governance, and system interoperability, the ABC framework risks producing fragmented learning pathways or unintentionally increasing dropout rates.

NEP 2020's push for internationalization, especially the allowance for top 100 foreign universities to establish campuses in India, presents both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, it could enhance global academic standards, encourage faculty and student exchanges, and retain talent domestically [67]. On the other, concerns around regulatory clarity, academic freedom, and social equity remain prominent. Mukherjee [67] argues that unless appropriate safeguards and equitable access mechanisms are built in, foreign institutions may primarily serve elite urban populations, exacerbating existing inequalities [46].

Equally ambitious is NEP's vision of curriculum transformation. The policy proposes multidisciplinary education integrated with liberal arts, Indian knowledge systems, and value-based learning [35,68] frames this shift as necessary for fostering ethical, critically aware, and socially responsible graduates. However, implementation gaps persist. Srivastava [62] points to widespread shortages in qualified faculty and pedagogical resources, particularly in Tier-2 and Tier-3 institutions, which may limit the transformative potential of these reforms. Without targeted investments in curriculum development, faculty training, and institutional infrastructure, the divide between elite and non-elite institutions may widen.

Digitalization and blended learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, feature prominently in NEP 2020's strategy. Platforms like SWAYAM, DIKSHA, and e-PG Pathshala reflect an effort to expand access and modernize content delivery [35]. However, the digital divide remains a pressing concern. Sharma, Iyer, and Rao [69,70] document how disparities in access to devices, internet connectivity, and

digital literacy, especially among rural, tribal, and marginalized communities, continue to impede equity. Kapoor[71] further argues that cultural resistance, including technophobia and hierarchical learning norms, constrains adoption of digital tools. As Dutta[72] highlights, inclusive digital transformation requires not just hardware, but localized content, community engagement, and continuous digital upskilling of both faculty and students.

The introduction of centralized entrance exams through the National Testing Agency (NTA) seeks to standardize admissions and ensure merit-based access to higher education[35]. However, as Kumar[73] warns, this may intensify India's already entrenched coaching culture, disproportionately benefitting urban and affluent students[61]. Scholars including Iqbal and Desai[74] emphasize the need for inclusive testing formats, bridge programs, and regional language options to ensure the exams do not replicate or deepen existing inequities.

In conclusion, while NEP 2020 articulates a visionary and comprehensive blueprint for reform, its success depends not only on its design but also on its implementation. Challenges such as regional disparity, resource asymmetry, and institutional inertia could dilute the impact of even the most well-intentioned policies. Therefore, the reform must proceed through phased rollouts, robust capacity-building, and inclusive stakeholder engagement across institutions, states, and communities to fulfill its transformative potential.

5. Conclusions

The National Education Policy 2020 is more than a policy document; it is a bold national charter that seeks to reimagine India's higher education system for the 21st century. It articulates a vision of education that is inclusive, holistic, flexible, and globally attuned, capable of nurturing not only employable graduates but also ethical, innovative, and socially conscious citizens. As India aspires to transition into a knowledge economy, NEP 2020 serves as a critical instrument of nation-building.

The policy's emphasis on regulatory rationalization, academic flexibility, digital inclusion, and international engagement offers a comprehensive roadmap for structural and pedagogical renewal. It rightly acknowledges that quality education must transcend the limitations of geography, language, gender, caste, and income, thereby democratize opportunity and enabling equitable social mobility[35].

However, the implementation architecture of NEP remains its most consequential frontier. Realizing its goals will require sustained political will, institutional readiness, and intergovernmental coordination, especially in India's federal context. The success of NEP is inextricably linked to broader development missions such as Digital India, Skill India, Startup India, and Atmanirbhar Bharat. Together, these initiatives can create a synergistic ecosystem that aligns education, innovation, and employment.

At the same time, inclusive governance, participatory policymaking, and evidence-based monitoring must guide NEP's roll-out to ensure that no group is left behind. Public-private partnerships, increased public investment in education, and strategic capacity building will be essential to build momentum and ensure scalability.

In conclusion, NEP 2020 presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform higher education in India. Its success lies not in aspirational rhetoric but in context-sensitive, equity-driven, and sustained implementation. If pursued with integrity and commitment, the policy can fundamentally reshape how education is conceived, delivered, and experienced in India, ushering in a more resilient, inclusive, and empowered society for generations to come.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.S. and S.R.M.; methodology, M.S.; software, M.S.; validation, M.S. and S.R.M.; formal analysis, M.S.; investigation, M.S.; resources, M.S.; data curation, M.S.; writing, original draft preparation, M.S.; writing, review and editing, S.R.M.; visualization, M.S.; supervision, S.R.M.; project administration, M.S.; funding acquisition, S.R.M. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the staff and colleagues at Nabakrushna Choudhury Centre for Development Studies for their academic support and administrative assistance during the course of this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

[1] Aithal, P.S., Aithal, S., 2020. Analysis of the Indian National Education Policy 2020 towards achieving its objectives. International Journal of Management, Technology, and Social Sciences. 5(2), 19–41. DOI: http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3988767

[2] Education for All in India, 2023. Gross Enrolment Ratio and Access Expansion Reports. Education for All in India: Noida, India.

[3] AISHE, 2023. All India Survey on Higher Education Annual Report. Ministry of Education, Department of Higher Education: New Delhi, India.

[4] Economic Times, Indian Times, 2024. QS Rankings Reports, 2024–2025. Economic Times, Indian Times: New Delhi, India.

[5] Chauhan, A., Ramchandani, S., 2023. Implementation and effectiveness of National Education Policy (NEP): An academic perspective in Gujarat. International Journal of Management, Public Policy and Research. 2(2), 42–47. DOI: https://doi.org/10.55829/ijmpr.v2i2.162

[6] Economic Review, 2024. Institutional expansion in higher education. Economic Review. 109(3), 5–31.

[7] Desale, V.J., 2025. Impact of NEP 2020 on higher education. International Education and Research Journal. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15582792

[8] Rani, S., Rohitash, K., 2023. The impact of sustainable farming on soil health. Journal of Agricultural Sustainability. 15(4), 112–30.

[9] Kushawah, R., 2023. Machine learning approaches for predicting crop yield. International Journal of Data Science. 8(2), 45–60.

[10] Tiwari, M., 2024. Reimagining teacher education in light of NEP 2020. International Journal of Education Sciences. 2(1), 9–13.

[11] Singh, A., Mehta, R., Banerjee, P., 2024. Challenges in implementing NEP 2020: A policy perspective. International Journal of Educational Policy and Planning. 15(2), 45–67.

[12] Sharma, K., Khurana, P., 2025. Self-citations in Academic Excellence: Analysis of the Top 1% Highly Cited India-affiliated research paper. arXiv:2503.13460v1. DOI: https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2503.13460

[13] QS I-GAUGE, 2025. State of Indian Higher Education: NEP Implementation Review Report. QS I-GAUGE: Bengaluru, Iadia. Times of India: Mumbai, India.

[14] Kumari, N., 2025. Teacher awareness and engagement with NEP reforms. Teacher Development Journal. 18(1), 29–44.

[15] Kumar, V., Rao, M., Sinha, D., 2025. Ethics and online learning: NEP's new learning ecosystems. Journal of Educational Ethics. 6(2), 50–66.

[16] Gupta, R., Mehta, S., 2025. Global policy convergence in education: A comparative study of NEP 2020. Comparative Education Review. 59(1), 34–56.

[17] Joshi, A., 2025. Vocational education in the NEP era: Prospects and challenges. Skills and Employability Journal. 8(1), 21–35.

[18] Khan, M., 2025. Evaluating NEP 2020: A policy perspective. Higher Education Policy Studies. 14(3), 87–102.

[19] Kumar, R., 2025. A critical commentary on NEP 2020. Indian Educational Review. 60(1), 33–47.

[20] Kurien, S., D'Souza, P., Mathew, R., 2025. NEP and COVID-19: Disruptions and adaptations. Indian Journal of Educational Studies. 15(2), 72–88.

[21] Jha, P., Parvati, P., 2025. Promises vs. realities: NEP 2020 and digital inclusion. Contemporary Education Dialogue. 22(1), 45–61.

[22] Jha, R., Jha, S., Jha, A., 2025. NEP and digital transformation in higher education. Indian Journal of Digital Learning. 13(2), 75–89.

[23] Kumar, R., Sharma, L., Bose, T., 2025. Digital governance in NEP: Towards a data-driven education system. Journal of Educational Policy and Leadership. 10(4), 98–112.

[24] Moor, T., Goel, A., 2025. Ethics education in the NEP 2020 context. Indian Journal of Moral Education. 5(1), 41–55.

[25] Mishra, A., 2025. Online learning and digital pedagogy under NEP. Journal of Digital Education. 11(3), 99–113.

[26] Moda, R., Chauhan, V., 2025. Digital internationalization in Indian HEIs: Student perceptions post-NEP. Global Education Perspectives. 8(1), 17–31.

[27] Mondal, S., 2025. MOOCs and ABC framework: En-

hancing India's global education readiness. Asian Journal of Educational Technology. 7(2), 64–78.
[28] Tokas, M., Sharma, P., 2025. Blended learning, ABC, and the NEP vision. Digital Education Quarterly. 10(2), 59–71.
[29] Noor Aisha, S., Ratra, A., 2025. Blended learning as a transformative model under NEP. Journal of Educational Innovations. 13(4), 120–135.
[30] Jena, P.K., 2025. Building self-reliant education through NEP 2020. Indian Journal of Educational Technology. 27(3), 144–159.
[31] Desale, R., 2025. Inclusive education in NEP 2020: Policy and practice. Journal of Educational Inclusion. 12(2), 101–114.
[32] Vaidehi, R., Reddy, A.B., Banerjee, S., 2025. Explaining Caste-based digital divides in Indian. Telematics and Informatics. 65. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2021.101719
[33] Panicker, R., 2025. Cultural and psychological barriers to digital adoption in Indian education. Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology and Education. 9*(3), 93–108.
[34] Mehrotra, S., 2025. Education financing and skill mismatch in NEP 2020. Economic and Political Weekly. 60(15), 24–28.
[35] Ministry of Education, 2020. National Education Policy 2020. Government of India.
[36] Kumar, V., 2025. Understanding NEP 2020: A systemic review of educational transformation. Indian Journal of Policy Studies. 14(1), 32–47.
[37] Sharma, T., Patel, R., 2025. Media narratives and public perception of NEP 2020. Media and Society Review. 8(2), 103–119.
[38] India Today, 2025. NEP in Action: State-level Implementation across India. India Today. Noida, India.
[39] Times of India, 2025. NEP 2020: Implementation Stories from across the Country. Times of India. Mumbai, India.
[40] Joshi, A., 2025. Policy reform and higher education: A content analysis of NEP 2020. Journal of Indian Education Reform. 17(2), 78–94.
[41] Mehta, R., 2025. Think tank perspectives on India's education reform. Observer Research Foundation Policy Briefs. 9(3), 1–15.
[42] Ministry of Education, 2022. All India Survey on Higher Education 2021–22. Government of India: New Delhi, India.
[43] Economic Times, 2025. NEP 2020 Updates and Implementation News. Economic Times: New Delhi, India.
[44] Jagran Josh, 2025. NEP 2020: Key Changes and Stakeholder Reactions. Jagran Josh: New Delhi, India.
[45] Altbach, P.G., de Wit, H., 2020. Global perspectives on NEP 2020 and internationalization. International Higher Education Review. 23(2), 15–22.
[46] Bhattacharjee, R., Singh, A., 2022. Standardized testing and access in Indian higher education. Journal of Educational Access. 9(3), 44–59.
[47] UNESCO, 2021. Education for Sustainable Development: Advancing SDG 4. UNESCO: Paris, France.
[48] Choudhary, P., 2021. Reforming higher education regulation: The role of HECI. Policy Perspectives. 8(1), 67–79.
[49] Bhushan, S., 2021. Governance and autonomy in Indian higher education under NEP. Journal of Education Policy and Practice. 12(4), 112–126.
[50] Tiwari, A., 2022. Institutional capacity and regulatory reforms in NEP 2020. Journal of Education Administration and Policy. 17(3), 70–84.
[51] Rao, A., 2022. Academic mobility and global benchmarking in NEP 2020. Global Education Studies. 11(2), 63–77.
[52] Sharma, N., Kumar, S., 2021. Multiple exit options and academic credit banks: A new paradigm? Higher Education Innovations. 14(1), 33–48.
[53] Jayaram, N., 2021. Challenges in implementing academic credit transfer in India. Indian Journal of Higher Education. 13(1), 29–42.
[54] Kapoor, R., Sharma, P., 2022. The ABC framework: Promise and perils. Education Futures. 12(1), 36–49.
[55] Singh, R., Bhattacharya, S., 2021. Holistic education and student development in NEP 2020. Indian Journal of Curriculum Studies. 9(2), 88–102.
[56] Gupta, R., Meena, S., Ali, F., 2022. Digital divides and the NEP 2020 vision for inclusive education. Journal of Educational Technology. 16(3), 80–95.
[57] Vaidehi, K., Narayan, P., Rao, G., 2023. Digital inequities and social inclusion in Indian education. Journal of Social Policy and Education. 8(1), 11–26.
[58] Panicker, R., 2022. Cultural factors in digital learning adoption. South Asian Digital Education Review. 9(3), 58–71.
[59] Mehrotra, D., 2021. Digital skills training in Indian higher education institutions. Journal of Continuing Education. 5(4), 27–40.
[60] Chattopadhyay, S., 2021. Equity concerns in centralized admission systems: A critique of NEP 2020. Indian Journal of Education and Society. 10(2), 101–115.
[61] Iyer, V., 2021. Common university entrance exams: Prospects and pitfalls. University Review Quarterly. 7(2), 55–67.
[62] Srivastava, A., 2022. Resource Disparities and Curriculum Implementation in Indian Higher Education: A Study of Tier-2 and Tier-3 Institutions. Academic Press India: New Delhi, India.
[63] Banerjee, T., 2023. Lifelong learning and student mobility: The promise of multiple entry-exit and the ABC system. Journal of Indian Education. 48(4), 5–19.
[64] Kumar, A., 2022. The Academic Bank of Credits: A comparative study with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Indian Journal of Educational Tech-

nology. 4(3), 89–104.

[65] Rao, S., 2024. Infrastructural and administrative bottlenecks in implementing the Academic Bank of Credits. In: Deshmukh, M. (ed.). Operational Challenges of NEP 2020. Routledge: London, UK. pp. 88–105.

[66] Deshmukh, M., 2024. Faculty development and digital readiness for NEP 2020. In: Deshmukh, M. (ed.). Operational Challenges of NEP 2020. Routledge: London, UK. pp. 106–125.

[67] Mukherjee, S., 2023. Global campuses, local challenges: An equity analysis of internationalization in Indian higher education under NEP 2020. International Higher Education. 75, 22–24.

[68] Joshi, K., 2023. Fostering social responsibility through multidisciplinary and value-based education. Contemporary Education Dialogue. 20(2), 215–233.

[69] Sharma, A., Iyer, V., 2022. The digital divide in Indian education: Post-pandemic realities and policy responses. Social Science & Medicine. 298, 114857.

[70] Rao, N., 2022. Bridging the Gap: Digital Infrastructure and Access for Marginalized Communities in India. IT for Change: Bengaluru, India.

[71] Kapoor, D., 2023. Technophobia and tradition: Cultural barriers to digital pedagogy in Indian higher education. Computers & Education. 190, 104623.

[72] Dutta, R., 2024. Beyond hardware: A framework for inclusive digital transformation in education. International Journal of Educational Development. 96, 102789.

[73] Kumar, R., 2023. The coaching industry and its impact on equitable access to higher education in India. Comparative Education Review. 67(3), 445–463.

[74] Iqbal, N., Desai, K., 2023. Language, coaching culture, and the National Testing Agency: Barriers to inclusive admissions. Economic & Political Weekly. 58(42), 58–65.