



National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Policies, Practices and Challenges

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Abstract: *The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a major restructuring of India's education system, covering school education, higher education, teacher education, vocational learning, assessment, research, technology, and educational governance. Its vision emphasizes holistic and multidisciplinary learning, foundational literacy and numeracy, flexibility in curricular choices, skill development, inclusion, Indian knowledge systems, and greater integration of technology. However, translating an ambitious policy framework into educational practice remains complex because implementation occurs across diverse institutional, linguistic, socio-economic, technological, and regional contexts. This qualitative study examines NEP 2020 through the interconnected dimensions of policy, practice, and implementation challenges. A documentary qualitative approach was adopted using the policy document, government implementation materials, scholarly literature, and recent evidence concerning implementation. The analysis is organized around four objectives: examining the major policy provisions of NEP 2020; analysing their translation into educational practice; identifying institutional, human, financial, technological, and socio-economic challenges; and suggesting strategies for strengthening implementation. The findings indicate that NEP 2020 provides considerable opportunities for curricular flexibility, multidisciplinary education, vocational integration, competency-based assessment, digital learning, research, and inclusive education. Nevertheless, gaps between policy aspirations and institutional capacity remain significant. Teacher preparedness, infrastructure, funding, digital inequality, curriculum and textbook alignment, intergovernmental coordination, regulatory complexity, and uneven institutional readiness can constrain implementation. Recent evidence also indicates that adoption of reforms across higher education institutions remains uneven. The study concludes that the success of NEP 2020 depends less on policy formulation alone and more on sustained financing, contextual implementation, teacher development, institutional autonomy with accountability, cooperative federalism, and continuous monitoring.*

Keywords: *National Education Policy 2020; Educational Policy; Policy Implementation; Educational Reform; Multidisciplinary Education; Teacher Education; Digital Education; Educational Equity.*

Introduction: Education plays a central role in individual development, economic productivity, social cohesion, cultural continuity, and national development. India's changing demographic structure, technological transformation, labour-market requirements, and aspirations for a knowledge-based economy have created the need for substantial educational reform. In this context, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for restructuring Indian education from early childhood through higher education. NEP 2020 is the first education policy of the twenty-first century and replaced the earlier policy framework of 1986, as modified in 1992. It seeks to transform education from a predominantly content-oriented and examination-driven system into one emphasizing conceptual understanding,

competencies, creativity, critical thinking, flexibility, vocational skills, and holistic development. Its implementation is designed to occur progressively over a long period rather than through a single administrative intervention. The Government's implementation framework explicitly recognizes varied timelines and a phased approach. Among its major reforms, the policy proposes the 5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical structure, beginning with the foundational stage; universal foundational literacy and numeracy; greater use of experiential and competency-based learning; flexibility in subject selection; vocational exposure; multilingual education; technology integration; and reforms in assessment.

At the higher-education level, NEP 2020 promotes multidisciplinary institutions, flexible undergraduate programmes, multiple entry and exit possibilities, academic credit mobility, research strengthening, internationalization, and greater institutional autonomy. The policy also emphasizes inclusion and equitable participation, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. The significance of NEP 2020, however, lies not merely in its policy provisions but in their translation into practice. Education is a concurrent subject in India, requiring coordination between the Union and State governments. The Government itself has emphasized joint planning, monitoring, and collaborative implementation.

Consequently, a policy that is conceptually comprehensive may encounter difficulties when implemented across institutions with substantially different levels of infrastructure, staffing, finance, digital connectivity, and administrative capacity. Recent evidence continues to show uneven implementation across higher education institutions, particularly regarding four-year undergraduate programmes, multiple entry and exit, and industry linkages.

The present paper therefore examines NEP 2020 not simply as a policy document but as a process of policy-to-practice transformation.

For ease of presentation and systematic understanding, the paper is organized into four broad sections. Section I outlines the rationale of the study and provides a concise review of the relevant literature. Section II presents the research questions, objectives, and methodological framework adopted for the study. Section III focuses on the analysis and interpretation of findings, followed by their discussion and validation. Finally, Section IV highlights the policy implications of the study and concludes with the major findings and overall conclusions.

Section - I

Rationale of the Study: The rationale for the study arises from the distinction between policy intention and implementation reality. Educational reforms frequently fail to achieve their intended outcomes when institutional conditions do not correspond with policy expectations.

NEP 2020 is exceptionally broad in scope. It seeks simultaneous transformation of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher education, vocational education, technology, governance, research, and higher education. Such comprehensive reform creates opportunities but also produces significant implementation demands. The policy requires teachers to adopt more experiential, competency-oriented, and learner-centred approaches. Institutions need appropriate infrastructure, laboratories, libraries, digital facilities, counselling systems, and trained personnel. Universities and colleges must restructure curricula and academic regulations to accommodate flexibility and multidisciplinary learning. There is therefore a need to examine whether institutional capacity is developing at a pace consistent with policy expectations. Recent reporting based on higher-education implementation evidence indicates that reform adoption remains uneven, with only a proportion of institutions implementing key features such as four-year undergraduate programmes and multiple entry-exit arrangements.

The study is consequently important for identifying the major factors that determine whether NEP 2020 can move successfully from policy prescription to educational practice.

Brief Review of Literature: The *Ministry of Education's (2020)* NEP framework presents education as a holistic, multidisciplinary, inclusive, flexible, and skill-oriented process. It emphasizes foundational learning, curricular reform, teacher development, vocational education, technology, research, and institutional transformation. The Government's implementation plan emphasizes phased implementation because the policy contains recommendations with different timelines and requires coordinated action among multiple agencies and levels of government. Government implementation materials further emphasize universal access, support for disadvantaged groups, vocational integration, infrastructure development, scholarships, and mechanisms for bringing dropout students back into education. Recent qualitative research on NEP implementation has identified gaps related to infrastructure, teacher preparedness, socio-economic disparities, institutional capacity, and ground-level execution. Another recent study identifies institutional, human, technological, and socio-economic barriers as major dimensions of the policy-practice gap.

UNESCO (2021) emphasizes the need to rethink education through a broader social contract involving equity, inclusion, cooperation, and collective responsibility. This perspective is relevant to NEP 2020 because large-scale educational transformation requires participation from teachers, learners, institutions, governments, families, and communities. The literature on educational technology also suggests that digital transformation can expand educational access but may reproduce inequality when connectivity, devices, digital literacy, and institutional capacity are unevenly distributed. The emerging evidence therefore indicates that NEP 2020 has strong transformative potential, but implementation requires attention to the institutional conditions under which policy operates.

Section - II

Research Questions

1. What are the major policy provisions and transformative objectives of NEP 2020?
2. How are the major provisions of NEP 2020 being translated into educational practice?
3. What major challenges constrain the effective implementation of NEP 2020?
4. What strategies can strengthen the implementation and educational impact of NEP 2020?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the major policy provisions and transformative objectives of NEP 2020.
2. To analyse the translation of NEP 2020 provisions into educational practice.
3. To identify the major challenges affecting effective implementation of NEP 2020.
4. To suggest strategies for strengthening the implementation and educational impact of NEP 2020.

Methodology: The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design. The primary conceptual source was the National Education Policy 2020, supplemented by official implementation documents, scholarly publications, and recent literature examining implementation experiences. Government sources were used to establish the policy's intended provisions and implementation architecture, while academic and contemporary evidence was used to interpret the emerging policy-practice relationship.

Documents were purposively selected according to their relevance to the four research objectives. The material was analysed thematically through repeated reading, coding, categorization, comparison, and interpretation. Four principal analytical themes were established: policy transformation, educational practice, implementation challenges, and policy strategies. Triangulation was achieved by comparing official policy

intentions with independent academic and contemporary implementation evidence. The study is qualitative and interpretive; therefore, its purpose is analytical understanding rather than statistical measurement of NEP implementation.

Section - III

Analysis and Discussion

Objective 1: To Examine the Major Policy Provisions and Transformative Objectives of NEP 2020

NEP 2020 represents a shift from a predominantly content-oriented educational model towards holistic, competency-based, flexible, and multidisciplinary learning. Its school-education framework reorganizes schooling into the 5+3+3+4 structure, connecting early childhood education with subsequent stages of learning. One of the most significant priorities is foundational literacy and numeracy. The policy recognizes that meaningful participation in later education depends upon foundational learning during the early years. This represents a major shift because educational quality is conceptualized as beginning before conventional primary schooling. Another important provision is curricular flexibility. Students are expected to have greater opportunities to study across disciplinary boundaries rather than being rigidly restricted to traditional streams. This reflects the changing requirements of knowledge economies in which interdisciplinary understanding is increasingly important. NEP 2020 also emphasizes vocational education, practical learning, internships, experiential learning, and skill development. Such measures seek to reduce the traditional separation between academic education and employability. At the higher-education level, multidisciplinary institutions, flexible undergraduate structures, credit mobility, multiple entry and exit, research promotion, and greater institutional autonomy represent major structural reforms. The policy additionally emphasizes Indian languages and knowledge systems, technology integration, teacher development, inclusive education, and research. The Government has characterized implementation as a long-term, phased process because recommendations differ in complexity and timeline.

Discussion and Validation: The policy framework demonstrates considerable internal coherence: foundational learning supports school participation; flexible curricula support multidisciplinary development; vocational education strengthens employability; research reforms support knowledge creation; and digital education expands learning possibilities.

However, the breadth of the reform creates a corresponding implementation burden. A policy that simultaneously changes curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher preparation, governance, and institutional structures requires substantial coordination and resources. Thus, NEP 2020's greatest strength—its comprehensive character—may also become one of its major implementation challenges.

Objective 2: To Analyse the Translation of NEP 2020 Provisions into Educational Practice

The transition from policy to practice is visible in several areas. Educational institutions have begun restructuring curricula, introducing flexible academic pathways, emphasizing multidisciplinary learning, expanding skill-oriented programmes, and integrating digital resources. At the school level, foundational learning, competency-oriented pedagogy, experiential learning, and vocational exposure have become increasingly prominent areas of implementation. At the higher-education level, universities and colleges are adapting undergraduate structures and credit systems to accommodate greater flexibility. Nevertheless, implementation is uneven. Recent evidence indicates that only a proportion of universities had adopted four-year undergraduate programmes and multiple entry-exit provisions, while industry-linked mechanisms such as apprenticeship cells remained relatively limited. This demonstrates an important distinction between formal adoption and functional implementation. An institution may revise regulations or curriculum structures while still lacking sufficient teachers, laboratories, digital systems, counselling facilities, or

administrative mechanisms to make the reforms effective. Recent evidence also points to delays in curriculum-textbook alignment. A parliamentary committee has reportedly identified discrepancies between revised curriculum structures and availability of corresponding textbooks for Classes 9–12, highlighting the importance of synchronization between curriculum reform and learning resources.

Discussion and Validation: These developments validate recent qualitative research identifying a gap between policy aspirations and institutional capacity. The evidence suggests that successful implementation should not be evaluated merely through the existence of policy documents or revised regulations. It should be evaluated through actual changes in classroom pedagogy, student experience, assessment, learning outcomes, institutional flexibility, and employability.

Therefore, implementation quality is more significant than implementation speed.

Objective 3: To Identify the Major Challenges Affecting Effective Implementation of NEP 2020

The analysis identifies several interconnected challenges.

3.1 Teacher Preparedness: Teachers are central to policy implementation. NEP requires movement towards experiential, competency-based, multidisciplinary, and technology-supported pedagogy. Such transformation requires continuous professional development.

Where teacher training remains largely theoretical or occasional, teachers may find it difficult to translate policy language into classroom practice. Recent literature similarly identifies limited faculty preparedness as a significant implementation barrier.

3.2 Infrastructure and Institutional Capacity: Many institutions require improved laboratories, libraries, digital facilities, classrooms, counselling services, and vocational infrastructure. Without adequate institutional capacity, policy provisions may remain largely formal.

3.3 Financial Constraints: NEP 2020 involves substantial financial requirements. Teacher recruitment, professional development, infrastructure, technology, research, vocational education, and inclusive provisions all require sustained investment. Recent analysis continues to identify funding limitations as a challenge to effective implementation.

3.4 Digital Divide: Technology can expand access but can also create new inequalities. Students and institutions differ in access to devices, connectivity, digital skills, and technical support. Consequently, digital education must be accompanied by digital inclusion.

3.5 Curriculum and Assessment Transition: Moving from content memorization towards competency-based learning requires corresponding changes in textbooks, examinations, classroom practices, and teacher preparation. If assessment remains predominantly examination-oriented, teachers and students may continue prioritizing memorization despite curricular reforms.

3.6 Federal and Institutional Coordination: Education is a concurrent subject, making cooperation between the Centre and States essential. The Government itself has emphasized collaborative planning and monitoring. Differences in institutional capacity, policy interpretation, language, curriculum traditions, and administrative priorities can nevertheless produce uneven implementation.

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3.7 Socio-Economic Inequality: Students from disadvantaged communities may face barriers in accessing quality schooling, digital resources, vocational opportunities, higher education, and multidisciplinary programmes. Consequently, policy flexibility alone cannot guarantee educational equity.

3.8 Institutional Resistance and Change Management: Educational organizations are complex institutions with established practices. Major changes in curriculum, credit systems, assessment, governance, and teaching methods may generate uncertainty or resistance.

Discussion and Validation: These challenges correspond closely with recent qualitative research identifying institutional, human, technological, and socio-economic barriers. The evidence therefore supports the argument that NEP implementation is not simply an administrative process; it is a process of institutional transformation.

Objective 4: To Suggest Strategies for Strengthening the Implementation and Educational Impact of NEP 2020

The analysis suggests that implementation should be based on capacity, context, coordination, and continuous evaluation.

Firstly, teacher education must become a continuous process rather than a one-time training activity. Professional development should focus on practical classroom strategies, competency-based assessment, digital pedagogy, multidisciplinary teaching, inclusive education, and experiential learning.

Secondly, implementation should be adequately financed. Infrastructure development, teacher recruitment, research, technology, vocational education, and student support cannot be achieved without sustained investment.

Thirdly, implementation should recognize regional diversity. States and institutions should have sufficient flexibility to adapt the broad principles of NEP to local languages, socio-economic conditions, institutional capacities, and educational priorities.

Fourthly, curriculum reform must be synchronized with textbooks, assessment, teacher preparation, and learning resources. Recent concerns about curriculum-textbook gaps demonstrate the importance of such coordination.

Fifthly, digital expansion should be accompanied by digital equity measures, including affordable connectivity, devices, institutional digital infrastructure, and student support.

Sixthly, implementation monitoring should focus on educational outcomes rather than only procedural compliance. Indicators should include learning achievement, student retention, employability, teacher preparedness, research productivity, inclusion, and student satisfaction.

Finally, institutions should establish mechanisms for feedback from teachers, students, parents, employers, and local communities. Such participatory monitoring can identify implementation problems before they become systemic.

Section - IV

Policy Implications: The study has several policy implications:

1. Strengthen teacher capacity through continuous, practice-oriented professional development.
2. Increase sustained educational investment in infrastructure, human resources, research, and technology.
3. Promote cooperative federalism through meaningful Centre–State coordination.
4. Allow contextual flexibility while maintaining national educational standards.
5. Synchronize curriculum, textbooks, pedagogy, and assessment to avoid implementation gaps.

6. Bridge the digital divide through infrastructure, connectivity, devices, and digital-literacy programmes.
7. Strengthen vocational and industry linkages through internships, apprenticeships, and workplace learning.
8. Protect equity and inclusion by providing additional support to disadvantaged learners and institutions.
9. Strengthen institutional autonomy with accountability, ensuring that autonomy produces educational improvement rather than administrative fragmentation.
10. Establish outcome-based monitoring of NEP implementation rather than relying primarily on structural compliance.
11. Promote research-based policy evaluation to identify successful practices and scale them appropriately.
12. Strengthen stakeholder participation so that teachers, students, institutions, communities, and employers contribute to implementation.

Concluding Remarks: NEP 2020 represents an ambitious attempt to transform India's educational system through holistic learning, curricular flexibility, multidisciplinary education, vocational integration, foundational learning, technology, research, and greater institutional responsiveness. Its policy framework provides considerable opportunities for improving the relevance, flexibility, inclusiveness, and quality of Indian education.

However, the analysis demonstrates that policy ambition does not automatically produce educational transformation. The effectiveness of NEP 2020 depends on the capacity of institutions and teachers to translate policy principles into everyday educational practice.

The major challenges include inadequate infrastructure, teacher preparedness, financial limitations, digital inequality, curriculum-resource gaps, assessment transition, institutional capacity, socio-economic disparities, and coordination across different levels of government. Recent implementation evidence confirms that progress remains uneven across institutions and reform areas.

The central lesson is therefore that NEP 2020 should be implemented as a long-term process of educational capacity building, not merely as a structural policy reform. Adequate financing, teacher empowerment, contextual flexibility, institutional autonomy, digital inclusion, cooperative governance, and evidence-based monitoring are essential.

In conclusion, the success of NEP 2020 will ultimately be determined not by the comprehensiveness of its policy provisions but by their equitable and meaningful translation into classroom, institutional, and community practice. If implementation challenges are systematically addressed, NEP 2020 can contribute substantially to creating an inclusive, multidisciplinary, skill-oriented, research-driven, and future-ready Indian education system.

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