NEP 2020 and the Future of Indian Higher Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a historic turning point in India's approach to higher education. Designed to overhaul an outdated, exam-centric, and rigid system, NEP aims to create a more flexible, inclusive, and student-driven academic landscape. With a vision that integrates global competitiveness, indigenous knowledge, technological innovation, and holistic development, the policy sets ambitious goals for transforming India into a knowledge superpower.

As the policy enters its fifth year of implementation, it becomes crucial to assess not only its intentions but also its actual impact across its core focus areas. This article critically evaluates the category-wise implementation of NEP 2020 in Indian higher education, drawing on official data and independent surveys to highlight progress and persistent gaps—thereby offering a grounded perspective on the policy's progress and the road ahead.

1. Learner-Centric Education (LCE): Toward Personalization and Flexibility

India's higher education system serves over 40 million students, spread across diverse linguistic, economic, and regional backgrounds. Recognizing the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach, NEP 2020 recommends a shift to learner-centric education—emphasizing personalized academic pathways, flexible curricula, and multidisciplinary exposure. Tools such as the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and multiple entry-exit systems enable students to customize their learning journey.

One of the key challenges in implementing Learner-Centric Education (LCE) as outlined in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is the limited adoption of its core components. According to a recent report from QS I-GAUGE , the provision for multiple entry and exit options (LCE7) implementation has been seen in only 36% across higher education institutions, indicating a slow transition towards flexible academic pathways. Digital access also remains a major barrier, especially in remote areas. Furthermore, the overall success of LCE hinges on a fundamental shift in teaching methodologies, requiring educators to evolve from traditional instructors into facilitators of active and personalized learning—a transformation that is still in progress. While personalization improves student choice, employability ultimately hinges on how well academia connects with the world of work—bringing us to the NEP's second pillar: Industry-Institute Collaboration.

2. Industry-Institute Collaboration (IIC): Building Employability and Innovation

NEP 2020 underscores the importance of aligning academia with industry to make education employment-ready. It promotes internships, apprenticeships, vocational integration, and the appointment of Professors of Practice (PoP) from the corporate sector to enrich real-world learning.

The PoP scheme, launched by the UGC under the NEP 2020 to strengthen industry–academia collaboration, has gained significant traction. According to the official PoP portal, as of 2025 over 17,700 professionals and 508 higher education institutions (HEIs) have registered for the initiative. While in mid-2023, only about 4,300 experts and 140 HEIs had signed up, by November 2024, As per the Ministry of Education, University departments had as many as 15,325 professor-of-practice appointments while colleges had 2,444 and IITs had 80. This uptake reflects growing recognition of the scheme's role in bringing seasoned professionals into classrooms to align curricula with real-world skills and NEP 2020's vision of experiential learning.

However, a broader challenge persists in the limited involvement of industry professionals in curriculum design and academic planning. Without regular feedback from industry leaders, curricula risk becoming outdated and misaligned with evolving job market demands. Furthermore, the absence of robust, formal R&D departments in many HEIs continues to weaken the research-to-application pipeline, hindering the potential for innovation-led growth. Such collaborations are essential to align research agendas with region-specific development needs and to foster grassroots innovation. Yet, many institutions still operate in isolation, lacking dedicated R&D cells or the administrative capacity to forge sustained partnerships with local industries. As per the 2023-24 Economic Survey, R&D spending comprised only about 0.65%–0.7% of GDP indicating weak industry linkages and the absence of a robust innovation ecosystem. These gaps underline the need for structural reforms, capacity-building measures, and incentives to create a truly collaborative, industry-aligned academic ecosystem. Strengthening such linkages is vital not just for employability, but also for building research-driven institutions that can compete globally—an ambition central to NEP's internationalization agenda.

3. Academic Research and Internationalization: Toward Global Standards

To elevate India's global education footprint, NEP 2020 encourages research-driven ecosystems, international collaborations, and academic mobility. These efforts are intended to enhance institutional rankings, attract foreign faculty/students, and generate high-impact research.

True internationalization requires systemic transformation, including joint degree programs, global research collaborations, student and faculty mobility, and curriculum

co-design with foreign universities. However, several institutional constraints continue to limit this progress. One of the most significant barriers is the lack of faculty collaboration with international researchers, which restricts exposure to global academic trends, research methods, and emerging technologies. Many Indian faculty members have limited opportunities to engage in cross-border projects due to funding limitations, language barriers, or absence of institutional incentives. In addition, rigid governance structures in universities—characterized by centralized decision-making and limited academic autonomy—discourage experimentation and hinder timely approval of international partnerships or curriculum innovation.

Furthermore, bureaucratic delays in visa processing, recognition of foreign qualifications, and procedural approvals for joint programs slow down the pace at which institutions can internationalize. These systemic issues often make Indian higher education institutions (HEIs) less agile and less attractive to potential global collaborators.

To truly compete on the global stage, Indian HEIs must reimagine and reform their internal governance models, enhance financial autonomy, and cultivate a proactive approach toward building global academic partnerships. This would require not only structural reforms but also a cultural shift—where internationalization is no longer viewed as an add-on, but as a strategic priority embedded in the institution's core mission. But NEP is not just about looking outward—it is equally about reclaiming India's intellectual heritage and embedding it within modern higher education through Indian Knowledge Systems.

4. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS): Reviving Civilizational Wisdom

NEP 2020 seeks to restore India's civilizational knowledge traditions—ranging from Ayurveda and philosophy to architecture and classical arts—by integrating them into modern higher education. AISHE 2021–22 shows that while 59% of institutions offer heritage-related courses and 64% offer Yoga programs, actual uptake remains modest: about 60,700 UG and 27,300 PG enrolments in Oriental Learning, smaller cohorts in Veda/Jyotisha, and only a few hundred in Yoga research. These subjects continue to remain electives rather than mainstream academic streams.

The limited adoption of IKS is largely due to two structural barriers: a shortage of trained faculty with interdisciplinary expertise, and insufficient funding for dedicated departments, research, and curriculum innovation. Traditional teacher training programs rarely prepare educators to blend ancient Indian knowledge with modern disciplines like science, technology, or economics, creating a significant capability gap.

Yet, national initiatives are laying critical groundwork. The AICTE's IKS Division has established 51 IKS centres, launched 38 interdisciplinary courses, funded 88 research projects, supported 5,500+ internships, and trained nearly 1,000 faculty members (with a target of 10,000+). In parallel, the Bharatiya Bhasha Samiti has advanced Indian languages in higher education, most recently through the *Bharatiya Bhasha Pustak Pariyojana*, which aims to integrate 750 translated books across 22 Indian languages into university curricula. These efforts are building a foundation for broader recognition of IKS and linguistic diversity, but without sustained investment and institutional prioritization, IKS risks remaining a symbolic inclusion rather than a transformative pillar of Indian higher education. These efforts show promise, but for IKS to move beyond electives into mainstream education, digital platforms and technology-enabled access will play a critical role—linking tradition with modern modes of learning.

5. Digital Education: Transforming Access and Pedagogy

Digital education is one of NEP 2020's most rapidly advancing areas, aiming to democratize learning across India's socio-economic spectrum. With platforms like SWAYAM, DIKSHA, and PM eVidya, content delivery is now more inclusive, multilingual, and scalable.

While the widespread adoption of digital platforms and tools marks a significant system-wide shift toward blended and flexible learning, it also brings to the surface a range of persistent concerns—particularly in the context of equity and accessibility. One of the most critical challenges is device access in rural and low-income households, where students often rely on a single smartphone shared among family members. According to the NSO's 2021 report, only 15% of rural households have access to a computer, and internet penetration remains uneven, disproportionately affecting students from marginalized communities and remote regions. Moreover, digital literacy remains a major hurdle, especially for first-generation learners and students from non-urban educational backgrounds. The assumption that students inherently possess the skills to navigate online platforms, troubleshoot technology, or engage in self-paced learning often does not hold true. Many learners struggle with basic digital navigation, creating a digital divide not just in terms of access, but also in capability and confidence.

Another key barrier is the lack of high-quality vernacular content. Most Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and e-learning modules are primarily available in English or Hindi, alienating students whose primary language of instruction is regional. Without localized and multilingual content, digital education risks reinforcing linguistic hierarchies and leaving out large sections of the student population. This is particularly concerning in states with diverse linguistic profiles, where demand for instruction in local languages remains high. Despite broad uptake on SWAYAM—over **3 crore enrolments**

to date (with ~11.3 lakh certificates issued (July 2021)—the share in regional languages is small. Only 521 courses have been translated into eight Indian languages (majority: Hindi [130], Tamil [94]; others lag far behind). National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL), with 4,000+ STEM-focused offerings, too, remains primarily English. Nonetheless, roughly 244 courses have been translated; 207 into Hindi, backed by 1,200+ hours of audio/video and ~199 e-books, with IIT Madras leading Tamil translations (~170–200 courses) Enrollment data specific to the translated regional-language versions is sparse—but in a few cases like "Joy of Computing using Python" translations, enrollments reached several lakhs, indicating some demand. Regional universities contribute little original vernacular MOOC content, outside select efforts (e.g. IGNOU's Odia translations). In conclusion, while there are clear steps toward translating MOOCs into Indian languages, actual access and uptake remain limited, leaving many regional-language learners underserved.

To ensure that digital education truly democratizes learning, India needs to move toward a sustainable and inclusive digital model. This includes localized content creation in multiple Indian languages, investment in affordable digital devices, teacher training for blended delivery, and equitable internet infrastructure—especially in aspirational districts and tribal regions. Without such systemic efforts, the digital leap risks becoming a digital divide, contradicting the very inclusivity that NEP 2020 aspires to achieve.

Conclusion: Bridging Policy and Practice

NEP 2020 has set in motion a far-reaching transformation of Indian higher education. Flexibility through learner-centric models, stronger industry linkages, research-driven global aspirations, the revival of Indian Knowledge Systems, and the rise of digital platforms all signal an ambitious reimagining of what higher education can achieve.

Yet progress remains uneven. While digital adoption and the PoP scheme show rapid gains, structural gaps in research capacity, limited international partnerships, modest uptake of IKS, and persistent digital divides risk slowing momentum. The challenge now lies in moving beyond pilots and partial adoption toward systemic change that reaches all tiers of institutions—not just elite universities.

The road ahead requires sustained public investment, decentralized governance, and deeper industry–academia partnerships. Equally critical is an inclusive lens: ensuring that reforms empower rural students, regional-language learners, and first-generation entrants as much as they serve urban, well-resourced campuses.

If implemented with consistency and equity, NEP 2020 could transform Indian higher education into a globally competitive, locally rooted, and socially inclusive system. Its success will determine whether India becomes not only a knowledge superpower but

also a nation where higher education truly serves as the engine of broad-based development.

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