

Original Article

Reimagining Research-Oriented Higher Education in India: Institutional Transformation under the National Education Policy 2020.

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Abstract

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The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 presents a transformative framework for restructuring India's higher education system into a multidisciplinary, research-intensive ecosystem. This paper critically examines institutional transformation under NEP 2020 with a focus on governance reforms, research funding mechanisms, academic restructuring, and innovation-driven learning. Adopting a qualitative research design grounded in policy analysis and secondary data review, the study evaluates the structural and functional changes proposed in the policy. The findings suggest that NEP 2020 envisions a systemic shift from fragmented affiliating colleges to autonomous multidisciplinary institutions supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF). However, implementation challenges related to funding, faculty development, institutional readiness, and regional disparities remain significant. The paper concludes that effective realization of NEP 2020 requires coordinated governance, sustained public investment, accountability mechanisms, and inclusive research ecosystems.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Research Universities, Institutional Transformation, Higher Education Reform, National Research Foundation, Academic Innovation

Introduction

Higher education systems globally are increasingly evaluated on their capacity to generate research, foster innovation, and contribute to socio-economic development. India, possessing one of the largest higher education systems in the world, has faced persistent structural challenges including limited research output, regulatory fragmentation, and uneven institutional quality. Higher education plays a pivotal role in national development by generating knowledge, fostering innovation, and producing skilled human capital. India's higher education system, one of the largest globally, has historically been characterized by fragmentation, limited research output, and uneven quality. The National Education Policy 2020 aims to address these systemic weaknesses through comprehensive reform focused on multidisciplinary education, research integration, and institutional autonomy. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to address these challenges by promoting multidisciplinary education, institutional autonomy, and research excellence. Central to the policy is the vision of transforming universities into vibrant knowledge ecosystems that integrate teaching, research, and community engagement. This study investigates how NEP 2020 proposes to reimagine research-oriented higher education and assesses the implications for institutional transformation.

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

(1) What structural reforms are proposed under NEP 2020 for research-oriented institutions?

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As pillars of excellence. In India, scholars have noted that affiliating university structures and bureaucratic regulation have historically constrained research productivity.

Existing scholarship emphasizes that research-intensive universities are key drivers of innovation-led growth. Studies on global higher education reforms highlight the importance of autonomy, funding, and international collaboration. In the Indian context, scholars have noted systemic challenges such as bureaucratic governance, limited industry linkages, and inadequate research infrastructure. Recent studies analyzing NEP 2020 argue that the policy aligns with global best practices by advocating multidisciplinary institutions and competitive research funding through the National Research Foundation. However, literature also cautions that policy ambition must be matched with fiscal capacity and institutional preparedness. Recent analyses of NEP 2020 suggest that its multidisciplinary approach aligns with global best practices, while the proposed National Research Foundation aims to democratize research funding across institutions.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design using doctrinal policy analysis. Primary data sources include the official NEP 2020 document and Ministry of Education reports. Secondary data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, and academic commentaries published between 2015 and 2024.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Key themes identified include governance reform, research funding mechanisms, multidisciplinary restructuring, institutional autonomy, and innovation ecosystems. The study does not involve human subjects and relies exclusively on documentary evidence. A qualitative research design based on policy analysis. Primary sources include the NEP 2020 document and official reports, while secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed articles and policy commentaries. The analysis focuses on identifying key reform mechanisms and their potential impact on institutional research capacity.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework integrates institutional theory and innovation systems theory. Institutional transformation is viewed as a dynamic process influenced by regulatory restructuring, financial incentives, academic autonomy, and stakeholder participation. NEP 2020 functions as a macro-level reform instrument intended to transition higher education institutions from teaching-centric models toward research-intensive ecosystems. The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in institutional theory and innovation systems perspectives. Institutional transformation is viewed as a function of governance reforms, resource mobilization, academic restructuring, and stakeholder engagement. NEP 2020 is conceptualized as a policy catalyst enabling universities to transition from teaching-centric models to research-intensive ecosystems.

Institutional Transformation under NEP 2020

NEP 2020 proposes categorizing institutions into Research-intensive Universities, Teaching-intensive Universities, and Autonomous Degree-granting Colleges. The affiliating college system is to be phased out, encouraging consolidation into large multidisciplinary institutions. NEP 2020 proposes a restructuring of higher education institutions into three categories: research universities, teaching universities, and autonomous colleges. The establishment of the National Research Foundation is intended to foster a robust research culture across disciplines. Multidisciplinary education, flexible curricula, and technology-enabled learning are expected to enhance innovation and knowledge creation. The establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF) aims to create a competitive and inclusive research funding mechanism. The NRF is designed to mentor institutions, fund high-quality research proposals, and strengthen research culture across disciplines including sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

Academic innovation is promoted through flexible curricula, multiple entry-exit options, Academic Bank of Credits, and integration of technology-enabled learning platforms.

Governance and Regulatory Reforms

The policy introduces a single higher education regulator, the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), with verticals for regulation, accreditation, funding, and standard setting. This restructuring seeks to reduce bureaucratic overlap and enhance transparency and accountability.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite its transformative vision, several implementation challenges persist. Financial constraints may hinder research expansion, particularly in state universities. Faculty shortages and limited research training capacity could slow progress. Despite its ambitious vision, the implementation of NEP 2020 faces several challenges. These include financial constraints, shortage of qualified faculty, disparities between urban and rural institutions, and resistance to organizational change. Addressing these issues requires coordinated policy action, capacity building, and sustained investment in research infrastructure. Regional disparities between metropolitan and rural institutions may widen unless targeted capacity-building programs are implemented. Institutional resistance to change and governance complexities also present transitional barriers.

Policy Implications

To ensure effective implementation, sustained public funding must be prioritized. Capacity-building programs for faculty development and research mentorship are essential. Public-private partnerships and international collaborations should be strategically leveraged.

Conclusion



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NEP 2020 represents a structural shift in India's higher education landscape. By promoting research intensity, multidisciplinary integration, and institutional autonomy, the policy aspires to position India as a global knowledge leader. However, the realization of this vision depends on phased implementation, financial commitment, and collaborative governance. NEP 2020 represents a transformative roadmap for India's higher education system, emphasizing research, innovation, and multidisciplinary learning. If effectively implemented, the policy can significantly enhance India's global academic standing and contribute to knowledge-driven economic growth. However, its success will depend on consistent funding, institutional readiness, and stakeholder commitment.

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