

Equitable Access to Quality Higher Education: Challenges and Mitigating Strategies under NEP-2020

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Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) aimed at transforming India's higher education system by promoting equitable access to quality education. This study examines the challenges in implementing NEP 2020 vision and proposes mitigating strategies. Key challenges include limited access to rural areas, economic constraints, insufficient awareness of opportunities, discrimination during admissions, and inadequate infrastructure. To address these issues, NEP 2020 proposes increasing the gross Enrollment ratio to 50% by 2035, promoting vocational education and skill development, establishing a National Educational Commission for quality assurance, encouraging international collaboration, and providing free education for marginalized groups. The policy emphasizes multidisciplinary education, flexible curricula, technology integration, and faculty development to enhance quality and competency. However, successful implementation faces obstacles, such as socioeconomic disparities, regional imbalances, and bureaucratic hurdles. Effective execution, sustained funding, and collaborative efforts across stakeholders are crucial for realizing the transformative potential of NEP 2020. Continuous evaluation and adaptability will be necessary to address emerging issues as India strives to become a knowledge-based economy. Although NEP 2020 presents a comprehensive roadmap for reform, bridging the gap between policy goals and on-ground realities remains a significant challenge. Overcoming these barriers is essential to creating a more inclusive, innovative, and globally competitive higher education system that can drive India's socioeconomic development.

Keywords: NEP2020, Quality Education, Equitable, Higher Education

Introduction

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) marks a significant overhaul of India's education system, replacing the 34-year-old National Policy on Education (1986). It aims to transform India into a "knowledge economy" by emphasizing multidisciplinary education, holistic development,

skill-based learning, and inclusivity. Formulated by a committee led by Dr. K. Kasturirangan and approved by the Indian government in July 2020, NEP 2020 addresses evolving educational needs and global technological advancements to enhance India's global competitiveness. It ensures quality education for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, fostering moral and civic citizens for national development (Dustker et al., 2023). The policy promotes holistic, enjoyable, and engaging education through innovative pedagogies such as service-learning (Dustker et al., 2023), emphasizing critical thinking, a learner-centric approach, and multidisciplinary education (Acharya & Vagdal, 2023).

The key objectives of NEP 2020 include the following:

1. Ensuring universal access to high-quality education from preschool to higher education.
2. Promoting a comprehensive, adaptable, and interdisciplinary educational approach, removing rigid boundaries between academic, vocational, and extracurricular activities.
3. Achieving universal basic literacy and numeracy in elementary schools by 2025.
4. Bridging educational access gaps, especially for underprivileged groups.
5. Shifting from memorization to conceptual understanding, analytical thinking, and creativity.
6. Enhancing teaching quality through improved training, support, and career development for educators.
7. Integrating vocational education and skill development into mainstream schooling for better employability.
8. Transforming higher education institutions (HEIs) into multidisciplinary, inclusive, and research-oriented entities.
9. Utilizing technology to improve accessibility, quality, and management in education.
10. Emphasizing India's cultural heritage and traditional knowledge systems in the curriculum.
11. Globalizing Indian education to enhance competitiveness and foster international collaboration.
12. Decentralizing educational governance to grant institutional autonomy and improve accountability.
13. Providing continuous learning opportunities for all citizens.
14. Raising awareness about environmental sustainability and promoting eco-friendly practices through education.

15. Transitioning from high-pressure examinations to a continuous assessment system that prioritizes learning and growth over test performance.

The National Education Policy 2020 is a forward-thinking and comprehensive approach aimed at transforming India's educational landscape. It equips students with essential 21st-century skills while preserving India's cultural heritage and values, emphasizing accessibility, fairness, excellence, and job readiness. The policy envisions a shift towards holistic development, preparing students to excel in an increasingly complex global environment.

Importance of Higher Education in India

Higher education is crucial for India's national development and economic growth, serving as a key instrument for sustainable development by generating and disseminating knowledge (Thakur 2015). The system has expanded markedly, growing from 28 universities and 695 colleges in the first five-year plan to over 700 universities and 36,000 colleges enrolling nearly 30 million students (Kakkar, 2017). It provides individuals with advanced knowledge, specialized skills, and critical thinking abilities that are essential for tackling an increasingly complex world. These institutions act as research and innovation hubs, contributing to scientific, technological, and social progress. In India, higher education is vital for developing a skilled workforce that drives industry, entrepreneurship, and innovation, aligning with the country's goal of becoming a global economic leader. It also promotes social mobility, allowing individuals from various backgrounds to enhance their socioeconomic status. As India contends with issues such as poverty, environmental sustainability, and healthcare, higher education offers a platform to address these issues through informed policies, advanced research, and leadership development. Additionally, it preserves and advances India's cultural heritage while preparing students for global economic participation. Thus, investing in and enhancing the quality, accessibility, and inclusivity of higher education is critical to India's long-term development.

The Challenges in providing Equitable Access to Quality Higher Education

Despite significant advancements in recent years, India still struggles to provide equitable access to high-quality higher education. The sector's substantial growth does not necessarily improve accessibility to all societal groups (Arunachalam, 2010). Although student enrolment has surged,

only a small segment of the population can access higher education, highlighting the issue of limited availability (Arunachalam, 2010). A major barrier is the socioeconomic disparity that prevents disadvantaged groups from accessing education (Mangat, 2024; Rodriguez, 2023). NEP the 2020s inclusivity goals are hindered by economic constraints, inadequate digital infrastructure, and insufficient language support (Mangat, 2024). Furthermore, the curriculum is often criticized for being too elite and offering little support to underprivileged students (Mangat, 2024). The transition from exclusive to widespread education has posed challenges for universities to improve accessibility and fairness while maintaining high-quality standards (Arunachalam, 2010).

India introduced several initiatives and policies to address these issues. NEP 2020 aims to overhaul the educational system, embedding it in Indian values to transform the country into a balanced, fair, and dynamic knowledge-based society. This policy seeks to provide top-tier education to all citizens, positioning India as a global knowledge hub (Singh & Narayanan, 2023; Raj, 2024). However, obstacles such as inadequate teacher training, administrative delays, and public unawareness impede the effective implementation of this policy (Mangat, 2024).

Despite progress in expanding access to higher education, significant challenges remain in ensuring equitable opportunities for quality education across all societal segments. Addressing these issues requires increased financial investment, workforce development, technology utilization, and targeted measures to support disadvantaged groups (Mangat, 2024; Rao et al., 2021). Collaboration between the government and private sectors, along with a focus on inclusive policies and infrastructure enhancement, is crucial for achieving fair access to high-quality higher education in India (Pandey, 2019; Vaishali & Thakur, 2023).

Equitable access to quality higher education is a global challenge, marked by disparities in socioeconomic status, race, sex, and geography. Financial barriers such as rising tuition and limited scholarships often hinder disadvantaged students from pursuing higher education. In India, which has the largest higher education system by institutions and the second largest by enrolments, these issues are significant (Joshi & Ahir, 2019). Although access has expanded, the Gross Enrolment Ratio remains low, indicating ongoing entry barriers. Inadequate secondary education can impede college success. Challenges in equitable access include gender, caste, interstate, religion, spatial,

and income disparities (Joshi & Ahir, 2019), leading to unequal opportunities. Additionally, the system's efficiency is questioned, as graduates often face employment difficulties despite higher education's benefits (Joshi & Ahir, 2019). The digital divide worsens these inequalities, with students lacking reliable internet or technology struggling with online learning. Cultural and linguistic barriers further impede minority and international students' progress. Addressing these challenges requires policy reforms, increased need-based financial aid, targeted support programs, and inclusive learning environments. Although India has improved access to education, including preschool (Rao et al., 2021), quality remains a concern. NEP 2020 seeks to promote inclusive and equitable quality education (Sethi, 2023; Singh & Narayanan, 2023), but its implementation faces socioeconomic, health, and digital access challenges (Singh & Narayanan, 2023). A multifaceted approach is required, including policy reforms, investment in infrastructure and faculty, inclusive practices, leveraging technology, and open educational resources. By addressing these issues comprehensively, India can establish a more equitable and globally competitive higher education system, meeting the diverse needs of the population and contributing to national development as a knowledge society.

A) Limited access to Quality Higher Education in rural and remote areas: Limited access to quality higher education in India's rural and remote areas remains a significant issue, despite the country's economic growth and technological advancements. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Indian higher education had not reached 15% of the population by 2010, revealing a substantial access gap (Maurya, 2014). This disparity is particularly evident in rural and remote regions due to inadequate transportation networks, insufficient funding for rural educational institutions, and a shortage of qualified teachers willing to work in these areas. Contributing to this limited access are rural-urban, gender, inter-religious, inter-class, inter-caste, inter-state and regional, age, and differently abled disparities (Maurya, 2014). The lack of English language proficiency further creates a barrier for rural students seeking higher education. Additionally, the digital divide exacerbates the problem as many rural areas lack reliable internet connectivity and access to online resources. This educational gap hinders individual growth and career prospects for rural youth and impedes overall regional development and social mobility.

B) Economic constraints and inability to afford Higher Education: Economic constraints and the unaffordability of higher education in India significantly hinder access and quality for many students, especially those from low-income backgrounds. High costs often exceed many families' financial capabilities, worsened by limited scholarships and inadequate government funding. Consequently, talented students may forgo higher education or choose less expensive, lower-quality alternatives. Financial barriers are a major obstacle, with the government's gradual reduction of subsidies increasing costs (Gethe & Hulage, 2022). Privatization has resulted in the private sector accounting for 59% of tertiary enrollments (Pandey & Rizvi, 2018), but high costs exacerbate affordability issues.

While privatization has increased access, it raises concerns about quality and equity (Wadhwa, 2024). Efficient resource allocation is critical, given constraints (Kaur, 2021). Economic challenges disproportionately affect women and marginalized groups, further limiting their opportunities (Halder, 2009; Jamatia, 2023). The inability to afford higher education perpetuates economic inequality, impeding India's growth and development by limiting the skilled workforce.

C) Lack of Awareness and Guidance about Higher Education opportunities: Higher education in India faces significant challenges, including a lack of awareness and guidance about educational opportunities. The rapid expansion of the sector has increased enrolment but not necessarily improved access to quality education for all societal segments (Sabharwal, 2021). Disadvantaged groups, such as Dalits and transgender individuals, encounter substantial barriers to higher education access (Khanal et al., 2024; Srivastava & Mistry, 2022). Despite India's extensive educational landscape, many remain uninformed about the available academic programs, institutions, and career paths, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. Limited access to reliable resources and mentorship in these regions means many talented individuals miss opportunities aligned with their interests and aptitudes. The absence of comprehensive career counseling in schools and colleges exacerbates the issue, leaving students unprepared to make informed decisions about their futures. Addressing this awareness and guidance gap is crucial for equitable access to higher education and fostering a more inclusive, knowledgeable society in India.

D) Discrimination and biases in Admission processes: Discrimination and biases, particularly gender-based and caste-based, persist in India's higher education admission processes despite efforts to create equity. Women face significant barriers, especially in technical and professional fields, with increased disparities during globalization (Sinha, 2013). Dalit students encounter widespread prejudice, humiliation, and exclusion from peers, faculty, and administration, including biases in the admission process itself (Kumar, 2021; Maurya, 2018). These biases result in caste, gender, and socioeconomic disparities. The reservation system, intended to address historical inequalities, is criticized for perpetuating new forms of discrimination. Standardized entrance exams favour privileged students with access to better resources and preparatory coaching, while regional disparities and language barriers further limit opportunities for rural or underprivileged students. To ensure equitable opportunities for all aspiring students, policymakers and educational institutions must implement more inclusive admission processes that consider diverse factors beyond academic performance.

E) Insufficient Infrastructure and Resources in Institutions: India's higher education sector faces significant challenges related to insufficient infrastructure and resources, which hinder its ability to provide quality education and compete globally (Altbach, 1993; Dutta, 2016). These include insufficient classroom facilities, outdated equipment, limited technology access, and poorly stocked libraries. Overcrowded campuses, lack of hostel accommodations, faculty shortages, and limited research funding further compromise education quality. These constraints hinder teaching, learning, innovation, and students' preparation for the job market. Addressing these deficiencies is essential to enhance the quality and competitiveness of India's higher education system.

Mitigating Strategies Enshrined in NEP2020 for Ensuring Equitable and Quality Higher Education

NEP2020 proposes strategies to improve India's higher education by increasing institutions in underserved areas and promoting multidisciplinary education. It advocates the flexible curricula with multiple entry/exit points and integrating technology for better learning outcomes. The policy emphasizes faculty development, research, innovation, and internationalization. It aims to strengthen quality assurance and implement equity measures for underrepresented groups. NEP2020 prioritizes skill development, employability, reforms governance for greater autonomy

and accountability, and promotes education in regional languages. These approaches aim to create a more inclusive, innovative, and globally competitive higher education system in India.

A) Increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to 50% by 2035: The National Education Policy 2020 aims to raise the gross enrolment ratio to 50% by 2035, but this target faces significant challenges. Strategies such as expanding access, enhancing quality, and increasing affordability might not fully address systemic issues like socioeconomic disparities, regional imbalances, and inconsistent secondary education quality. Additionally, rapid expansion without matching improvements in infrastructure, faculty quality, and job market alignment risks lowering educational standards and producing graduates unprepared for the workforce.

B) Promoting Vocational Education and Skill Development: NEP2020 emphasizes vocational education and skill development through a comprehensive approach. It integrates job training into traditional education from the secondary level, highlights local skills, and encourages industry collaboration. The policy advocates the flexible learning paths, recognizes informal education, and focuses on practical skills. It also emphasizes teacher training, digital literacy, local skill mapping, hands-on competencies, industry exposure, and entrepreneurship. NEP 2020 aims to align vocational education with global standards, ensuring students gain skills relevant to the modern job market. Effective implementation of these initiatives is crucial for achieving the policy's objectives and enhancing youth employability in India.

C) Setting up a National Educational Commission for Quality Assurance: Establishing a National Educational Commission for higher education quality assurance requires a comprehensive strategy. This includes defining clear objectives aligned with national goals and creating a legal framework to support its authority. Appointing diverse expert members and forming a structured organizational hierarchy will ensure effective governance. The commission should develop quality assurance standards and implement a rigorous accreditation system to uphold educational standards. Effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms will enable continuous improvement. International partnerships can facilitate knowledge exchange and best practices. Institutional support and resources are essential for the commission to fulfil its mandate

effectively. This strategy will create a robust foundation for ensuring and enhancing the quality of higher education nationally.

D) Encouraging International Collaboration and Research: India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) emphasizes international collaboration and research to improve the quality and global competitiveness of Indian higher education. The policy aims to promote India as a global study destination by inviting top universities to establish campuses in the country while enabling Indian institutions to set up offshore campuses for cross-border knowledge exchange. NEP 2020 advocates for increased research partnerships, faculty and student exchanges, and joint degree programs with foreign universities. By fostering an internationalized academic environment, the policy seeks to expose Indian students and researchers to diverse perspectives, advanced methodologies, and global best practices. This approach is expected to elevate research and innovation standards in India and enhance the country's soft power and global academic standing.

E) Providing Free Education for Girls and Other Marginalised Groups: The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) in India aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) by emphasizing free and equitable education for girls and disadvantaged groups (Sethi, 2023; Soni, 2023). It aims to reduce the rich-poor divide and create an equitable knowledge society through high-quality education regardless of social or economic background (Bairwa, 2022). NEP 2020 focuses on empowering socially and economically disadvantaged groups through educational development (Kanaiyalal, 2022; Soni, 2023), utilizing targeted scholarships, transportation assistance, and establishing schools in underserved areas. The policy promotes inclusive learning environments, gender-sensitive curricula, and special bridging programs for disadvantaged students, fostering social mobility, reducing inequality, and contributing to national development.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy 2020 signifies a major shift in India's educational strategy, aiming to establish a more inclusive, comprehensive, and competency-based system. Although its ambitious goals range from universal access to quality enhancement, the policy encounters several implementation challenges, including economic and social disparities, inadequate infrastructure, and bureaucratic obstacles. To address these, the policy proposes various strategies, such as

increasing enrolment, prioritizing vocational training, and enforcing quality control. NEP 2020's success will depend significantly on effective execution, sustained funding, and collaborative efforts. As India aspires to become a knowledge-based economy, the policy's impact will be pivotal in shaping the educational and socioeconomic future. Continuous evaluation, adaptability, and addressing emerging issues will be crucial to harnessing NEP 2020's transformative potential.

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