NEP 2020 turns five: Charting India's educational reforms and future pathways

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The government may review the guidelines for eligibility and allow more universities to offer online programs, without sacrificing quality. | Photo: iStock/Getty Images

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, India's first comprehensive education policy of the 21st century, is a blueprint for the transformation of the nation into a knowledge society and a global knowledge superpower. Over the past five years, progress has been made by all the stakeholders to implement it, in letter and spirit. This article reviews the achievements, so far, vis-à-vis the major objectives of the policy, challenges faced, and provides suggestions for the future road map.

About NEP 2020

Grounded in the foundational five pillars of access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability, NEP 2020 aims to cultivate an education system that is holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary, and responsive to the demands of the 21st century. It seeks to integrate India's ancient traditional values into the educational fabric, to ensure the holistic development of students to be not only competent professionals but also good human beings. The policy outlines a comprehensive set of core objectives for the higher education sector, designed to bring about a systemic transformation, with milestones up to 2035.

Objectives of NEP 2020

The primary objective of the policy is the enhancement of the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education, from 26.3% (in 2018) to 50% by 2035. This quantitative expansion is coupled with a strong

emphasis on the quality of education to improve academic standards concurrently. The policy champions holistic and multidisciplinary education, moving away from the traditional disciplinary silos.

A key structural reform is the introduction of a flexible curricular structure and a credit system. To invigorate the research and innovation ecosystem, the policy proposes the establishment of a National Research Foundation (NRF) to fund and promote research across all disciplines. Internationalisation is another significant objective, to promote India as a global study destination by offering quality education at affordable costs.

In terms of regulatory and governance reforms, the policy proposed the establishment of a single overarching regulator for higher education, the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), which would replace the existing multiple regulatory bodies. Finally, the NEP 2020 places considerable emphasis on the capacity building of teachers, which includes a focus on comprehensive training and development programs for teachers.

Gross enrolments moved up by 20%

Due to various initiatives, gross enrollments were estimated to have grown by about 20% in the last five years from 4.14 crores in 2020-21 to 4.95 crores in 2024-25.

Enrolments in Higher Education 2014-2024			
Academic Year	Enrolment (Crores)	GER (%)	Remarks
2014-15	3.42	23.7	
2019-20	3.85	25.6	
2020-21	4.14	27.3	AISHE report 2020-21
2021-22	4.33	28.4	AISHE report 2021-22
2022-23	4.46	29.5	Rajya Sabha unstarred question no 2599

Post COVID-19, online education has emerged as an enabler in India's higher education landscape, particularly accelerated by the push from NEP 2020 and the digital transformation. The number of HEIs offering online programs has more than doubled, from 42 in 2020-21 to 109 in 2024-25, whereas the number of students enrolled in online undergraduate and postgraduate programs has grown about four times, from 25,905 in 2020-21 to over a lakh in 2024-25, including foreign students. Furthermore, over 90% of the HEIs reported engaging with government e-learning platforms such as SWAYAM and SWAYAM Prabha, indicative of widespread digital readiness and integration.

Curricular and pedagogical reforms

Progress has been made in restructuring the academic framework to foster greater flexibility and multidisciplinary learning. The Four-Year Undergraduate Program (FYUP), with multiple entry and multiple exit options, has been adopted by over 105 universities, including 19 central institutions.

The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) has been operationalised as a digital platform for storing earned academic credits. By July 2025, over 32 crore ABC IDs have been issued, with credits applicable from the academic year 2021 onwards.

Research and innovation ecosystem

Efforts have been made to strengthen India's research and innovation landscape. The Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) has been constituted as the new apex body for funding scientific research, with an ambitious target to receive ₹50,000 crore during 2023-28, which includes a budgetary provision of ₹14,000 crore from the Central Government and the balance funds to be sourced through donations from public and private agencies.

The initiative of Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs), envisioned development of public universities on par with premier institutions like IITs and IIMs, is progressing. A grant of ₹100 crore, under the Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA) scheme, is earmarked per State Public University (SPU), for their transition to MERUs and 440 units in various states are, so far, approved to boost India's R&D output and global research standing.

Internationalisation of higher education

Under the UGC 2023 regulations, top 500 ranked global universities are permitted to establish campuses in India. The University of Southampton, U.K. is the first overseas university to open its campus in Gurugram in August 2025. Furthermore, five other globally renowned universities, Illinois Institute of Technology (US), University of Liverpool (U.K), Victoria University (Australia), Western Sydney University (Australia), and Istituto Europeo di Design (Italy), are set to establish their Indian campuses by 2026-2027.

The presence of international universities is expected to foster a more globally connected education ecosystem in India, facilitating interdisciplinary research and innovation. However, the premium cost of the foreign campuses might limit access for many Indian students, potentially creating a two-tiered system that requires careful monitoring to ensure equitable access.

Integration of skills and vocational education

The proportion of formally trained individuals in the Indian workforce in the age group of 19 to 24 years

has increased from 2.4% in 2004-05 to 4.1% in 2023-24. Only about 5% of the students are currently enrolled in vocational courses. The Prime Minister's Internship Scheme (PMIS) 2025 is a key initiative launched to bridge this gap and enhance the employability of India's youth, which provides real-world exposure to fresh graduates. As a part of this scheme, about 1.53 lakh internship offers were made by about 500 companies, across two rounds in October 24 and January 2025 and some 50,000 graduates accepted the offers.

Quality improvement and accreditation

Last five years have seen concerted efforts towards quality improvement, significantly influenced by initiatives like the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF). NIRF 2024, in its ninth edition, has seen 86% growth in participation, from 3,500 institutions in its inaugural year to over 6,500 unique institutions, across 16 categories.

While NIRF focuses on ranking, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) plays a crucial role in the direct accreditation of the institutions. As of January 2025, about 43% of the universities and less than 20% of the colleges are NAAC accredited. In line with the recommendation of Dr. Radhakrishnan Committee report (2024) on transformative reforms in accreditation, NAAC plans to introduce binary accreditation system, which is expected to accelerate the pace of accreditation in the days to come.

Challenges and suggestions

Despite the advancements, the NEP 2020 implementation journey has been characterised by formidable challenges. Significant deficits in physical and digital infrastructure, a critical shortage of qualified teachers, the enduring digital divide, and constraints in additional financial allocation pose major hurdles.

There is a critical shortage of qualified teachers to meet the increasing student numbers. Challenges extend beyond the mere number of teachers to encompass the need for comprehensive teacher preparation programs, reskilling faculty for new pedagogies, and adapting to transparent assessment practices. Addressing regional disparities and ensuring equitable access and quality for all socio-economic groups will continue to be a formidable challenge. Enhanced public-private partnerships, targeted capacity building for faculty, and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are crucial.

Online education, as a growth driver to enhance enrolments

In order to achieve the GER target of 50% by 2035, it is estimated that nearly eight crore students need to be enrolled, which works out to be additional enrolment of about three crore students in the next 10 years. It is a daunting task, considering that the pace of enrolments in the last five to 10 years has been about 15

lakhs-18 lakhs per year in the existing institutions. It calls for substantial investment in infrastructure and capacity building towards the expansion of existing institutions and setting up new ones.

Considering the response to the online education programs in the last five years, it may be a good strategy to leverage online education to grow enrolments. Currently, less than 10% of the existing universities are approved by the UGC to offer online degree programs due to the stringent eligibility criteria, based on the NIRF ranking and NAAC accreditation score.

The government may review the guidelines for eligibility and allow more universities to offer online programs, without sacrificing quality. This could facilitate a jump in enrolments in the next five years. It is also essential ensure more robust digital infrastructure and connectivity in rural and remote areas to bridge the digital divide.

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