



Holistic and multidisciplinary education and research in Indian higher education: A critical analysis of NEP 2020

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant transformation in Indian higher education by envisioning a holistic, multidisciplinary, flexible, and inclusive educational system. This study aims to examine the conceptual framework of holistic and multidisciplinary education as envisioned in NEP 2020, analyse its transformative dimensions and implications for Indian higher education, and critically examine how these reforms promote inclusive higher education. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design with a qualitative approach based on secondary sources, which are analysed thematically to critically examine the policy's implications. The findings indicate the NEP 2020 provides a broad framework for reshaping Indian higher education towards a more flexible, learner-cantered, interdisciplinary, and inclusive system. Holistic and multidisciplinary approaches can enhance academic flexibility, broaden learning opportunities, and address the diverse needs of learners. However, translating this vision into practice requires effective implementation, institutional preparedness, and sustained support to ensure a more equitable, inclusive, and responsive higher education system. The paper provides a contemporary synthesis of NEP 2020's multidisciplinary vision and offers a consolidated understanding of the transition from rigid disciplinary boundaries towards a more flexible and integrated knowledge ecosystem. The study offers useful insight for policymakers and academic administrators in strengthening the implementation of holistic and multidisciplinary education in Indian higher education.

Keywords: National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, holistic and multidisciplinary education, interdisciplinary research, inclusive higher education, transformative higher education, India

Introduction

The Indian higher education system is undergoing a significant transformation with the introduction of the National Education Policy 2020, which envisions a shift from traditional, rigid learning structures to a more holistic, flexible, and multidisciplinary approach. In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, the need for an education system that not only imparts academic knowledge but also nurtures critical thinking, creativity, ethical values, and social responsibility has become essential. NEP 2020 responds to this need by emphasizing holistic development and promoting multidisciplinary education and research as key drivers of educational reform. In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, the need for an education system that not only imparts academic knowledge but also nurtures critical thinking, creativity, ethical values, and social responsibility has become essential. NEP 2020 responds to this need by emphasizing holistic development and promoting multidisciplinary education and research as key drivers of educational reform. It also reflects global educational trends where leading institutions are moving towards interdisciplinary learning and research to address complex real-world challenges.

Furthermore, the policy seeks to align higher education with the principles of inclusivity and equity by expanding access to diverse learner groups and reducing disparities across regions and communities. It introduces innovative mechanisms such as flexible curricula, multiple entry and exit options, the Academic Bank of Credits, and the integration of vocational and academic streams, enabling learners to pursue education according to their interests and

capabilities. In addition, the policy emphasizes the use of technology, digital learning platforms, and research-driven innovation to strengthen the overall quality of education. By fostering interdisciplinary learning and research, NEP 2020 aims to create a knowledge ecosystem that is not only academically robust but also socially responsive and globally competitive, thereby paving the way for a more inclusive and future-ready higher education system in India.

Review of Literature

Subhrajyoti Nayak (2026) ^[1] has studied “transforming higher education in India: a thematic analysis of NEP 2020 reforms”. This study aims to examine the key provisions of NEP 2020 related to higher education, analyse their current status of implementation, and explore the associated opportunities and challenges. Adopting a qualitative review approach, and based on secondary sources. The findings indicate that while significant progress has been made in areas such as digital learning, academic flexibility, and institutional development, the implementation remains uneven across institutions.

Eliza Bhoi (2025) ^[2] has studied “promoting a multidisciplinary approach in view of NEP 2020: a thematic perspective”. The study examined several important thematic strands and it also examined how NEP 2020 promotes universities to become knowledge centres that support inquiry, adaptability, and creativity, particularly through the establishment of the Academic Bank of Credits, MERUs, and a flexible choice-based credit system. The results indicate that although the policy establishes a progressive framework, systemic adjustments in curriculum

design, teacher competencies, governance, and infrastructure support are necessary for successful implementation.

Shravan (2024) has studied “pathways to inclusive higher education: learnings from India’s National Education Policy 2020”. This paper provides an understanding about the provisions and prospective effect of the NEP 2020 on historically marginalized students in the realm of higher education. This study poses a crucial question: Can the Indian higher education system effectively cultivate inclusivity? This study compares the higher education initiatives of Nordic region with India in the framework of equity and inclusive education. It concludes with the ideas for promoting inclusivity, particularly by addressing the educational challenges faced by underprivileged students to enhance the Education system both in India and in Nordic regions.

Latika et.al. (2024) have studied “multidisciplinary education: new paradigms under NEP 2020”. This paper explored the benefits, challenges, and implications of embracing a multidisciplinary approach in higher education. Additionally, the paper discusses the potential impact of these changes on students, educators, and the broader educational ecosystem in India. Findings of the study revealed that the implementation of multidisciplinary education under NEP 2020 presents challenges, including the need for institutional support, faculty training, and appropriate assessment methods, the potential benefits are significant. By embracing multidisciplinary education, India can cultivate graduates who are not only knowledgeable in their chosen fields but also equipped with the skills needed to lead and innovate in a rapidly evolving world.

Indra (2023) has studied “holistic and multidisciplinary education within India’s National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: a comprehensive analysis”. This research provides a comprehensive analysis of the integration of holistic and multidisciplinary education within the NEP 2020, exploring its principles, impact, and implications for India's educational landscape. It concludes that the integration of holistic and multidisciplinary education within NEP 2020 represents a visionary approach to education that recognizes the evolving needs of society. The future holds great promise as India embarks on this transformative educational journey, ensuring that its learners are prepared to meet the complex challenges of the 21st century with wisdom and resilience.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the conceptual framework of holistic and multidisciplinary education and research envisioned in NEP 2020.
2. To analyse the transformative dimensions of NEP 2020 and their implications for reshaping the academic landscape of Indian higher education.
3. To critically examine the role of NEP 2020 in promoting inclusive higher education in India through holistic and multidisciplinary education and research.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design with a critical perspective and employs a qualitative approach based on secondary sources of information such as policy documents, government reports, academic journals, and institutional publications etc. The collected data are

analysed thematically to critically examine the role and implications of holistic and multidisciplinary education and research in transforming Indian higher education.

Analysis and Discussions

This section presents a critical analysis of major higher education provisions articulated in the National Education Policy 2020. The analysis is structured in alignment with the stated research objectives and systematically examines the role of NEP 2020 in promoting inclusive higher education in India through holistic and multidisciplinary education and research.

1. Holistic Education in the Context of NEP 2020:

Holistic education is a fundamental concept in the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India. NEP 2020 places a strong emphasis on holistic education, recognizing that education should encompass not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the overall development of individuals in various dimensions. Here's a closer look at holistic education in the context of NEP 2020:

- **Intellectual Development:** NEP 2020 promotes intellectual development by encouraging critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills. It emphasizes a shift from rote learning to experiential and inquiry-based learning approaches.
- **Emotional Development:** The policy recognizes the importance of emotional well-being. It aims to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment that addresses the emotional needs of students. Schools are encouraged to provide counselling services and support systems to foster emotional growth.
- **Physical Development:** NEP 2020 emphasizes physical fitness and sports as integral components of holistic education. It encourages schools to provide opportunities for physical activity, sports, and yoga to promote physical well-being.
- **Ethical and Moral Development:** The policy underscores the importance of ethical and moral values in education. It aims to instil values such as empathy, integrity, and social responsibility in students, promoting their ethical development.
- **Social Development:** NEP 2020 recognizes the significance of social development. It encourages students to engage in community service and extracurricular activities that promote social skills, teamwork, and collaboration.
- **Life Skills:** The policy emphasizes the development of life skills, including communication, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. These skills are seen as essential for students to thrive in a rapidly changing world.
- **Assessment and Evaluation:** NEP 2020 proposes a shift in assessment methods to assess a broader range of skills and competencies beyond traditional exams. Formative and continuous assessments are encouraged to provide a more holistic view of students' abilities.

- **Promotion of Arts and Culture:** The policy recognizes the importance of arts, culture, and creative expression in holistic education. It encourages the integration of arts and cultural activities into the curriculum.
- **Inclusion and Diversity:** NEP 2020 emphasizes inclusive education that caters to the diverse needs of students, including those with disabilities. It promotes a barrier-free and inclusive learning environment.
- **Teacher Training:** To implement holistic education effectively, NEP 2020 highlights the need for teacher training programs that equip educators with the skills and knowledge to nurture the holistic development of students.

In summary, holistic education is a central theme in NEP 2020, aiming to foster well-rounded individuals who are not only academically proficient but also emotionally resilient, socially responsible, and equipped with life skills to thrive in the modern world.

2. Multidisciplinary Education and Research in the Context of NEP 2020:

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 in India aims to bring about transformative changes in the education system, and one of the key aspects it emphasizes is multidisciplinary education. Multidisciplinary education refers to a holistic approach to learning that integrates knowledge and skills from various disciplines or fields of study. Here's how multidisciplinary education is envisioned in the context of NEP 2020:

- **Integrated Four-Year Undergraduate Programs:** The NEP 2020 proposes the introduction of integrated four-year undergraduate programs, which will allow students to explore multiple disciplines before specializing in a particular field. Under NEP 2020, India's 4-year degree offers multidisciplinary learning, multiple entry-exit points, research focus, credit transfer, and Academic Bank of Credits for flexibility and mobility with multiple exit points: 1 year or 40 credits of learning will be awarded with Certificate, 2 year or 80 credits of learning will be awarded with Diploma, 3 year or 120 credits of learning will be awarded with Bachelor's degree, and 4 years or 160 credits of learning will be awarded with Bachelor's degree with Research or Honours (MoE, 2020). Thus, these programs are designed to provide a more holistic and well-rounded education, equipping students with a diverse set of skills and knowledge.
- **Common Core Curriculum:** The policy suggests the implementation of a common core curriculum for the first few years of undergraduate education. This core will provide a foundation in various subjects and can be followed by specialized courses. This allows students to explore multiple disciplines before deciding on their major.
- **Multidisciplinary Approach to Teaching and Learning:** The policy promotes interdisciplinary teaching and learning that connects knowledge from different fields. This approach can strengthen critical

thinking, creativity, problem-solving and innovation. It envisions higher education institutions transforming into large multidisciplinary universities, colleges, and knowledge hubs, promoting holistic and integrated education.

- **Interdisciplinary Research:** NEP 2020 promotes interdisciplinary research at the higher education level. It encourages universities to establish research centres and institutes where scholars and researchers from different disciplines can collaborate on projects. This approach is expected to foster innovation and problem-solving by drawing on diverse perspectives.
- **Institutional Restructuring and Governance:** The policy envisions the transformation of higher education institutions into multidisciplinary universities and colleges offering diverse academic programmes and facilitating across disciplines among students and faculty.
- **Industry and Academia Collaboration:** The policy encourages collaboration between universities and industries, which can further promote multidisciplinary education. This collaboration can help students gain practical experience and exposure to real-world challenges that often require interdisciplinary solutions.

In summary, the National Education Policy of 2020 in India promotes multidisciplinary education as a means to foster a well-rounded, adaptable, and innovative workforce. By breaking down traditional silos between disciplines and encouraging a holistic approach to learning, NEP 2020 aims to prepare students to address the complex challenges of the modern world.

3. Transformative Dimensions of NEP 2020 in Indian Higher Education:

A central vision of NEP 2020 is the transformation of the higher education system into a multidisciplinary and flexible ecosystem. The policy recommends restructuring institutions into multidisciplinary universities, establishing Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs), and introducing flexible curricula through mechanisms such as the Choice-Based Credit System (CBCS). It further proposes the gradual phasing out of the affiliating college system and the introduction of graded autonomy.

- **Multiple Entry and Exit:** The introduction of the Multiple Entry and Exit system represents a paradigm shift toward flexible and learner-centric higher education. NEP 2020 recommends allowing students to enter and exit programmes at different stages, with appropriate certification at each level, thereby promoting lifelong learning and reducing dropout rates.
- **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC):** The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) is envisioned as a transformative digital mechanism to facilitate academic mobility and flexibility. By enabling students to accumulate and transfer credits across institutions, the policy aims to promote interdisciplinary learning and personalized educational pathways.

- **Technology and Digital Learning:** NEP 2020 talks about the transformative potential of technology in expanding access and improving the quality of higher education. It recommends the development of digital platforms, virtual laboratories, and a National Digital University, alongside the integration of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies in teaching and learning processes.
- **Centres of Excellence and Institutional Development:** The policy envisions the creation of world-class institutions and the strengthening of existing ones through targeted investments and institutional reforms. It recommends the establishment of Institutions of Eminence (IoEs), Centres of Excellence, and the expansion of central institutions to enhance academic quality and global competitiveness.
- **Quality Assurance and Accreditation:** NEP 2020 proposes a comprehensive reform of the regulatory and accreditation framework through the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). It emphasizes a “light but tight” regulatory approach, graded autonomy, and outcome-based accreditation linked to performance and funding.
- **Research, Innovation, and Technology:** The promotion of research and innovation is a key pillar of NEP 2020, with the establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF) as a central mechanism for funding and coordination. The policy also emphasizes interdisciplinary research, industry-academia collaboration, and the development of innovation ecosystems within higher education institutions.
- **Internationalization of Higher Education:** NEP 2020 envisions positioning India as a global hub for higher education through international collaboration, student mobility, and the establishment of foreign university campuses. It also promotes joint, dual, and twinning degree programmes to enhance global exposure.
- **Financing and Budgetary Expansion:** The policy emphasizes increased public investment in education and the promotion of financial autonomy for higher education institutions. It recommends innovative financing mechanisms, including the establishment of funding agencies and the encouragement of public-private partnerships.

4. Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education and Research for Inclusive Higher Education:

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisages an inclusive higher education system that provides equitable opportunities to learners from diverse social, economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Its emphasis on holistic and multidisciplinary education seeks to address learners varied academic, personal and social needs while promoting flexibility in learning. The policy also recognises research as an important instrument for addressing issues of inequality and social exclusion. In this context, holistic and multidisciplinary education and research can contribute to making Indian higher education more accessible, equitable, flexible and responsive to diverse learner needs. The

following dimensions highlight the role of NEP 2020 in advancing inclusive higher education.

- **Access and Participation:** NEP 2020 seeks to expand access to quality higher education by reducing geographical, financial, and social barriers. Greater use of technology, flexible learning opportunities and institutional expansion can encourage participation among learners who have traditionally faces difficulties in accessing higher education. The policy also gives specific attention to socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs).
- **Equity and Social Inclusion:** The policy places equity and inclusion at the centre of higher education reform by recognising the specific barriers faced by disadvantaged communities. Measures such as scholarships, financial assistance, improved institutional access and targeted support are intended to create more equitable educational opportunities.
- **Academic Flexibility:** Holistic and multidisciplinary education can make higher education more flexible by allowing students to choose subjects across different fields and follow varied academic pathways. Multiple entry and exit and the Academic Bank of Credits are designed to credit mobility and reduce the rigidity of conventional degree structure. Such flexibility can help learners continue education according to their individual circumstances and interests.
- **Language and Cultural Inclusion:** NEP 2020 recognises linguistic and cultural diversity as an important dimension of inclusive education. Greater support for Indian languages, bilingual learning and the inclusion of Indian knowledge and cultural traditions can reduce language-related barriers to participation. This approach can make higher education more accessible and culturally responsive to learners from diverse linguistic and social backgrounds.
- **Inclusive Pedagogy:** The holistic approach of NEP 2020 encourages teaching practices that respond to learners’ abilities, interests, and learning needs. Grater attention to accessible learning resources and support for students with disabilities can create a more inclusive learning environment. Holistic education therefore supports participations beyond conventional academic abilities.
- **Research and Social Inclusion:** NEP 2020 views research as an important means of addressing wider social and developmental concerns. Its emphasis on interdisciplinary and collaborative research creates opportunities. By connecting research with social needs, higher education can contribute to developing more inclusive and context-sensitive solutions.

Conclusions

The study concludes that NEP 2020 offers a transformative framework for Indian higher education by integrating holistic development, multidisciplinary learning and interdisciplinary research. It moves beyond rote learning and rigid disciplinary boundaries towards a flexible and learner-centric system that promotes intellectual, emotional,

social and ethical development. NEP 2020 also introduces several transformative measures, including multiple entry and exit, the Academic Bank of Credits, multidisciplinary institutions, interdisciplinary research, technology-enabled learning and institutional autonomy. These provisions have the potential to reshape the academic landscape and make higher education more flexible, interdisciplinary, responsive, and inclusive. However, their effective implementation depends upon institutional preparedness, adequate infrastructure, qualified faculty, technological capacity and sustained financial support.

The study also highlights that NEP 2020 can play a vital role in promoting inclusive higher education by making learning more responsive to the diverse needs and circumstances of students. The integration of holistic and multidisciplinary approaches broadens opportunities for participation, academic choice and overall learner development. Thus, the policy provides a strong foundation for a more equitable, learner-centred and socially responsive higher education system in India. Overall, the analysis further reveals that NEP 2020 has significant potential to promote a more inclusive higher education system in India through its emphasis on holistic and multidisciplinary learning. However, achieving this vision requires sustained efforts in capacity building, policy support, effective implementation, and institutional development.

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