

Implementation of recommendations of NEP 2020 – analysis and some suggestions

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The National Education Policy (NEP) drafted in 2020 is the third in the series of National Education Policy documents (1968 and 1986/92) in India and is the first education policy of the 21st century. It was approved by the Union Cabinet on 29 July 2020. Although many foreign countries have shown keen interest and appreciation of the logic and philosophy of the NEP, some states in India have been going slow in accepting its implementation.

The country has waited over three decades for a policy with curative measures to address the ills prevailing in the ecosystem of higher education (HE). The present article focuses on the recommendations regarding HE in this policy.

Currently, there are more than 1100 university-level institutions and 40,000 colleges in addition to many standalone institutions in the country. A committee constituted by the Government of India undertook a comprehensive review of HE with feedback from different stakeholders across the country and was able to diagnose the deficiencies, drawbacks and serious shortfalls. By taking cognizance of these, the NEP includes remedial measures. The important recommendations concerning HE in the NEP are: (1) transforming the regulatory system of higher education – the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) with its four verticals; (2) effective governance and leadership for higher educational institutions through the Board of Governors; (3) introducing HEIs with high-quality multidisciplinary and cross-disciplinary flexible four-year programmes, (4) catalysing quality academic research in all fields through a new National Research Foundation, and (5) using and integrating technology under National Educational Technology Forum (NETF).

NEP 2020 has opined that ‘achieving successful implementation of this policy demands a long-term vision, availability of expertise on a sustainable basis and concerted action from all concerned at the national, state, institutional and individual levels. Since some ‘states’ are still hesitant to implement NEP, the immediate challenge is to develop a national strategy to achieve its universal adoption in India. The

basic problem is how and where to initiate the process. During the last three years, the central and a few state-funded HE institutions have made attempts to accomplish NEP’s vision. Now is the time to take cognizance of existing shortcomings and undertake mid-term course correction.

Higher-education institutions (HEIs) are regulated by multiple national agencies: UGC, AICTE, NCTE, NAAC, etc. The most desired recommendation of NEP 2020 is to do away with these multiple regulators and replace them with an overarching body called Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). Under the umbrella of HECI, four independent verticals, each with defined functions and responsibilities, are to be formed, namely the National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC), National Accreditation Council (NAC), Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) and General Education Council (GEC). In principle, these four pillars should have been erected along with HECI to guide the implementation of NEP 2020 across the country. This should be done with little time so that the states which are expected to have parallel bodies/task forces to take the policy forward can also set up these bodies quickly. Setting up of National Research Foundation to fund research in the universities is an important guideline of the NEP. It is urgently required to promote and sustain research in universities and colleges.

In the absence of the four mentoring bodies mentioned above at the centre so far, a few HE institutions have followed the strategy of picking and choosing some of the recommendations of the NEP since 2020, bypassing the holistic strategic approach. Multiple regulators continue to exist and are issuing recommendations. This approach needs to be corrected quickly.

NEP has suggested revamping the administrative structure of the universities and having a Board of Governors with defined composition and responsibilities. Further, it has duly recognized the importance of timely recruitment/appointment/nominations of chairpersons of governing bodies, Vice-Chancellors/Directors of institutions and even members of statutory bodies. For this, NEP has suggested a defi-

nite timeline for filling the vacancies. These advisories of NEP deserve to be taken forward at the earliest.

NEP recommends the abolition of the existing diversity of HE institutions and bringing them under (i) research, (ii) research and teaching, and (iii) teaching institutions. Without a set of dynamic and flexible guidelines to categorize, heterogeneity among HEIs continues to exist. Another vital observation of the NEP is that both government-funded and private HEIs should be governed by the same set of rules and regulations. As the policy has only been recently approved by the Government, even today, different rules/regulations/statutes/acts are being followed by different HEIs. An early transition to the regime of the same set of rules and regulations as applicable to all HEIs, irrespective of whether they are Government-funded or not, is required.

To increase the number of universities with a hope to increase Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), in keeping with the recommendations of the NEP, many states are carving out smaller universities from larger parent universities. These smaller universities are functioning with minimum faculty and reduced funding. In a way, this adversely affects both the parent university and newborn universities and has been counterproductive and not in the interest of quality education. Instead, existing state universities could be strengthened with additional grants and expanding human resources for teaching and research to open new disciplines and programmes, as well as to develop state-of-the-art infrastructure.

The word ‘university’ has its origin in the Latin word ‘universitas’ meaning ‘the whole, total, the universe, the world’. Thus, in the true sense of the word, universities are institutions of higher learning offering courses in almost all disciplines (Gursharan Singh, *Hindustan Times*, February 2023). The entire NEP document revolves around the concept of ‘multidisciplinary’ HEIs with interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary courses offering extensive choices to students. NEP expects that departments in languages, literature, music, philosophy, Indology, art, dance, theatre, education,

mathematics, statistics, pure and applied sciences, sociology, economics, sports, translation and interpretation, and other subjects are needed for a multidisciplinary stimulating education, and they must be strengthened in all HEIs. In view of the shortage of faculty and availability of only a few programmes, the challenge is to meet the expectation of multidisciplinary character in HEIs.

The provisions of the Academic Bank of Credits floated by the Government of India's Ministry of Education (MoE) and the UGC, under the NEP, allow eligible students to take courses and earn required credits in different universities and finally earn their degrees. This facilitates not only the mobility of students but also compensates for the deficiencies and limitations in terms of expertise, programmes and infrastructure in any one institution. The success of this approach strongly depends on the availability of faculty. Therefore, the current vacancies, more than 40% of sanctioned positions in many institutions, must be filled on time with qualified faculty.

The recommendation of the NEP, which provides for dynamism and flexibility, namely, 'multiple entry' and 'multiple exit' (ME-ME), is excellent. A four-year multidisciplinary bachelor's degree has been recommended. The student will be eligible to get a certificate or diploma, or degree each year under the programme depending upon the number of years of the degree programme he has completed. However, there is a shortage of specialized faculty to conduct value-added programmes/certificate courses and teach life skills/social skills/employable skills in relevant subjects in the job market.

NEP has given special attention to teacher education. Almost all teacher-education institutions are single-stream colleges. They are suffering from a severe shortage of faculty. To start with, a one-year B.Ed. programme after graduation was in place. Subsequently, this was replaced by a two-year programme. NEP recommends that

HEIs offering a four-year integrated B.Ed. may also run a two-year B.Ed. programme for students who have already obtained a bachelor's degree in a specialized subject. A one-year B.Ed. programme may also be offered for candidates who have received a four-year undergraduate degree in a specialized subject. This amounts to conducting four different programmes simultaneously. This is achievable only if the teacher-education single-stream colleges are merged with existing multidisciplinary institutions or introduce teacher education in multidisciplinary HEIs.

NEP has envisioned a student-centric curriculum and pedagogy, horizontal and vertical mobility of students, credit accumulation and transfer, integration of vocational and general education, blended and online learning, and internationalization of education by enabling equivalence of courses and qualifications. The fruitful realization of these expectations requires certain prescriptions to be followed by the HEIs. Realizing this, during the last couple of months, the UGC has released the 'guidance enabling reports' required to translate NEP's vision. They are Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes (CCFU, December 2022), National Credit Framework (NCrF, April 2023), National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF, May 2023), Guidelines for Innovative Pedagogical Approaches and Evaluation Reforms, and Notification on the Specification of Degrees and Suggested New Degree Nomenclature(s) (June 2023). These independent but related reports have enriched the vocabulary of HE as well as introduced new concepts and processes, which must be integrated into a logical sequence to facilitate successful translation.

Another important vision of the NEP to be realized is the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF), an autonomous body which would provide a platform for the free exchange of ideas on the use of technology to enhance learning, assessment,

planning, administration and so on, both for school and higher education. The NEP has expressed that the use of technology should be taken to the next level to 'ensure preparedness with alternative modes of quality education whenever and wherever traditional and in-person modes of education are not possible'. NETF will also promote 'Online Education and Digital Education' and 'Open and Distance Learning' with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

State universities and their affiliated and autonomous colleges are the backbone of the Indian higher education system. Although Education is on the 'Concurrent list', the wide disparity in terms of quality and quantity between State and Central funded institutions needs to be addressed. If not, the students would be victims, and the holistic development and transformation of Indian education as claimed by NEP, may not be achieved. The 'backbone' has to be strengthened by way of filling up faculty vacancies, providing comprehensive and continuous professional development of teachers; funds to improve infrastructure for teaching and research; sanctioning additional faculty positions to start new programmes of relevance, and research projects and single stream HEIs to become multidisciplinary institutions.

Although higher education reforms have been high on the agenda of many governments, the recommendations of many commissions/committees on education have not been implemented in totality. As the government has only recently accepted the NEP, let us hope that the futuristic report of the Kasturirangan committee, with its diagnosis and specific prescriptions for improving higher education through concerted and complementary interactions between the central and state governments, will be appropriately executed.

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