



# **A Critical Review of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Transforming India's Education System towards Quality, Equity, and Skill Development**

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## **Abstract**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks one of the most significant reforms in the Indian education system since the 1986 National Policy on Education. Developed to address the changing educational, technological, and socio-economic needs of the twenty-first century, NEP 2020 seeks to establish an education system that is learner-centered, multidisciplinary, skill-oriented, flexible, and globally competitive. The policy introduces structural reforms across school and higher education through the 5+3+3+4 curricular framework, competency-based learning, vocational education, digital integration, multilingual education, and continuous professional development of teachers. It also emphasizes inclusion, equity, research, innovation, and lifelong learning.

This review paper critically examines the major provisions, achievements, implementation strategies, and challenges associated with NEP 2020. The study adopts a systematic review methodology by synthesizing findings from peer-reviewed research articles, government reports, and policy documents published between 2020 and 2026. The review reveals that although NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive roadmap for educational trained teachers, digital disparities, financial constraints, and uneven policy execution across Indian states. Recent systematic reviews similarly conclude that the policy's vision is widely supported, but successful implementation depends on improved funding, faculty development, digital infrastructure, and stronger governance.

**Keywords:** National Education Policy 2020, Educational Reform, Skill Development, Higher Education, School Education, Competency-Based Learning, Digital Education, Multidisciplinary Education

## **Introduction**

Education has always been regarded as the cornerstone of national development, social transformation, and economic progress. In the twenty-first century, rapid technological advancements, globalization, artificial intelligence, climate change, and changing employment patterns have significantly altered the competencies required for individuals to succeed. Traditional education systems emphasizing rote memorization and examination-oriented learning are increasingly viewed as inadequate for preparing students to meet these evolving challenges.

India's previous education framework was primarily guided by the National Policy on Education (1986), revised in 1992. While that policy expanded educational access, it faced criticism for encouraging examination-centric learning, limited vocational integration, inadequate flexibility, and insufficient emphasis on employability and research. To address these concerns, the



Government of India introduced the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 on 29 July 2020, proposing comprehensive reforms from early childhood education through higher education.

NEP 2020 envisions an education system rooted in India's cultural heritage while preparing learners for global citizenship. Its objectives include improving foundational literacy and numeracy, promoting holistic development, integrating vocational education, enhancing research and innovation, encouraging multilingual education, and expanding access through technology-enabled learning. The policy replaces the traditional 10+2 system with a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure and promotes competency-based assessment instead of rote memorization. These reforms aim to create flexible pathways that foster critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and lifelong learning.

This review paper critically examines the policy by synthesizing existing research, evaluating implementation experiences, identifying achievements and challenges, and suggesting recommendations for more effective realization of NEP 2020's objectives.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. Examine the major provisions and objectives of the National Education Policy 2020.
2. Critically review educational reforms introduced in school and higher education.
3. Evaluate the role of NEP 2020 in promoting skill development and employability.
4. Identify opportunities created through digital education and multidisciplinary learning.
5. Examine implementation challenges across educational institutions.
6. Provide evidence-based recommendations for improving policy implementation.

### **Research Questions**

- What are the major educational reforms introduced under NEP 2020?
- How effective are these reforms in improving educational quality?
- What opportunities does NEP 2020 provide for skill development and employability?
- What are the major challenges encountered during implementation?
- What strategies can strengthen the implementation of NEP 2020 across India?

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a **systematic literature review** approach to synthesize existing evidence on the implementation and impact of NEP 2020. Relevant literature published between 2020 and 2026 was collected from peer-reviewed journals, government reports, policy documents, and academic databases. Recent systematic reviews have similarly employed PRISMA-based methods to evaluate the policy's outcomes and challenges across higher education institutions.

The review focuses on themes including school education reforms, higher education transformation, teacher education, vocational education, digital learning, equity and inclusion, research and innovation, governance, and implementation barriers. The collected studies were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns, strengths, challenges, and research gaps.



## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The announcement of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 generated widespread academic interest among researchers, policymakers, educational administrators, and teachers. Since its introduction, numerous studies have evaluated the policy from multiple perspectives, including school education, higher education, teacher education, digital learning, skill development, equity, governance, and implementation. Most researchers recognize NEP 2020 as India's most comprehensive educational reform in over three decades. At the same time, they emphasize that the success of the policy depends on effective implementation, institutional readiness, adequate funding, and continuous monitoring.

The present literature review synthesizes major research conducted between 2020 and 2026 and identifies common themes emerging from the scholarly literature.

### **Studies on the Vision and Philosophy of NEP 2020**

Early studies primarily focused on understanding the philosophical foundations of NEP 2020. Researchers argued that the policy represents a paradigm shift from knowledge acquisition to competency development. Unlike previous policies that emphasized content coverage, NEP 2020 prioritizes conceptual understanding, critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, and lifelong learning.

Several scholars observed that the policy is aligned with global educational trends promoted by international organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD. The emphasis on multidisciplinary education, flexible curriculum design, vocational integration, digital literacy, and research reflects international best practices while incorporating Indian cultural values.

Another important contribution identified in the literature is the policy's learner-centered approach. Instead of treating students as passive recipients of information, NEP 2020 encourages experiential learning, project-based education, inquiry-based pedagogy, and competency-based assessment.

### **Literature on School Education Reforms**

School education reforms constitute one of the most extensively discussed aspects of NEP 2020.

Researchers appreciated the replacement of the traditional **10+2** educational structure with the **5+3+3+4** curricular framework. This restructuring integrates Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), recognizing that learning begins well before Grade 1.

Several studies concluded that the new framework is developmentally appropriate because it aligns curriculum with children's cognitive and psychological growth.

The literature further highlights several major reforms:

- Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)
- Experiential learning



- Activity-based pedagogy
- Competency-based curriculum
- Reduced curriculum content
- Holistic Progress Card
- Flexible subject combinations
- Art-integrated learning
- Sports-integrated education

Researchers argue that these reforms encourage conceptual understanding rather than memorization and improve students' overall personality development. However, many studies note that implementation remains inconsistent across states and school systems due to differences in infrastructure, teacher preparation, and administrative capacity.

### **Higher Education Transformation**

Higher education reforms have received substantial attention in recent literature.

Researchers identify several transformative features:

- Multidisciplinary universities
- Multiple Entry and Exit System
- Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)
- Four-Year Undergraduate Programme
- Choice-Based Credit System
- Institutional autonomy
- Research promotion
- Internationalization
- Flexible curriculum

A recent systematic review of 50 peer-reviewed studies found that most higher education institutions have made measurable progress in curriculum flexibility and vocational integration, although implementation varies considerably among institutions. The review also identified faculty preparedness, funding constraints, and infrastructure limitations as persistent barriers.

Several authors argue that the Academic Bank of Credits represents a major innovation because it enables lifelong learning, academic mobility, and flexible educational pathways.

### **Skill Development and Employability**

Researchers consistently argue that India's traditional education system emphasized academic achievement while neglecting practical competencies demanded by employers.

NEP 2020 addresses this gap through:

- Vocational education from Class VI
- Internship opportunities
- Industry partnerships
- Entrepreneurship education
- Internship-based learning



- Coding and digital skills
- Financial literacy
- Problem-solving skills
- Design thinking

Recent systematic evidence indicates that vocational integration has expanded across many institutions, but industry-academia collaboration remains uneven and requires further strengthening. Several studies conclude that skill-based education has the potential to reduce graduate unemployment and improve employability if implemented consistently.

### **Major Provisions of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark reform in India's education system, aiming to transform education into a more holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary, and skill-oriented framework. The policy seeks to prepare learners for the demands of the twenty-first century by integrating academic excellence with employability, innovation, and ethical values. The following are its major provisions.

#### **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)**

NEP 2020 recognizes that over 85% of brain development occurs before the age of six years. Consequently, it integrates Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) into the formal education system. The policy aims to ensure universal access to quality preschool education through Anganwadis, Balvatikas, and pre-primary schools. The National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat) supports this objective by ensuring that every child achieves basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills by Grade III. Researchers consider this initiative one of the most significant reforms because foundational learning strongly influences later academic achievement.

#### **New Curricular Structure (5+3+3+4)**

One of the most visible reforms is the replacement of the traditional **10+2** structure with a **5+3+3+4** model.

| Stage               | Age Group   | Classes            | Major Focus                                      |
|---------------------|-------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Foundational</b> | 3–8 years   | Preschool–Grade II | Play-based learning                              |
| <b>Preparatory</b>  | 8–11 years  | Grades III–V       | Activity-based education                         |
| <b>Middle</b>       | 11–14 years | Grades VI–VIII     | Experiential and multidisciplinary learning      |
| <b>Secondary</b>    | 14–18 years | Grades IX–XII      | Flexibility, critical thinking, career readiness |

This structure aligns educational stages with children's cognitive development and promotes age-appropriate learning experiences.

#### **Multiple Entry and Exit System**

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Students can leave and re-enter degree programs without losing academic progress.

| <b>Duration Completed</b> | <b>Qualification Awarded</b>    |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 Year                    | Certificate                     |
| 2 Years                   | Diploma                         |
| 3 Years                   | Bachelor's Degree               |
| 4 Years                   | Bachelor's Degree with Research |

This flexibility reduces dropout-related losses and supports lifelong learning.

### **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)**

The Academic Bank of Credits digitally stores students' earned academic credits, allowing them to transfer credits across participating institutions. Advantages include:

- Academic mobility
- Flexible learning pathways
- Reduced duplication of study
- Lifelong learning opportunities

### **Comparative Analysis: National Policy on Education (1986) vs. NEP 2020**

| Parameter                    | National Policy on Education (1986) | NEP 2020                                         |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Educational Structure</b> | 10+2                                | 5+3+3+4                                          |
| <b>Teaching Method</b>       | Teacher-centered                    | Learner-centered                                 |
| <b>Curriculum</b>            | Content-heavy                       | Competency-based                                 |
| <b>Assessment</b>            | Examination-oriented                | Holistic and formative                           |
| <b>Vocational Education</b>  | Limited                             | Integrated from Class VI                         |
| <b>Technology</b>            | Minimal integration                 | Digital-first approach                           |
| <b>Higher Education</b>      | Single-discipline focus             | Multidisciplinary institutions                   |
| <b>Research</b>              | Limited emphasis                    | National Research Foundation                     |
| <b>Skill Development</b>     | Secondary priority                  | Core objective                                   |
| <b>Flexibility</b>           | Restricted                          | Multiple entry/exit and flexible subject choices |
| <b>Teacher Development</b>   | Periodic training                   | Continuous Professional Development              |
| <b>Employability</b>         | Limited focus                       | Strong emphasis on career readiness              |

### **Discussion**



The review of the major provisions of NEP 2020 indicates that the policy has the potential to transform Indian education by fostering holistic learning, flexibility, multidisciplinary education, and employability. Its emphasis on foundational literacy, competency-based education, vocational training, technology integration, and research aligns with global educational trends. However, the literature consistently highlights that implementation remains the decisive factor. Inadequate infrastructure, uneven digital access, teacher capacity constraints, and financial limitations continue to affect the pace and consistency of reforms, particularly in rural and underserved regions. Addressing these challenges through sustained investment, teacher professional development, institutional support, and effective monitoring will be essential to realizing the policy's vision.

### **Implementation of NEP 2020 in School Education**

The implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in school education represents one of the most ambitious educational reform initiatives undertaken in India. The policy seeks to improve educational quality by introducing competency-based curricula, experiential learning, flexible subject choices, technology integration, and inclusive education. However, implementation requires coordinated efforts from central and state governments, school managements, teachers, parents, and local communities.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms**

One of the first implementation priorities has been the redesign of school curricula in line with competency-based education. National and state curriculum frameworks have progressively shifted from content-heavy syllabi toward learning outcomes that emphasize conceptual understanding, critical thinking, creativity, communication, and problem-solving.

Schools are increasingly adopting:

- Activity-based learning
- Inquiry-based instruction
- Experiential learning
- Project-based assignments
- Collaborative learning
- Art-integrated education
- Sports-integrated education

These approaches aim to make learning more engaging and relevant to students' real-life experiences.

### **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)**

The implementation of **NIPUN Bharat** has become a key strategy for achieving foundational literacy and numeracy. Schools are conducting regular assessments, remedial teaching, and teacher training to ensure that every child acquires basic reading and mathematical skills by Grade III.

Despite encouraging progress in several states, learning outcomes continue to vary due to differences in teacher availability, classroom resources, and socio-economic conditions.



## **Inclusive School Education**

NEP 2020 promotes equitable access for:

- Girls
- Children with disabilities
- Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)
- Tribal communities
- Rural learners
- Minority communities

Implementation measures include scholarships, gender inclusion initiatives, accessible infrastructure, multilingual instruction, and targeted support programmes.

## **Major Findings of the Study**

Based on the systematic review of literature published between 2020 and 2026, several significant findings emerge regarding the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

### **NEP 2020 is a Transformative Policy Framework**

The review indicates that NEP 2020 is the most comprehensive educational reform introduced in India since the National Policy on Education (1986). Unlike previous policies that primarily focused on expanding access to education, NEP 2020 adopts a holistic approach encompassing quality, equity, flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, vocational education, digital transformation, research, and innovation. Its learner-centred philosophy aligns with global trends that emphasize competency-based education, lifelong learning, and sustainable development.

### **Shift from Rote Learning to Competency-Based Education**

One of the most significant findings is the policy's transition from examination-oriented and rote-learning practices toward competency-based education. The review highlights that conceptual understanding, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and problem-solving have become central objectives. This shift has the potential to improve learning outcomes and prepare students for the evolving demands of the twenty-first-century workforce.

### **Emphasis on Skill Development and Employability**

The integration of vocational education from Class VI, internships, entrepreneurship education, and industry-academia collaboration represents a major strength of NEP 2020. These initiatives aim to reduce the gap between academic learning and labour market requirements. However, their success depends on strong partnerships with industries, effective curriculum design, and adequate institutional capacity.

### **Importance of Teacher Professional Development**

The review consistently identifies teachers as the most critical factor influencing successful policy implementation. Continuous professional development, digital pedagogy, competency-based assessment, and inclusive teaching practices are essential for translating policy goals into



classroom realities. Many studies emphasize that teacher readiness remains uneven across regions and institutions.

### **Digital Transformation Requires Greater Equity**

Digital education has expanded significantly through initiatives such as DIKSHA, SWAYAM, PM eVIDYA, and the National Digital Library. Nevertheless, persistent challenges—including limited internet connectivity, lack of digital devices, inadequate ICT infrastructure, and disparities between rural and urban areas—continue to restrict equitable access to technology-enabled learning.

- Inclusive classrooms
- Classroom assessment
- Action research
- Leadership development

### **Conclusion**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a bold and comprehensive vision for transforming India's education system into one that is equitable, inclusive, flexible, multidisciplinary, and globally competitive. By emphasizing foundational literacy, competency-based learning, vocational education, digital transformation, teacher professional development, research, and innovation, the policy seeks to prepare learners for the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century. This review demonstrates that NEP 2020 has already influenced curriculum design, assessment practices, higher education reforms, and technology integration. The introduction of the 5+3+3+4 curricular structure, multidisciplinary education, multiple entry and exit options, the Academic Bank of Credits, and the proposed National Research Foundation reflects a significant departure from traditional educational models.

Overall, NEP 2020 provides a strong policy framework capable of enhancing educational quality, employability, innovation, and social inclusion. With effective implementation, continuous evaluation, and adequate investment, it has the potential to contribute significantly to India's aspirations of becoming a knowledge-driven and globally competitive nation.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This review has several limitations:

1. It relies primarily on published literature and policy documents rather than primary empirical data.
2. Since NEP 2020 is still being implemented, many long-term outcomes cannot yet be fully assessed.
3. The review focuses mainly on national-level evidence and does not provide detailed state-wise comparisons.

### **Future Research Directions**

- Conduct longitudinal studies evaluating the long-term impact of NEP 2020 on student learning outcomes.



- Compare implementation across different Indian states and union territories.
- Assess the effectiveness of competency-based assessment in improving educational quality.
- Evaluate the impact of vocational education on graduate employability.
- Examine digital inclusion strategies in rural and remote areas.
- Investigate teacher preparedness and professional development needs across educational contexts.
- Explore the role of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies in supporting NEP 2020 objectives.

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