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**THE SPIRIT OF THE NATIONAL
EDUCATION POLICY-2020:
THE POLE STAR FOR IMPLEMENTERS**

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Since moving to ORF Mumbai in 2010, Leena has been engaged in research and policy advocacy primarily in education, but also in other areas such as renewable energy, public health and sustainable agriculture. She has contributed to the preparation of India's Draft National Education Policy 2019, as a member of the Technical Secretariat to the Dr Kasturirangan Committee and as a member of the Drafting Committee of the Policy.

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The Indian youth constitute one of the youngest populations in the world (SRS 2018), and the NEP-2020 can enable them to realise their potential as a workforce, not just for their own benefit and that of their families, but also that of society, the economy, and the country as a whole. The difficulty with implementing the policy, however, is that it describes the vision for the future higher education system of India in vivid detail but does not prescribe the pathways for realising the vision. The policy leaves it to the leadership of HEIs, supported by their faculty members, to chart their own individual pathways towards the transformed higher education system envisaged in the policy. The NEP-2020 is centred around students – their abilities, their interests, and their aspirations – and the policy seeks to create an enabling and flexible framework that HEIs can make use of to support each individual student. The multiple entry and exit option introduced in the policy will also support students who have dropped out for either financial or social reasons, by giving them an opportunity to return to their studies at a later time. In the long term, lifelong learning will be enabled for youth and adults across all disciplines through the multiple entry and exit option coupled with the Academic Bank of Credits, and the provisions for vertical and horizontal mobility across disciplines, enabled through the defining of a National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF) suitably intertwined with the existing National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF 2013). The NEP-2020 envisages ushering in a new era of cultural transformation in the context of the realisation of a multi-dimensional and vibrant knowledge society.

PRELUDE

In the months since the NEP–2020 has been made available to the public, () widespread discussions and debates on all aspects of the policy have been taking place throughout the country. It is generally acknowledged that the policy is a transformational one, capable of delivering the necessary changes to the Indian education system. The Indian youth constitute one of the youngest populations in the world (*SRS 2018*), and the NEP–2020 can enable them to realise their potential as a workforce, not just for their own benefit and that of their families, but also that of society, the economy, and the country as a whole. The Prime Minister has been exhorting everyone to seize the opportunity to turn the new decade into India’s decade. However, it is also apparent that the transformative potential of the policy cannot be leveraged by students unless all empowered stakeholders in the system – managements of higher education institutions (HEIs), faculty members and staff, decision makers in governments both at the Centre and in the states, and all regulating and professional standard setting bodies – imbibe the spirit of the policy and collaborate towards creating the flexible, responsive, yet integrated higher education system that can cater to the interests and aspirations of individual students. Successful implementation of the policy calls for leadership at all levels, by educators and educationists, managements of institutions, and most of all by motivated faculty members who are willing to lead the transformation.

NEP–2020: A COHESIVE POLICY AND ITS CHALLENGES

The challenges facing the Indian higher education system are well known and well documented in multiple reports prepared by expert committees and researchers ((*NKC 2009, YPC 2009, DNEP 2019, Wadia and Shamsu 2020*)). These include: i) the extreme fragmentation of our educational institutions with as much as 64 per cent of our colleges enrolling less than 500 students (*AISHE 2019*); ii) the early specialisation and streaming of students into disciplinary silos; iii) persistent challenges of access to higher education for many groups of disadvantaged students; iv) the lack of institutional and faculty

autonomy; v) the relatively unattractive working conditions and career progression of faculty; vi) the neglect of research at universities and colleges; vii) poor governance and leadership of HEIs, both public and private; and viii) a regulatory system that has unfortunately stifled innovation and creativity rather than encourage it (*DNEP 2019*). The NEP–2020 has taken cognisance of these challenges and put forward a comprehensive and cohesive policy that addresses all of them. The difficulty with implementing the policy, however, is that it describes the vision for the future higher education system of India in vivid detail but does not prescribe the pathways for realising the vision. The policy leaves it to the leadership of HEIs, supported by their faculty members, to chart their own individual pathways towards the transformed higher education system envisaged in the policy. The task of dismantling the old reality and constructing a new one poses considerable challenges and will not be easy to accomplish. This article argues that the compass that can guide implementers every step of the way is a keen understanding of the spirit of the policy. It illustrates how the spirit of NEP–2020 can help to make appropriate implementation choices.

Although most of the recommendations in the DNEP-2019 have become part of NEP–2020, there are two key recommendations that have not been accepted. These include: i) the suggestion to create a new National Education Commission (NEC) or the Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog (RSA) in DNEP–2019. Its role has instead been assigned to a strengthened Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) in NEP–2020; and ii) the suggestion in DNEP–2019 to have professional councils continuing to regulate professional practice but giving up their regulatory role with regard to educational institutions and education in the respective professions, has not been accepted in the case of legal and medical education.

THE SPIRIT OF NEP–2020: A KEEN FOCUS ON STUDENTS

The NEP–2020 is centred around students – their abilities, their interests, and their aspirations – and the policy seeks to create an enabling and flexible framework that HEIs can make use of to support

each individual student. “It is based on the principle that education must develop not only cognitive capacities - both the ‘foundational capacities’ of literacy and numeracy including scientific, ICT, financial, and cultural and civic literacy, and ‘higher-order’ cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem solving – but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions” (*NEP–2020*). The policy therefore emphasises multidisciplinary education that provides students with considerable choice across subjects in the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, and Sciences, and also includes Sports, Vocational and Professional subjects.

In this spirit, it becomes natural for HEIs to offer the new four-year undergraduate program (FYUP) that creates the space for students to explore their interests and to acquire a broad-based liberal education that gives them the exposure and the perspective they need, for life and for citizenship. This is in line with the aim of the policy of “producing engaged, productive, and contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive, and plural society as envisaged by our Constitution” (*NEP–2020*). Naturally, HEIs will have to assist students with exercising their choices and with making the best of such opportunities by providing them with career counselling and guidance. HEIs in turn are empowered by the policy to enable student choices to the maximum extent possible, particularly through the Academic Bank of Credits which enables the sharing of courses within and across institutions, both public and private. Student choices must also be made available, to the extent possible, within the 3-year undergraduate programme. The latter has been retained by the policy, keeping in mind the need for flexibility of options for HEIs as well as students, particularly those who have concerns about affordability. *NEP–2020* also enables cluster approaches to providing multidisciplinary education that commits to setting up model, public, and Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs) that will aim to set the highest standards for multidisciplinary education in India.

The provisions in *NEP–2020* for equity and inclusion beyond the regular provisions for affirmative action include :i) the introduction of special education zones, particularly in the aspirational districts,

to balance the disadvantages due to geography; ii) the option for HEIs to offer higher education in Indian languages for students who have completed school education in the vernacular medium; as also iii) a 'Gender-Inclusion Fund' to combat the systematic dropouts observed among women across all categories (*Varghese et. al. 2019*); among others. HEIs on their part, the bulk of whom are in the private sector, are being supported and urged by the policy to appreciate the power of inclusivity and diversity within a classroom to enhance the quality of education, and to provide scholarships for up to 50 per cent of students. The multiple entry and exit option introduced in the policy will also support students who have dropped out for either financial or social reasons, by giving them an opportunity to return to their studies at a later time. In the long term, lifelong learning will be enabled for youth and adults across all disciplines through the multiple entry and exit option coupled with the Academic Bank of Credits, and the provisions for vertical and horizontal mobility across disciplines, enabled through the defining of a National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF) suitably intertwined with the existing National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF 2013).

The policy relies on HEIs and their faculty members to inculcate critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, communication, and several other 21st century skills through the exploration of alternative pedagogies involving learning by doing, teamwork etc., and through the integration of vocational education. Such an approach is consistent with the spirit of the policy of empowering students and helping them explore their abilities and interests in a holistic manner. Providing vocational education through HEIs has the potential to not just provide jobs to students and contribute to the economy, but also to bring HEIs closer to the industry and to their communities, valuable connects that are either weak or non-existent at present. With the advent of Industry 4.0 and emerging technologies such as robotics, nano technology, quantum computing, internet of things, autonomous vehicles and so on, the traditional distinction between white-collar work following university education and blue-collar work following vocational education has blurred considerably, a development that will help combat the mindset prevalent today about

vocational education being inferior or a lesser priority. A report by the Ministry of IT, Government of India, called out a USD 1 trillion digital opportunity for India which led to NASSCOM partnering with the government to launch India's digital skilling platform Future Skills Prime on November 18, 2020 (*Wadia and Dabir 2020*). That vocational education is seeing considerable uptake from students is clear from the fact that the Bachelor of Vocation (BVoc) degree launched by the UGC in 2013, to provide vocational education and skill development as part of college/university education, has grown from an initial list of just 127 colleges approved in 2014 to nearly 1000 as of the academic year 2020-21. Some innovative models for BVoc have also come to the fore such, as that of the School of Vocational Education at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, and of the Dayalbagh Educational Institute, Agra, among others (*Wadia and Dabir 2020*). More HEIs can come forward to devise innovative and effective ways of partnering with industry for their mutual benefit and for the benefit of students.

POST-GRADUATE EDUCATION, RESEARCH AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF FACULTY MEMBERS

Masters and PhD programs in the country suffer from low enrolments, just 10.81 per cent and 0.45 per cent respectively (*AISHE 2019*), and many are not of very high quality. The consequence is that faculty members in higher education, most of whom are inducted after their Masters' degree, do not receive adequate pre-service training that covers training in pedagogies. Induction training for new faculty by the HEIs themselves is also relatively rare, so training of teachers relies mainly on faculty development programmes. Given that most Masters' programmes in the country does not have a research component, many faculty members also do not have training and experience in conducting research. The emphasis of the new National Research Foundation (NRF) announced on capacity building within the university system in NEP-2020, is therefore very natural and represents a huge opportunity for faculty members to take advantage of the mentoring as well as the research funding that the NRF will provide, for meaningful research.

Neither innovations in teaching nor leveraging of opportunities for research can occur without conducive working conditions for faculty members. These include freedom from contract work, decent wages, and the autonomy to exercise their own judgement with regard to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment of students. The clear signal sent out by NEP-2020 – of phasing out the affiliation system and providing graded autonomy to colleges – will in time return the responsibility for quality education into the hands of the faculty members. HEIs that recognise this fact and invest in their faculty members will be able to compete successfully among their peers to attract students. Faculty members in turn will have to take the initiative to create a vibrant learning environment for students. Their efforts must be supported by the managements through the adoption of a performance evaluation system that gives credit to faculty members not just for teaching and research but also for their contributions to the development of the institution (through fund raising, consulting etc.) and to the well-being of students (through managing clubs, hostels etc., and overseeing other activities). Best practices with regard to cultivating excellence through autonomy and using enlightened methods of evaluating faculty exist already, as for instance in College of Engineering, Pune (*Wadia and Sivakumar 2015*). These practices can be used as starting points by other HEIs for developing standards suited to their own conditions.

World over, there are only a few ways to finance education. These include: i) philanthropic grants that are either outright grants or those that contribute towards the creation of corpus funds whose yields pay for education related expenditure; ii) grants from governments; iii) fees paid by students; iv) contributions by faculty in the form of revenues from consulting, from research grants, and from executive education and lifelong learning courses; v) revenues from stakes in companies incubated at the institution; and lastly, as a newer trend in many countries; and vi) revenues from the higher fees paid by large numbers of international students. In India it is only item (ii) the revenue from student fees that sustains most institutions, besides limited grants from government for research. With more autonomy going ahead, faculty members at HEIs can play a critical role in helping to raise additional funds for their institutions through: i)

bringing in research grants which generally carry overheads for the home institutions; ii) bringing in funds through consulting to industry and to governments; iii) introducing new and innovative courses for lifelong learners; and iv) by incubating start-up companies in collaboration with students and colleagues. These activities are relatively common in many developed countries and need to be grown in India in an organic manner.

GOVERNANCE AND REGULATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Complete autonomy for a large number of good-quality HEIs was the key lever for innovation envisaged in DNEP-2019. The NEP-2020 has modified this recommendation and opted for graded autonomy, beginning with academic autonomy, as a matter of abundant caution. However, it is also important to keep in mind that in many situations such as the procurement of equipment for laboratories for instance, it is difficult for HEIs to exercise academic autonomy without financial autonomy. If a large number of HEIs can be given operational autonomy in the coming years – based on their accreditation scores – they will be able to invest in their faculty members, launch new courses, increase their intake in existing courses, encourage research, innovation and entrepreneurship, and so on. The NEP-2020 has stipulated that HEIs be run by Boards of Governors consisting of eminent individuals and alumni who are committed to education and to the institution. This will ensure that vice-chancellors receive considerable support, academically and administratively, in running their institutions.

Since autonomy will be granted on the basis of excellent accreditation scores, the infrastructure for accreditation will have to scaled up considerably so that every HEI is accredited at least once every five years. This will mean that many excellent educational institutions will have the opportunity to become independent Accreditation Institutions (AIs) that will work under the supervision of a meta-accrediting body, the National Accreditation Council (NAC), renamed from the present National Accreditation and Assessment Council (NAAC). Such a move will help AIs generate revenue for themselves.

NAC may choose to use e-assessments as a preparatory step, prior to accreditation by AIs. If sufficient numbers of competent AIs can be identified, the desired goal of accrediting every HEI at least once in every five years will become attainable. NAC will need to ensure that AIs are not in conflict of interest with the institutions that they accredit.

The principle of separation of roles in governance and regulation, adopted in DNEP-2019, required that the functions of regulation, accreditation, funding and academic standard setting be entrusted to separate, independent, institutions. The NEP-2020 has instead made them independent verticals under an umbrella organisation, namely the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI). This is likely to be a better solution given that the synergies between these four functions can be better exploited, but it is also critical that the independence of each institution is maintained. A very important commitment in both DNEP-2019 and NEP-2020 is to keep regulation minimal and cede more autonomy to HEIs. It is expected that regulations will be made more effective through the use of technology to enforce transparent disclosure norms, relating to key information regarding the health of HEIs that is of value to students, parents and the public. The HECI is one of the most awaited pieces of legislation that is expected this year. In the meantime, existing regulators such as the UGC, AICTE, NCTE and the professional councils must begin preparing for the new regulatory approach by dismantling some of the excessive controls that exist at present. NAAC will need to prepare for its larger role as a meta-accrediting body by working out the processes that it will adopt towards ensuring the smooth functioning of the network of new accreditation institutions.

DNEP-2019 sought to ensure that the professional councils, which are membership organisations of practicing professionals such as doctors, lawyers etc., do not impinge on the autonomy of the faculty members at professional colleges. While they can continue to regulate their professional practice, DNEP-2019 expected these councils to allow faculty members, who are independent professionals in their own right, to function autonomously. This was a subtle change in the role envisaged for professional

councils. The professional councils were to become Professional Standard Setting Bodies (PSSBs) that specify ‘graduate attributes’ in their respective disciplines. The HEIs and their faculty members would then use these guidelines to design curriculum and ensure delivery so as to help in achieving the professional standards laid out by the councils. Of course, such a transition would only take place gradually, over a period of time, as more colleges offering professional education become autonomous, leading to these autonomous colleges and universities offering general and professional education as envisaged by the policy. A multidisciplinary approach would enable collaborative research between researchers in Medicine and Engineering for instance, something that is not very prevalent in the country today but is sorely needed for the design and development of medical equipment, an industry worth USD 156 billion in the United States way back in 2017. The NEP–2020 has however kept the regulation of education in medicine and law unchanged for the present, and outside the purview of its reforms. It may be worthwhile to review this decision in some years.

All HEIs need to be supported with an appropriate, supportive, legislative, and regulatory environment that enables them to achieve the goals set by NEP–2020. This requires the governments at the centre and the states to create the necessary, conducive and responsive, legislative and regulatory regime, providing adequate funding, and monitoring towards quality control and smooth implementation of the policy.

MONITORING AND QUALITY CONTROL FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

As mentioned earlier, the NEP–2020 replaces the National Education Commission (NEC) recommended in the DNEP–2019 with a remodelled and rejuvenated Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE). It is therefore worthwhile to examine the roles that were envisaged for the NEC since these must now be used as inputs to remodel CABE.

As stated in DNEP–2019, “NEC will be responsible for developing, articulating, implementing, evaluating, and revising the vision of education in the country on a continuous and sustained basis. It will also create and oversee the institutional frameworks that will help achieve this vision”. The NEC was therefore meant to be a policymaking as well as implementation body that would oversee the implementation of NEP–2020 over the projected two-decade long lifetime of the changes as often as necessary in order to ensure that the targeted goals are achieved.

The NEC was to draw upon the expertise of expert educators, educationists, researchers and professionals, who would form at least 50per cent of its composition, alongside ministers and officials from the various ministries involved in education, from both the centre and the states. Given the frequent changes in leadership within governments and ministries, there is a lack of institutional memory that affects long-term planning. It was anticipated that such a composition of the NEC would provide long-term continuity in decision-making.

Ensuring the success of policy implementation is a challenging task and there is evidence to show that only one in seven policies succeed around the world (*McGuinness and Slaughter 2019*). India’s own experience of implementing previous education policies is testimony to the fact that several decades later, many aspects of previous policies remain either unimplemented or poorly implemented. This is because the spirit of the policy is rarely transmitted to implementers, and implementation plans rarely create feedback loops (*McGuinness and Slaughter 2019*). It is therefore critical that the implementation plan of NEP–2020 includes provisions for continuous feedback gathering and the leveraging of data to evaluate what has worked and what hasn’t, as part of assessment and monitoring of overall progress. The NEC was intended to take a long-term view, based on regular analysis of data gathered.

One additional role that NEC was intended to play was to coordinate between different ministries of the government engaged in education and skill development, such as the Ministry of Women and Child Development that is involved in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and in helping to ensure the attainment of foundational

literacy and numeracy; and the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) that has an overlapping mandate with Ministry of Education with regard to provision of vocational education. The difficulties of working across ministerial boundaries are well known and the composition of the NEC was intended to help overcome these difficulties and preserve the interests of students. The suggestion that the Prime Minister could head the NEC was also made primarily for this purpose, and for increased funding support during the long implementation phase.

Historically, CABE has been a mechanism for coordination between states and the centre with the primary participation coming from education ministers of all states and UTs. It will now need to be remodelled and rejuvenated to take on all the roles outlined above if success in implementation is to be assured.

CONCLUSION

HEIs in India have remained at the periphery of society for far too long. The NEP–2020 envisages that HEIs and their faculty members would take centre stage through building bridges with industry and their local communities, in order to give students the opportunities to learn in real life situations and become aware of the challenges and needs of society, the economy and the country. For instance, attaining SDG 4 “Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” with its seven targets, four of which are related to skill development and decent jobs, will require that the goals of NEP–2020 are attained in full. Similarly, embracing the remaining SDGs and contributing to attaining their goals and targets can become a crucible for innovation and an important opportunity for HEIs to train youth for millions of ‘Green jobs’ that are becoming available and to help them contribute to the economic growth; to contribute to increasing female participation in the workforce; to work towards a society with reduced inequalities; and to conduct research towards sustainable cities and communities, towards climate action, among others.

NEP-2020 places the interests of students at the centre of all decision making and seeks to provide them with relevant and quality educational experiences that enable them to deal with a rapidly changing world. It envisages ushering in a new era of cultural transformation in the context of the realisation of a multi-dimensional and vibrant knowledge society. Every stakeholder in the education system must recognise this need for cultural transformation, identify his or her own role in it as appropriate, embrace it and practice it consistently with complete commitment. It is only when motivated faculty members, enlightened managements of HEIs, regulatory and standard-setting bodies, and officials within government departments imbibe the spirit of the policy in this manner, that its lofty goals can be achieved.

End Note

¹https://www.ugc.ac.in/pdf/news/3986236_NSQF-999-newly-approvedinstitutions.pdf

²<https://www.selectusa.gov/medical-technology-industry-unitedstates#:~:text=Thepercent20Unitedper%20Statesper%20remainsper%20the,toperc%20growper%20toperc%20per%204208per%20billion>

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