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**TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION  
IN INDIA**  
*CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES*

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# TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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*The consistent decline in the enrolments at secondary, senior secondary and higher education levels is a matter of concern. The success of NEP-2020 and the pace of its implementation depends to a large extent on how effectively the government, universities and schools can tide over the practical challenges. The last major revision was made in the education policy in 1986. To overcome the deficiencies experienced during the last 35 years, one of the main thrusts of the new policy in higher education is to end the fragmentation of higher education by transforming higher education institutions into large multidisciplinary universities, colleges, and HEI clusters, each of which will be having students in thousands. Unfortunately, the policy comes into being at a time when economy has been battered by COVID-19 related lockdown, low government tax collections, and high fiscal deficit even pre-COVID-19. It is very challenging to restructure the existing regulatory system driven by multiple authorities and rebuild the unitary regulatory system with four verticals, as a torchbearer for quality higher education.*

## PRELUDE

National Education Policy-2020 is a new policy to address the challenges that have affected the Indian Education System for a number of decades. The focus areas are lack of multidisciplinary approach and flexibility with regards to subject choice, assessment as well as skill gaps. While the drop-out rate has declined for higher education, Gross Enrollment Ratio is just about 26.3 percent compared to 58.2 percent in senior secondary and 79 percent in secondary levels, meaning that most of the students do not even enroll in higher

education. The consistent decline in the enrolments at secondary, senior secondary and higher education levels is a matter of concern. The other overall focus areas for NEP-2020 include curriculum design, teacher training, assessment, evaluation and examination format and teacher appraisal. The success of NEP-2020 and the pace of its implementation depends to a large extent on how effectively the government, universities and schools can tide over the practical challenges.

## IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES WITH POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The last major revision was made in the education policy in 1986. To overcome the deficiencies experienced during the last 35 years, one of the main thrusts of the new policy in higher education is to end the fragmentation of higher education by transforming higher education institutions into large multidisciplinary universities, colleges, and HEI clusters, each of which will be having students in thousands. The structure of 10+2 in school education will be replaced by 5+3+3+4. The total duration before approaching higher education shall remain the same.

Moving to large multidisciplinary universities and HEI clusters is one of the major recommendations of this policy regarding the structure of higher education. The policy seeks to establish multidisciplinary institutions for higher education replacing the single-disciplinary ones. The road to attain this goal has been paved with good intentions.

### Challenge 01

Our country has more than 1,000 universities today, and there are problems associated with large affiliating universities resulting in poor undergraduate education in colleges. Doubling the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education by 2035 will mean that we must open one new higher education institution every week for the next 15 years, with at least one in or near every district (*GER in 2018: 26.3 percent and GER in 2035: 50 percent*). Opening one higher

education institution every week on an ongoing basis is a massive challenge.

## Challenge 02

From the funding point of view, NEP-2020 envisages an increase in education spending from 3 percent to 6 percent of GDP, which amounts to around INR 2.5 lakh crores per year (*Viswanathan, 2020*). The policy comes into being at a time when economy has been battered by Covid-19 related lockdown, low government tax collections, and high fiscal deficit even pre-Covid-19. Economists have been advising to go for large stimulus packages amounting to double-digit percentages of GDP, despite the strain on the exchequer. National Education Policy is a 20-year journey, but one worries that we may be off to a stumbling start over the next 2-3 years, when government and budgetary priorities are focused at healthcare and economic recovery.

It will be a great achievement to fully implement the recommendations of NEP-2020 for higher education given the limited resources at hand. It requires private institutions to offer more scholarships to make admissions possible for the students from low-income strata as well, but NEP is silent on how this can be achieved. This indicates a need for greater public funding in higher education, which in reality does not go in line with the current scenario. The centre and states shall have to work together to increase public investment in education.

## Challenge 03

In higher education, inter-disciplinary learning is a welcome step. The new policy promotes flexibility so that learners could choose their learning paths: arts, science, physical education and other extra-curricular activities need to be equally promoted so that learners could pick up the areas of their interest. But, at the same time, the universities in our country have for decades been highly departmentalised. People in the academia have preferred rigid territories over flexibility. Thus,

changing the mindset of faculty, particularly that of the seniors, is a big challenge. It requires a cultural shift in the entire higher education ecosystem over the next 15-20 years.

### Challenge 04

We have more than 14 lakh faculty members in higher education. It is a challenge to train such a huge number in new-age skills in a short span of time. The existing education system excludes formal training and orientation towards pedagogy for college and university educators. This urgently calls for an overhaul of the curriculum design to make it flexible and organic for enabling foundational and higherorder thinking and inculcation of skills at different levels of education.

Mentoring of the young faculty is highly desirable, but it is equally challenging to identify the suitable mentors from the lot of senior and retired professors. Faculty needs to be trusted and empowered to conduct innovative teaching and research, and also extend their service to the community. There is an academy at Mussoorie for grooming the young probationers of civil service in the country, but no such facility is there at present for the young men and women who choose higher education as their career. At least one such academy of global standard needs to be established to prepare and orient the young faculty for this profession.

### Challenge 05

NEP-2020 classifies all HEIs into 3 categories: Research-intensive Universities, Teaching Universities and Autonomous degree granting colleges (National Education Policy, 2020). The country has more than 40,000 colleges, a large proportion of which offer only a single program and have fewer than 100 students. The challenge is to convert a large number of affiliated colleges into Autonomous degree granting colleges through graded autonomy in the span of 15 years and abolish the affiliating system in the country. As per NEP-2020, by 2025, the maximum number of colleges that can be affiliated by a university shall not exceed 300.

By 2035, all colleges currently affiliated to a university shall secure accreditation and become autonomous degree-granting colleges. The challenge is whether existing affiliating universities can mentor their affiliated colleges so that they could develop the capabilities and achieve minimum benchmarks in academic, curricular, teaching, assessment, governance, financial robustness and administrative efficiency. There will be a multidisciplinary approach across sciences, social sciences, arts, humanities and sports. The emphasis will be more on conceptual learning rather than rote learning. Creativity and critical thinking will be encouraged.

### Challenge 06

Availability of faculty in multidisciplinary streams is another major challenge. The distribution of faculty across streams or disciplines is not balanced at present. Thus, it is very challenging to attract and develop the faculty in those disciplines in which there is grave deficiency. Shortage of faculty is already being experienced even by the institutions of national importance. This challenge can partially be met by introducing positions of practice professors as well as research professors. Well-known artists, practitioners of various domains of work including industry, and outstanding researchers can be invited to join higher education institutions on such positions. Tenure positions with all the benefits which are extended to permanent employees can also help the higher education institutions to overcome the deficiencies without compromising on the merit.

### Challenge 07

Connect between multidisciplinary mix of courses and employability is going to be another challenge. For instance, will two students who having earned their BTech degrees with a different mix be equally employable? Similarly, can a highly rated university permit a student to join their BTech program in the third year if student has completed first two years of the same program from another university, which is not equally rated. Besides this, multiple entry and multiple exit

is going to be a difficult proposition. If a student of BTech program exits after completing first year only, then what kind of certification can be given to such a student. Will he/she be employable?

Every university in the country will be required to change the ordinances to allow a student to exit a program while facilitating the student to earn the academic credits based on the courses passed till then. The universities shall have to decide that how many times a student should be allowed to exit from a programme, and even how many times the entry into the same program should be allowed. The policy seeks to introduce revolutionary structural reforms at the higher education level. It simultaneously promotes three and four-year degree programmes at the undergraduate level. A student who has completed a four-year undergraduate programme with final year through research can directly be admitted in the doctoral programme. Won't this kind of provision make postgraduate programs irrelevant? Is this going to lead to the situation when postgraduate programs will be scrapped in line with the MPhil program?

## Challenge 08

student may have a good balance of credits from varied disciplines in the Academic Bank of Credits, but it will be very challenging for the universities to decide which certificate – diploma or degree – is to be awarded. One solution could be that universities may pick up the credits from the Academic Bank of Credits of a student selectively and advise him/her to complete the deficit by earning the relevant credits for the award of a particular degree.

Though flexibility in the higher education model through the concept of multiple exits is an important step for discouraging the number of dropouts, a question still arises on the value of such certifications and diplomas. The Indian psyche closely associates jobs with the degrees acquired. Hence, to implement the new system, out-of-date thinking needs to be changed first so that one can secure a job successfully only with a degree. This is a challenging paradigm which undermines and discourages other innate talents of an individual. Should the importance for a degree fade away? Will prospective recruiters



accept the candidates having certifications and diplomas instead of degrees? Will such candidates really be job ready? These questions will probably be answered with time only. We shall have to wait for review of the situation at the end of at least 5 years from now.

### Challenge 09

It is becoming easier to get connected with a global reach. A world of information is available at one's fingertips with the click of a button or a simple voice command, and as technology continues to advance, the students need to grow their learning with it. Technology is no longer a motivating factor when it comes to learning – it is a *must*. It needs to be incorporated in the future education to ensure students are equipped with the skills to cope in a world dependent on technology. The reality is that classrooms can be anywhere anytime. The time has come when we shall see our students working on projects in virtual contexts with other students from around the world at any given moment.

We require internet penetration in remote areas because e-learning is the way forward, as witnessed during the pandemic. Digital infrastructure for this purpose will include digital classrooms and expertise-driven online teaching models. There will be a concerted effort to promote contemporary subjects such as artificial intelligence, design thinking, data analytics, machine learning, and holistic health which are thought to be the career choices of tomorrow. Advanced technologies will be required to overcome gaps in physical face-to-face teaching and lab infrastructure, matchable assessment schemes across institutions, career counseling sessions and training of teachers to master these new-age technologies. This will continue to be a major challenge in the next decade.

### Challenge 10

National Research Foundation will be established to cater to the needs of quality research. Historically, government has promoted research mostly in public sector institutions in India. There has been a bias against private institutions. The challenge is to overcome this bias and provide a level playing field to good institutions of higher learning,

irrespective of the source of funding for running an institution. Good institutions from both public and private sectors need to be treated equally for ensuring our presence on the global academic plane.

## CONCLUSION

Restoring the role as a *Viswa Guru* is not easy. However, it is possible only by upgrading the quality of education and research with an all-round consistent set of efforts on the part of every stakeholder of higher education in the country. Research collaborations and student exchanges will follow only in that case. It is very challenging to restructure the existing regulatory system driven by multiple authorities and rebuild the unitary regulatory system with four verticals, as a torchbearer for quality higher education. In spite of many challenges, it is a great opportunity to transform the overall higher education sector into an integrated coherent ecosystem of professional and vocational education.

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