

# Commentary: New education policy: shifting gears toward the future of India

## Introduction

After 34 years, issues of quality, inequity and governance have been gathered together under the integrative framework of New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Sahni, 2020). India, like most of the developing countries to reap the advantage of the global market, is in an urgent need to empower the young population with cutting-edge knowledge and skills. In line with SDG 4 – to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong, learning opportunities for all the government aims to convert India into “Vishwa Guru” – a goal of internationalization at home, to promote Indian education institutions/universities and attract international top universities and students to retain brain drain. To achieve the goal, it envisages an overhaul shift in governance to re-energies. The policy recognizes the wicked problem that has impeded India to reap the desired demographic dividend. Including concerns of regulation of higher education that has been too heavy-handed for decades.

The paper is an attempt to analyze popular policy narratives (Gasper and Anthonpe, 1996) on the development of the NEP of India for developing operational directions. The paper attempts to assimilate the purpose of policy and practice to be adopted by practitioners across the disciplines in overcoming multidimensional challenges. The paper is an outcome of an online panel discussion on the policy. Participant observations used is to analyze the pattern in policy narratives on the content and context. With the use of content analysis, the paper analyzes the framing of concepts and their explicit and implicit rules of validation. The findings of the paper suggest that converting the aim of the policy into practice toward collective and coordinated efforts by public and private educations institutions will require integrations at five levels: regulatory, regional, resource, resilience and research.

## Shifting gear

The policy adopts education as an instrument to drive demographic advantage with the global agenda toward becoming a knowledge economy and society. It states given the 21st-century requirements, education must aim to develop good, thoughtful, well-rounded and creative individuals. Especially, higher education must enable the development of an enlightened, socially conscious, knowledgeable and skilled nation that can find and implement robust solutions to its problems. This vision of higher education will require an understanding of what constitutes or what higher education institutions (HEI) should constitute. During 2018–2019, India attracted 47,427 foreign students, while more than 750,000 Indian students went abroad for higher education. For education, the top four destinations for Indian students were Canada, the USA, Australia, the UK and New Zealand.



Despite its critical importance for higher education, the research and innovation investment in India is, at the current time, only 0.69% of GDP as compared to 2.8% in the United States of America, 4.3% in Israel and 4.2% in South Korea (NITI Aayog, 2021, p. 17).

To turn around the higher education ecosystem in India, the policy constructs a vision that teaching universities and autonomous degree-granting colleges gradually move toward an evolutionary approach to acquire a status of a research university. Single-stream HEIs will be phased out over time, and all will move toward becoming vibrant multidisciplinary institutions. By moving toward liberal art, it aspires from ancient Indian literary works such as Banabhatta's *Kadambari* that entails a good or sustainable education as knowledge of the 64 *Kalaas* or arts; an opportunity to blossom science with a song or vice-versa (NEP 2020). Catalyzing the quality of academic research in all fields through a new National Research Foundation is a noble idea; however, its institutionalization to cross-fertilize in solving social problems will entail success. The policy plans to treat all HEIs, be it public or private, on par within one regulatory regime. There is an attempt to develop common national guidelines that will enable all acts to establish and regulate HEIs, thus enabling common standards for private and public HEIs. These common guidelines will cover four key parameters; good governance, financial stability and security, educational outcomes and transparency of disclosures. HEIs will have the autonomy and freedom to move gradually from one category to another, based on their plans, actions, and effectiveness. Though the policy has taken feedback from approx. 2.5 lakh stakeholders and two parliamentary level committees, the demand for operational clarity exists. The ambitious goal of the policy has resulted in an unprecedented demand for dialog to evolve operational clarity. Merely by the scale and scope, this inquisitiveness for clarity from an ambitious policy is natural. However, it is important to be reminded of what the Bhore Committee report on health stated way back in 1946 stated [ . . . ] "it is desirable to plan boldly, avoiding, on the one hand, extravagant programs which are incapable of fulfillment and on the other hand halting and inadequate schemes which could have no effect on general standards and which will bring little return for the expenditure involved". Furthermore, taking a clue from findings of policy challenges for the next 50 years by OECD report titled "*Shifting Gears*"; three broad critical areas are pertinent for NEP to address: (1) growth will slow and economic activity will shift, with skills being crucial and wage inequality rising; (2) sustaining growth while addressing rising inequality will be a major policy challenge; and (3) more international cooperation will be needed in an increasingly multipolar world. Though the intent of NEP addresses all the three fundamental concerns that the Indian education system face, what makes it challenging for policymakers to establish a new integrative governance paradigm by deinstitutionalizing the old rigid administrative structure. This is expected to promote administrative ease, research and development available to every citizen with equitable choices.

### **Toward the future of India**

To attain the NEP goal, it would entail five elements of integration; regulatory integration, regional integration, resource integration, resilience and research integration.

*Regulatory integration:* The policy thrust on institutional restructuring and consolidation for graduating from standalone institution to Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERU). Apart from internal regulation to transform, it is equally important to manifest focus on external governance – between the regulators and the regulated. The Indian education system is marred with rigid rules often not in sync with changing policy paradigms. Institutions remain dwindling between AICTE, UGC, AIU and Education Ministry. Regulatory bodies are essential to ensure quality education; however, to achieve the policy goals, it is critical to instill administrative ease that reduces time and energy on multiple reporting and approvals. Moreover, inconsistent regulatory processes reduce choice

for long-term investment in education by private organizations. It is time that regulators assess the average timeframe, subsequent energy and resource consumed by an academic institution in external governance. This needs urgent attention, as ultimately, the cost of inaction of a less-educated society is borne by the nation.

*Regional integration:* Spatial and social inequality in the education system is a chronic age-old problem that has yet to witness solutions. India remains captured by a low level of educational attainment, marked disparity in rural-urban, males-females and among various social groups. Education infrastructure and facilities make it further difficult to break the vicious cycle of vulnerability. The challenge of these groups and regions is further accentuated with starved faculties and scarce resources in technical and higher education institutions available. To create equitable access, the policy targets to establish one model of education in every district. Or else to convert policy endeavor of the *Academic Bank of Credit* that entails flexibility with an offer of multiple entries and exits in different design of Master's program may remain in vain. While Credit Bank will allow flexibility, the desired goals will be a cumulative outcome of education quality, its prospects, more importantly, an ecosystem of due recognition of the skills and talent that improves employability. According to India Skills Report, employability has improved from 37.22% in 2015 to 45.9% in 2021. Reduced scope with the current stereotype examinations and practical system limited to pen and paper may require moving away from "skull to skill test".

*Resource Integration:* The idea of developing the capacities that promote student wellness such as fitness, good health, psycho-social wellbeing and south ethical grounding is considered critical for high-quality learning. Irrespective of multidisciplinary teaching and research, enabling infrastructure and facilities for students as well as faculties will be a prerequisite along with the creation of a library, smart classrooms, labs, sports, recreation, dining and auditorium that will require more than one time cost to create and sustain a standard. With mushrooming of private education institutions in metros, starved public and private universities in small towns, and resource scarcity in the states to invest in rural and small towns may fail to reap the demographic dividend.

*Resilience Integration:* Education institutions across India to attain the policy goals within the stipulated timeframe will require resilience. To apply organizational resilience as defined by BS 65000 standard, "the ability of an organization to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions to survive and prosper". Drawing learning on organizational science from the Himalayan expedition, [Suarez and Monte \(2020\)](#) in their article on building organizational resilience suggests three broad but essential approaches: (1) organizational routines—efficient when work is predictable, (2) simple rules or heuristics—rules of thumb that help you speed up processes and decision-making and prioritize the use of resources and (3) improvisation—spontaneous, creative efforts to address an emerging opportunity or a problem. While Indian educational institutes/universities are best in setting organizational routine, approach two and three will be more required than ever once the stand-alone institutions' phase out. For every education intuitions across India, to deliver 62 skills is very different than to cocreate valuable opportunities for students to acquire skills, even to create resources for 26 skills by an individual organization will run out of resilience due to the gap between dynamic demand and supply of skills across time and place. Thus, a model to insulate risk and improve appetite for spontaneous improvisation by allowing flexible rules with minimum resource pool is needed (for example, amending current ACITE limitations for institutions to employ adjunct and visiting faculties shall be critical). If the 2020 policy is not to repeat the mistakes that of education policies of 1968, 1986 and 1992, improving the ecosystem that entails education organizational resilience shall be critical to achieving 6% public expenditure or more. While public spending is low, the out-of-pocket expenditure on education is rising drastically. How this ambitious policy that entails

massive investments will alter the ecosystem to ensure organizational resilience will be some of the critical upcoming questions for the regulators.

*Research Integration:* The policy attempts to catalyze quality academic research in all fields through a new National Research Foundation (NRF) for enabling a culture of research through suitable incentives and recognition to outstanding research. As stated in the policy to competitively fund research in all disciplines may create a “class” stratification based on institutional capacity to fund research ideas. The resource-rich or elite group of institutes will produce more viable competitive research. Therefore, to promote policy goals, the NRF research funding should adopt policy goals to adjudge prerequisite for funding. Promotion of collaborative research that builds equitable research appetite should entail success to win the competition, while consolidation of an elite club of premier institutions should be avoided by NRF.

According to Vivekananda (2019), *The Future of India*, “the secret lies in organization, accumulation of power (knowledge and skills of the billion-plus population), and co-ordination of wills”. The holistic policy 2020 is with the right intentions; it requires integrating the regulation, region, resource, resilience and research with operational directions to convert the idea of India – a “Vishwa Guru”.

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## Further reading

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## About the author

Prof Avanish Kumar is an anthropologist, currently working as a professor of Public Policy and Governance at the Management Development Institute, Gurgaon. More than one and a half decades in academics, he explores questions at the intersection of policies and practices that promote sustainability and social inclusion. Prior to academics, over a decade he has worked with NGOs and research institution. As advisor, he serves government, large NGO networks, corporate houses and academic institutions.