

NEP 2020 and Higher Education Transformation

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Abstract— The National Education Policy 2020, approved by the Union Cabinet of India on 29 July 2020, represents the most comprehensive reform of India's education system since the National Policy on Education of 1986, with particularly far-reaching implications for higher education. This paper examines the structural, regulatory, and institutional transformations envisaged under NEP 2020 for Indian higher education, including the proposed shift to multidisciplinary institutions, the introduction of flexible undergraduate degree structures with multiple entry and exit points, the Academic Bank of Credits, the establishment of the National Research Foundation, and the proposed replacement of existing regulatory bodies with a single Higher Education Commission of India. It further examines the internationalisation dimension of the policy, most concretely realised through the University Grants Commission's 2023 regulations permitting foreign universities to establish campuses in India, and traces the early, still-limited experience of operational campuses established under this framework. Drawing on government policy documents and verifiable reporting on implementation progress through 2026, the paper assesses both the transformative ambition of NEP 2020 and the considerable gap that persists between policy design and ground-level implementation across India's vast and heterogeneous higher education landscape.

Keywords— National Education Policy 2020, higher education reform, multidisciplinary education, Academic Bank of Credits, Higher Education Commission of India, internationalisation, foreign university campuses

INTRODUCTION

Education policy in independent India has been shaped by a small number of landmark national frameworks: the National Policy on Education of 1968, informed by the recommendations of the Kothari Commission, the National Policy on Education of 1986, later modified in 1992, and, after a gap of over three decades, the National Education Policy of 2020. Each of these frameworks has sought to reorient the country's education system to the developmental priorities of its time; NEP 2020, formulated against the backdrop of a rapidly changing global knowledge economy, digital transformation, and India's own demographic profile, articulates an explicit and ambitious

vision of transforming India into what its text describes as a "global knowledge superpower."

For higher education specifically, NEP 2020 proposes changes of considerable structural depth: a move away from narrow, single-discipline institutions toward large, multidisciplinary universities and colleges; a flexible undergraduate curriculum permitting multiple entry and exit points with corresponding certification; a national credit transfer mechanism termed the Academic Bank of Credits; the establishment of a National Research Foundation to strengthen the research ecosystem; and, perhaps most significantly from a governance perspective, the proposed replacement of India's fragmented regulatory architecture, comprising the University Grants Commission, the All India Council for Technical Education, and other sector-specific bodies, with a single, "light but tight" regulator, the Higher Education Commission of India. The policy further commits India to raising the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education from approximately 26 percent at the time of the policy's formulation to 50 percent by 2035, a target implying the creation of millions of additional higher education seats.

This paper examines the scope, rationale, and early implementation trajectory of these reforms, situating NEP 2020 within the broader question of what constitutes genuine transformation, as opposed to incremental adjustment, in a higher education system as large, diverse, and institutionally complex as India's.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To document the principal higher education reforms envisaged under NEP 2020, including curricular flexibility, credit mobility, regulatory restructuring, and research infrastructure.
- To trace the institutional and policy history leading to the formulation and approval of NEP 2020.
- To examine the internationalisation dimension of NEP 2020, particularly the entry of foreign university campuses into India under the University Grants Commission's 2023 regulatory framework.
- To assess the documented early implementation experience of key NEP 2020 higher education

reforms, including the pace and scale of foreign campus establishment.

- To critically evaluate the gap between the transformative ambitions articulated in NEP 2020 and the practical, resource, and governance challenges of implementation across India's higher education system.
- To identify directions for continued reform and monitoring as NEP 2020 implementation proceeds toward its 2035 targets.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a descriptive-analytical research methodology, drawing on the publicly available text and official summaries of NEP 2020, government press releases, and reporting from established policy and education-sector publications, including Careers360, Invest India, the Indian Brand Equity Foundation, and specialised higher education reporting on the University Grants Commission's foreign higher educational institution regulations. Given the relatively recent character of several key reforms, particular attention is paid to contemporaneous reporting on implementation progress through 2025 and 2026. The study does not involve new primary data collection; it synthesises existing policy documentation and verifiable reporting to construct an evidence-based account of the scope and early trajectory of NEP 2020's higher education transformation agenda.

On the formulation and foundational character of the policy, multiple corroborating sources, including ClearIAS, Invest India, and the Indian Brand Equity Foundation, document that NEP 2020 was approved by the Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on 29 July 2020, replacing the 34-year-old National Policy on Education of 1986 and representing only the third major national education policy framework since Indian independence, following the frameworks of 1968 and 1986. These sources further document that the policy emerged from an extensive consultative process initiated in January 2015, involving, according to ClearIAS's summary of official government figures, over two lakh suggestions gathered from approximately 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats, 6,600 blocks, 6,000 urban local bodies, and 676 districts, culminating in a draft policy submitted in May 2019 by a committee chaired by former Indian Space Research Organisation chairman K. Kasturirangan. Multiple sources confirm that the policy is explicitly built on five foundational pillars, Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability, and Accountability, and is framed as aligned with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Notably, the Cabinet's approval of NEP 2020 was accompanied by the renaming of the Ministry of Human Resource Development to the Ministry of Education, a symbolic and administrative change documented across the IBEF, Byju's, and Careers360 sources reviewed, signalling the government's intent to reposition education policy as a central rather than peripheral domain of governance.

A second significant strand of the documentary literature addresses the specific structural reforms NEP 2020 proposes for higher education. Reporting by Careers360 at the time of the policy's approval documents that the policy envisions the establishment of at least one large multidisciplinary Higher Education Institution in or near every district of the country by 2030, alongside a target of doubling the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education, with subsequent official summaries, including ClearIAS's compilation, specifying this target more precisely as raising GER to 50 percent by 2035, requiring the addition of approximately 3.5 crore new higher education seats. The policy's curricular reforms are documented consistently across sources as including flexibility in subject combinations, dissolving what the Invest India summary describes as "no rigid separation between Arts and Science, curricular and extra-curricular activities, and vocational and academic streams," alongside the introduction of multiple entry and exit points in undergraduate programmes with appropriate certification at each stage, and the establishment of an Academic Bank of Credits to facilitate the digital storage and transfer of academic credits earned across institutions. The policy additionally proposes the establishment of a National Research Foundation, intended, according to the ClearIAS summary, to foster a strong research culture across higher education institutions, addressing a long-standing structural weakness in India's research ecosystem relative to its teaching capacity.



LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature and documentary record on NEP 2020 and higher education transformation in India converges around several themes: the policy's formulation history and foundational principles, its specific structural reforms for higher education, the regulatory restructuring it proposes, and the early, empirically observable progress of its internationalisation agenda.

A third and particularly significant theme in the documentary literature concerns the regulatory restructuring proposed under NEP 2020. The Invest India government policy summary documents that the policy calls for a single regulator for higher education, the Higher Education Commission of India, intended to replace the existing fragmented architecture of sector-specific bodies, operating on a "self-disclosure based transparent system of approvals in place of inspections," with common regulatory norms applied uniformly across public and private higher education institutions. The ClearIAS summary further specifies that this proposed single regulator would operate with four separate verticals responsible for distinct regulatory functions, reflecting the policy's stated "light but tight" regulatory philosophy, and that the existing system of college affiliation to universities is intended to be phased out over fifteen years, with graded autonomy extended to colleges in the interim. It is important to note, based on the documentary record reviewed, that while these regulatory bodies have been proposed within NEP 2020's text, their full legislative and institutional establishment, including the formal constitution of the Higher Education Commission of India as a statutory body replacing the University Grants Commission and All India Council for Technical Education, remained, as of the most recent available reporting, a matter of ongoing legislative and institutional process rather than a fully completed transition.

The internationalisation dimension of NEP 2020's higher education agenda has produced the most concrete and empirically traceable body of implementation evidence to date, centred on the University Grants Commission's notification, on 8 November 2023, of the Regulations for the Setting Up and Operation of Campuses of Foreign Higher Educational Institutions in India. Reporting from ThePrint at the time these regulations were being finalised documents that Australian universities Deakin and Wollongong were among the earliest institutions to announce concrete plans for establishing campuses in India, with Deakin indicating an intention to begin operations by mid-2024. Subsequent, more recent reporting substantially corroborates the pace and scale of this implementation: a 2026 industry analysis published by the education consultancy GOALisB documents that, as of December 2025, seventeen globally ranked universities had received formal approval from either the University Grants Commission or the International Financial Services Centres Authority, the latter governing a parallel, more liberalised regulatory pathway for campuses established within the GIFT City International Financial Services Centre in Gujarat, to establish degree-granting campuses in India. A detailed sector analysis published by the education consultancy RAYSolute in mid-2026 documents that, as of that point, three foreign university campuses were fully operational: Deakin University's GIFT City campus, which commenced operations in July 2024 with approximately 43 first-year students; the University of Wollongong's GIFT City campus, which commenced in November 2024 with approximately nine first-

year students; and the University of Southampton's Gurugram campus, which commenced in August 2025 with approximately 170 first-year students and represented, notably, the first mainland Indian campus established under the UGC's 2023 regulations rather than the separate GIFT City regulatory framework. The same analysis documents that these three operational campuses together enrolled fewer than 250 students in their first year of operation, and that further institutions, including Queen's University Belfast, Coventry University, the University of Liverpool, the University of Bristol, the University of York, and the Illinois Institute of Technology, the latter representing the first United States university to pursue this pathway, were documented as approved or in the process of launching operations through 2026 and beyond. Complementary analysis published by Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas's India Corporate Law blog clarifies the distinct legal architecture underlying this expansion, noting that foreign universities may establish campuses in India through two parallel regulatory pathways, the UGC's 2023 regulations governing mainland Indian campuses, and a separate set of regulations issued by the International Financial Services Centres Authority in 2022 governing campuses established specifically within the GIFT City financial centre, with the latter pathway offering greater regulatory flexibility, including exemption from certain domestic higher education regulations and unrestricted revenue repatriation.



Taken together, this literature and documentary record demonstrates that NEP 2020's higher education agenda encompasses genuinely far-reaching structural ambitions, spanning curricular flexibility, regulatory consolidation, research infrastructure, and internationalisation, formulated through an unusually extensive consultative process and formally adopted through the highest levels of government approval. At the same time, the most concretely traceable implementation evidence available, that concerning foreign university campus establishment, reveals a pattern of measured, gradual, and still numerically modest early-stage implementation relative to the scale of the policy's stated

ambitions, a pattern that invites careful, ongoing assessment of the broader implementation trajectory of NEP 2020's other, less easily quantified structural reforms.

Structural Reforms Envisaged for Higher Education

Table 1 summarises the principal structural reforms for higher education proposed under NEP 2020, drawing on the government policy documentation and corroborating reporting reviewed above.

Table 1: Principal NEP 2020 Reforms for Higher Education

Reform Area	Description	Target/Mechanism
Gross Enrolment Ratio	Substantial expansion of higher education access	GER to reach 50% by 2035; approximately 3.5 crore additional seats
Multidisciplinary institutions	Phasing out of narrow, single-stream institutions	At least one large multidisciplinary HEI in or near every district by 2030
Flexible undergraduate structure	Multiple entry and exit options with certification	Certificate (1 year), Diploma (2 years), Degree (3 years), Degree with Research (4 years)
Academic Bank of Credits	Digital repository enabling credit accumulation and transfer across institutions	National-level digital credit storage mechanism
Research infrastructure	Strengthening of India's research ecosystem across disciplines	Establishment of the National Research Foundation
Regulatory consolidation	Replacement of fragmented, multi-body regulation with a single regulator	Proposed Higher Education Commission of India, with four functional verticals
Affiliation reform	Gradual phasing out of the college-university affiliation system	15-year transition with graded institutional autonomy
Technology integration	Coordinated use of technology across the education sector	National Educational Technology Forum

Source: compiled from Invest India (investindia.gov.in), ClearIAS, IBEF, and Careers360 reporting on NEP 2020.

INTERNATIONALISATION AND FOREIGN UNIVERSITY ENTRY

Table 2 documents the early, verifiable implementation record of foreign university campus establishment in India under the UGC's 2023 regulatory framework and the parallel GIFT City IFSCA framework, as of the most recent available reporting.



Table 2: Foreign University Campuses in India — Operational Status (as of mid-2026)

University	Country	Location	Regulatory Pathway	Status / Commencement
Deakin University	Australia	GIFT City, Gujarat	IFSCA Regulation s, 2022	Operational since July 2024
University of Wollongong	Australia	GIFT City, Gujarat	IFSCA Regulation s, 2022	Operational since November 2024
University of Southampton	United Kingdom	Gurugram	UGC FHEI Regulation s, 2023	Operational since August 2025 (first UGC mainland campus)
University of Liverpool	United Kingdom	Bengaluru	UGC FHEI Regulation s, 2023	Approved/launching
Queen's University Belfast	United Kingdom	GIFT City, Gujarat	IFSCA Regulation s, 2022	Launching January 2026
Coventry University	United Kingdom	Not specified	UGC FHEI Regulation s, 2023	Launching January 2026
Illinois Institute of Technology	United States	Mumbai	UGC FHEI Regulation s, 2023	Approved/launching (first US university)
University of York, Bristol, Aberdeen	United Kingdom	Mumbai	UGC FHEI Regulation s, 2023	Approved/launching

Source: compiled from RAYSolute (raysolute.com), GOALisB industry analysis, Leverage Edu, and Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas India Corporate Law blog reporting, current as of the sources' publication dates in late 2025 and 2026.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The documentary record reviewed in this paper reveals a policy of considerable structural ambition, whose implementation trajectory, at least where it can be most concretely traced, proceeds at a measured and incremental pace relative to the scale of its stated targets. NEP 2020's proposed transformation

of India's higher education architecture, spanning curricular flexibility, credit mobility, research infrastructure, regulatory consolidation, and internationalisation, represents a genuinely comprehensive reform agenda, formulated through an unusually extensive and geographically distributed consultative process and formally approved at the highest level of government. The internationalisation strand of this agenda, evidenced through the concrete establishment of foreign university campuses under the UGC's 2023 regulations, demonstrates that meaningful implementation is indeed occurring; three campuses were operational by mid-2025, with a substantially larger cohort of approved institutions preparing to launch through 2026 and beyond.

At the same time, the modest enrolment figures documented at these early operational campuses, fewer than 250 students collectively across the first three institutions in their inaugural years, illustrate the considerable gap that persists between the scale of NEP 2020's headline targets, such as the addition of 3.5 crore higher education seats by 2035, and the pace of concrete, on-the-ground institutional transformation achievable within a compressed timeframe. This pattern is broadly consistent with the general character of large-scale education policy reform in a system as vast, federally distributed, and institutionally heterogeneous as India's, where national policy pronouncements necessarily depend on sustained state-level, institutional, and regulatory follow-through for their full realisation. The proposed Higher Education Commission of India, similarly, remains, based on the documentary record reviewed, a structural proposal whose full legislative and institutional establishment as the sole successor to India's existing multi-body regulatory architecture continues to represent an ongoing rather than completed process.

CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy 2020 articulates a genuinely comprehensive and structurally ambitious vision for the transformation of Indian higher education, encompassing multidisciplinary institutional consolidation, flexible undergraduate curricula, national credit mobility through the Academic Bank of Credits, strengthened research infrastructure through the proposed National Research Foundation, regulatory simplification through the proposed Higher Education

Commission of India, and a substantial internationalisation agenda enabling foreign university campus establishment on Indian soil. The most concretely traceable dimension of this agenda, the entry of foreign universities under the UGC's 2023 regulatory framework, demonstrates that meaningful implementation is proceeding, with a growing cohort of globally ranked institutions establishing or preparing to establish Indian campuses through 2026 and beyond, even as the modest early enrolment figures at these campuses illustrate the gradual, incremental character of on-the-ground transformation relative to the policy's headline targets. As NEP 2020 implementation continues toward its 2035 horizon, sustained attention to the pace of regulatory consolidation, the scale-up of multidisciplinary institutional restructuring, and the practical accessibility of internationalised higher education options across India's diverse student population will be essential to assessing whether the policy's transformative ambitions are ultimately realised in practice.

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