

Transforming School and Higher Education through NEP 2020: A Review of Curriculum Innovation, Inclusive Learning, Assessment Reform, and Employability-Oriented Pedagogy.

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Abstract: The National Education Policy 2020 marks one of the most ambitious attempts to restructure Indian education after more than three decades of policy continuity. Unlike earlier reform discourses that largely treated school education, higher education, skill development, assessment, and inclusion as parallel concerns, NEP 2020 attempts to reorganize the entire educational continuum through a learner-centred, multidisciplinary, competency-based, and equity-sensitive framework. This review critically examines how NEP 2020 seeks to transform school and higher education through four interlinked reform domains: curriculum innovation, inclusive learning, assessment reform, and employability-oriented pedagogy. The paper argues that the transformative potential of NEP 2020 lies not merely in its structural changes, such as the 5+3+3+4 school framework, multiple entry-exit options, Academic Bank of Credits, and multidisciplinary higher education, but in its deeper philosophical shift from content transmission to capability formation. However, the review also highlights that policy ambition alone cannot ensure educational transformation. The success of NEP 2020 depends on teacher preparedness, institutional autonomy, digital infrastructure, inclusive financing, assessment literacy, regional adaptability, and the creation of credible pathways between education and work. Drawing upon policy documents, curriculum frameworks, national education data, and international literature on inclusive education and competency-based learning, this paper proposes an integrated framework for NEP implementation. It concludes that NEP 2020 should be understood not as a single reform document, but as a long-term restructuring project whose outcomes will depend on how effectively India can translate policy language into classroom practice, institutional governance, and measurable learner development..

Keywords: NEP 2020; curriculum reform; inclusive education; assessment reform; employability; higher education; school education; competency-based learning; multidisciplinary education; India..

Introduction

Education systems across the world are undergoing a deep transition from knowledge-delivery models to competence-building ecosystems. The earlier assumption that schooling and university education should primarily transmit disciplinary content is increasingly insufficient in the context of rapid technological change, labour-market uncertainty, social diversity, and widening inequality [1]. In India, these pressures are particularly intense because the education system has to respond simultaneously to foundational learning deficits, uneven school quality, regional and linguistic diversity, higher education expansion, graduate unemployability, digital divides, and the demand for global competitiveness [2]. The National Education Policy 2020 was introduced against this complex background and presents itself as a comprehensive reform document that attempts to connect early childhood care, school education, higher education, vocational education, teacher education, research, technology, language policy, inclusion, and employability within one integrated vision [3].

The selected theme—transforming school and higher education through NEP 2020—is important because NEP 2020 does not treat school and university education as isolated stages. Instead, it views education as a developmental continuum [4]. Foundational literacy and numeracy, curricular flexibility, experiential pedagogy, inclusive classrooms, competency-based assessment, multidisciplinary higher education, vocational exposure, and lifelong learning are presented as mutually dependent reforms. The policy's emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy recognizes that higher-order learning, employability, and research capacity cannot emerge if basic reading, writing, and mathematical abilities remain weak in the early years [5].

At the school level, NEP 2020 proposes a shift from the traditional 10+2 structure to a 5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical structure. This is not merely an administrative rearrangement; it reflects a developmental understanding of childhood and adolescence [6]. The foundational stage emphasizes play-based and activity-based learning; the preparatory stage emphasizes discovery and interactive classroom learning; the middle stage introduces subject-oriented conceptual understanding; and the secondary stage aims at multidisciplinary, flexible, and critical learning [7].

At the higher education level, the policy attempts to move away from rigid, single-discipline, examination-heavy degree structures toward multidisciplinary, flexible, research-oriented, and skill-integrated learning. Multiple entry and exit options, the Academic Bank of Credits, multidisciplinary institutions, vocational integration, four-year undergraduate programmes, and learning-outcome-based curricula are central to this reform vision. However, NEP 2020 must be reviewed critically rather than celebrated uncritically. Its language is visionary, but its implementation is uneven [8].

Review Methodology

This paper adopts a critical narrative review approach supported by policy analysis. A narrative review is appropriate because NEP 2020 is not a single technical intervention but a broad reform framework involving curriculum theory, pedagogy, assessment, inclusion, governance, and employability. The review draws upon four categories of sources: official policy documents, curriculum and credit frameworks, national education data, and peer-reviewed literature on education reform [9].

The core policy sources include the National Education Policy 2020, National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023, NIPUN Bharat documents, UGC curriculum and credit frameworks, Academic Bank of Credits guidelines, PARAKH assessment initiatives, AISHE reports,

and UDISE+ school education data. The review also engages with international literature on inclusive education, learner-centred pedagogy, formative assessment, curriculum reform, skill development, and employability [10].

The review follows five analytical steps: first, identifying the major reform domains in NEP 2020; second, mapping these domains across school and higher education; third, examining their theoretical basis in educational philosophy and pedagogy; fourth, evaluating implementation opportunities and constraints; and fifth, proposing an integrated framework for future research and policy practice.

Philosophical Foundation of NEP 2020: From Rote Learning to Capability Formation

The deeper significance of NEP 2020 lies in its attempt to shift Indian education from an input-heavy model to a capability-oriented model. Traditional Indian education has often been criticized for syllabus overload, rote memorization, examination pressure, fragmented disciplines, limited vocational relevance, and weak links between classroom learning and real-life problem-solving. NEP 2020 attempts to address these limitations by emphasizing conceptual understanding, creativity, critical thinking, ethics, constitutional values, multilingualism, scientific temper, multidisciplinary learning, and holistic development [11].

This shift can be interpreted through three philosophical lenses. First, from a constructivist perspective, learning is not the passive reception of information but the active construction of meaning. NEP 2020's emphasis on experiential learning, inquiry, discussion, play-based learning, and project-based pedagogy aligns with constructivist principles [12]. Second, from a pragmatist perspective, education should prepare learners to solve real problems in society. The policy's focus on vocational education, internships, skill development, and employability reflects this orientation. Third, from a humanistic and inclusive perspective, education should support the full development of the learner, including emotional, ethical, social, creative, and intellectual capacities [13].

The policy's school education reforms are especially significant because they recognize the developmental relationship between age, cognition, language, and learning. Young children do not learn effectively through abstract textbook-heavy instruction [14]. They learn through play, movement, stories, interaction, sensory exploration, and language-rich environments. By placing early childhood care and education within the formal policy imagination, NEP 2020 attempts to correct a long-standing weakness in India's education system: the neglect of early years as the foundation of later academic success [15].

In higher education, the philosophical shift is visible in the move toward multidisciplinary learning. NEP 2020 challenges the rigid separation between arts, sciences, commerce, vocational education, and professional education. This is important because real-world problems—climate change, public health, artificial intelligence, forensic science, law, agriculture, sustainability, entrepreneurship, and social justice—do not exist within disciplinary boundaries [16].

Curriculum Innovation in School Education

Curriculum innovation under NEP 2020 is not limited to changing textbooks. It involves rethinking what is taught, how it is taught, why it is taught, and how learning is connected to the child's developmental stage, local context, language, culture, and future capabilities. The most visible structural change is the replacement of the traditional 10+2 model with the 5+3+3+4 structure [17].

The major curriculum innovation is the movement away from content accumulation toward competency development. Curriculum is expected to become lighter in terms of rote factual load but deeper in terms of conceptual understanding. This distinction is crucial. A reduced curriculum should not mean intellectual dilution. Rather, it should mean the removal of unnecessary repetition and mechanical memorization so that learners can spend more time on analysis, application, creativity, discussion, and problem-solving [18].

The focus on foundational literacy and numeracy is central. Evidence from India has repeatedly shown that many children progress through school without mastering basic reading and arithmetic. NEP 2020's emphasis on foundational learning is therefore not a minor reform; it is the base condition for the success of all later reforms. Without foundational learning, digital education, multidisciplinary curriculum, employability skills, and higher education expansion remain structurally weak [19].

Curriculum innovation also includes the integration of arts, sports, vocational education, environmental awareness, constitutional values, ethics, and local knowledge. This is important for reducing the artificial hierarchy between academic and non-academic learning. In many school systems, students who are good at memory-based examinations are treated as intelligent, while those with practical, artistic, linguistic, interpersonal, or technical abilities are often undervalued [20].

Table 1. Curriculum Transformation in School Education under NEP 2020

Stage	Age/Grade Approximation	Curriculum Orientation	Pedagogical Emphasis	Expected Transformation
Foundational	Ages 3-8	Early childhood care, literacy, numeracy, play, language	Play-based, activity-based, story-based, sensory learning	Strong foundation for lifelong learning
Preparatory	Ages 8-11	Language, mathematics, art, environment, basic concepts	Discovery learning, classroom interaction, hands-on activities	Transition from play to formal learning
Middle	Ages 11-14	Subject introduction, science, mathematics, social science, arts	Experiential learning, projects, conceptual clarity	Reduction of rote learning
Secondary	Ages 14-18	Multidisciplinary study, flexibility, critical thinking, vocational exposure	Choice-based, inquiry-based, skill-linked learning	Preparation for higher education, work, and citizenship

Curriculum Innovation in Higher Education

Higher education reform under NEP 2020 is built around flexibility, multidisciplinary, research orientation, credit mobility, and employability [21]. The policy challenges the traditional Indian model where students enter a rigid programme, study a fixed set of subjects, appear in annual or semester examinations, and graduate with limited practical exposure. In contrast, NEP 2020 imagines higher education as a flexible ecosystem where students can combine disciplines, earn and transfer credits, exit and re-enter programmes, pursue research, undertake internships, and develop professional skills [22].

The Academic Bank of Credits and multiple entry-exit system are among the most important structural reforms. These are significant because many students in India discontinue higher education due to financial, family, health, employment, migration, or social reasons. A flexible credit system can prevent such students from losing all academic progress [23].

The multidisciplinary university model is especially important. NEP 2020 seeks to move away from fragmented colleges and narrow single-stream institutions toward large multidisciplinary higher education institutions. This vision is aligned with global higher education trends, where universities are expected to produce graduates who can think across disciplines and adapt to uncertain futures [24].

However, higher education reform should not be mistaken for administrative restructuring alone. A university does not become multidisciplinary simply by offering elective courses from different departments. True multidisciplinary requires curriculum dialogue, co-teaching, problem-based modules, shared research questions, flexible credit design, and institutional culture [25].

Table 2. Major Higher Education Reforms under NEP 2020

Reform Area	NEP 2020 Direction	Transformative Potential	Implementation Risk
Multidisciplinary education	Integration of arts, sciences, humanities, vocational and professional fields	Produces adaptable graduates capable of complex problem-solving	Superficial course mixing without intellectual integration
Multiple entry-exit	Certificate, diploma, degree, and research-oriented pathways	Supports mobility and reduces dropout loss	Employers may undervalue exit qualifications
Academic Bank of Credits	Digital credit storage and transfer	Enables lifelong and flexible learning	Quality equivalence across institutions may be difficult
Four-year undergraduate programme	Research and multidisciplinary orientation	Strengthens preparation for research and advanced study	Uneven institutional capacity

Vocational integration	Skill exposure and internships	Connects education with livelihood	Risk of low-status vocational tracking
Research emphasis	Undergraduate research and National Research Foundation vision	Builds innovation culture	Requires funding, mentorship, and laboratory capacity

Inclusive Learning: Beyond Access and Enrolment

Inclusive education is one of the central pillars of NEP 2020, but inclusion must be understood deeply. In many policy discussions, inclusion is reduced to enrolment of marginalized groups or admission of children with disabilities into regular classrooms. While access is necessary, it is not sufficient [26]. A learner may be physically present in school but excluded from meaningful learning due to language barriers, poverty, caste discrimination, gender norms, disability, digital exclusion, poor pedagogy, or humiliating classroom practices [27].

In the Indian context, inclusive education must address multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage: rural location, first-generation learner status, gender, caste, tribe, disability, minority language background, poverty, migration, and lack of digital resources. NEP 2020's inclusive vision includes gender inclusion, socio-economically disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities, multilingual education, open schooling, scholarships, digital access, and special education zones [28].

However, inclusion will remain incomplete unless it enters everyday pedagogy. Inclusive learning means that teachers must be able to identify different learning needs, adapt materials, use multiple modes of explanation, avoid stigma, support slow learners, enrich gifted learners, and create classroom cultures where students feel respected [29].

The distinction between equality and equity is important here. Equality means giving the same resources to all learners. Equity means giving different forms of support according to need so that all learners can achieve meaningful outcomes. NEP 2020's inclusive promise is closer to equity than mere equality [30].

Table 3. Inclusive Learning under NEP 2020: From Policy Promise to Classroom Practice

Inclusion Dimension	Learner Group	Required Pedagogical Response	Risk if Ignored
Socio-economic inclusion	Poor, rural, first-generation learners	Scholarships, bridge courses, local language support, mentoring	Dropout, low confidence, hidden exclusion
Disability inclusion	Learners with physical, sensory, cognitive, or learning disabilities	Assistive technology, accessible infrastructure, individualized support	Formal enrolment without real participation
Linguistic inclusion	Mother-tongue learners, multilingual students	Multilingual pedagogy, local language materials	Conceptual confusion, early learning gaps

Gender inclusion	Girls, transgender learners, gender-vulnerable students	Safe schools, sanitation, counselling, gender-sensitive curriculum	Absenteeism, dropout, restricted aspiration
Academic diversity	Gifted and slow learners	Differentiated instruction, enrichment, remedial support	Boredom for advanced learners; failure for slow learners
Digital inclusion	Learners without devices or internet	Offline content, community digital centres, blended support	Technology-driven inequality

Assessment Reform: From Examination Pressure to Learning Evidence

Assessment reform is one of the most difficult but most important components of NEP 2020. Indian education has historically been dominated by high-stakes examinations, marks, ranking, board results, entrance tests, and degree certification. This has created a culture where students often study to reproduce expected answers rather than understand concepts. Teachers also experience pressure to complete the syllabus and prepare students for examinations rather than support deep learning [31].

NEP 2020 proposes a shift toward competency-based, formative, diagnostic, and holistic assessment. Assessment reform has three major purposes. First, it should diagnose learning gaps early. Second, it should support learning through feedback. Third, it should certify achievement fairly. In the current system, the third purpose dominates while the first two are neglected [32].

A strong assessment system should include written tests, oral responses, projects, portfolios, classroom observation, peer assessment, self-assessment, practical work, performance tasks, and digital evidence where appropriate. However, the danger is that holistic assessment may become another bureaucratic burden if teachers are required to fill lengthy records without meaningful training. Assessment reform requires assessment literacy [33].

At the higher education level, assessment reform should move beyond end-semester written examinations. Universities must include research projects, fieldwork, internships, case analysis, presentations, laboratory performance, reflective journals, problem-solving tasks, and industry-linked assignments. Employability-oriented education cannot be assessed only through theoretical examinations [34].

Table 4. Assessment Reform under NEP 2020

Traditional Assessment Pattern	NEP-Oriented Assessment Reform	Educational Benefit
Memory-based written exams	Competency-based tasks	Measures understanding and application
Annual high-stakes evaluation	Continuous and formative assessment	Identifies learning gaps early

Marks-focused reporting	Holistic progress cards	Captures cognitive, social, emotional, and skill development
Same test for all learners	Flexible and inclusive assessment	Supports diverse learning needs
Teacher as examiner	Teacher as feedback provider	Improves learning during the process
Exam preparation as learning	Learning evidence as assessment	Reduces rote culture

Employability-Oriented Pedagogy: Connecting Education with Work without Reducing Education to Training

Employability is one of the most urgent concerns in Indian education. Many students complete degrees but lack practical skills, communication ability, digital competence, workplace readiness, problem-solving capacity, and professional confidence. NEP 2020 attempts to address this through vocational education, internships, multidisciplinary learning, skill development, entrepreneurship, and stronger connections between education and industry [35].

However, employability-oriented pedagogy must be understood carefully. Education should not be reduced to narrow job training. A university is not merely a placement centre, and a school is not merely a pre-employment factory. The deeper goal is to build adaptive employability: the ability to learn, unlearn, relearn, communicate, collaborate, think ethically, solve problems, use technology, and adapt to changing work contexts [36].

Employability-oriented pedagogy must begin at the school level, not only in higher education. Schools can build foundational employability through communication, creativity, collaboration, basic digital literacy, financial awareness, environmental responsibility, and problem-solving. Higher education can then build advanced employability through internships, research, industry projects, entrepreneurship, and professional specialization [37].

Table 5. Employability Skills and Pedagogical Strategies under NEP 2020

Employability Dimension	Required Skill	Pedagogical Strategy
Cognitive employability	Critical thinking, reasoning, problem-solving	Case-based learning, inquiry-based learning, research projects
Digital employability	Data literacy, AI literacy, digital communication	Digital assignments, simulations, blended learning
Communication employability	Writing, speaking, presentation, multilingual ability	Seminars, debates, language labs, reflective writing

Social employability	Teamwork, leadership, empathy	Group projects, peer learning, community engagement
Professional employability	Workplace discipline, ethics, responsibility	Internships, mentoring, professional portfolios
Entrepreneurial employability	Innovation, risk-taking, opportunity identification	Start-up projects, design thinking, incubation activities

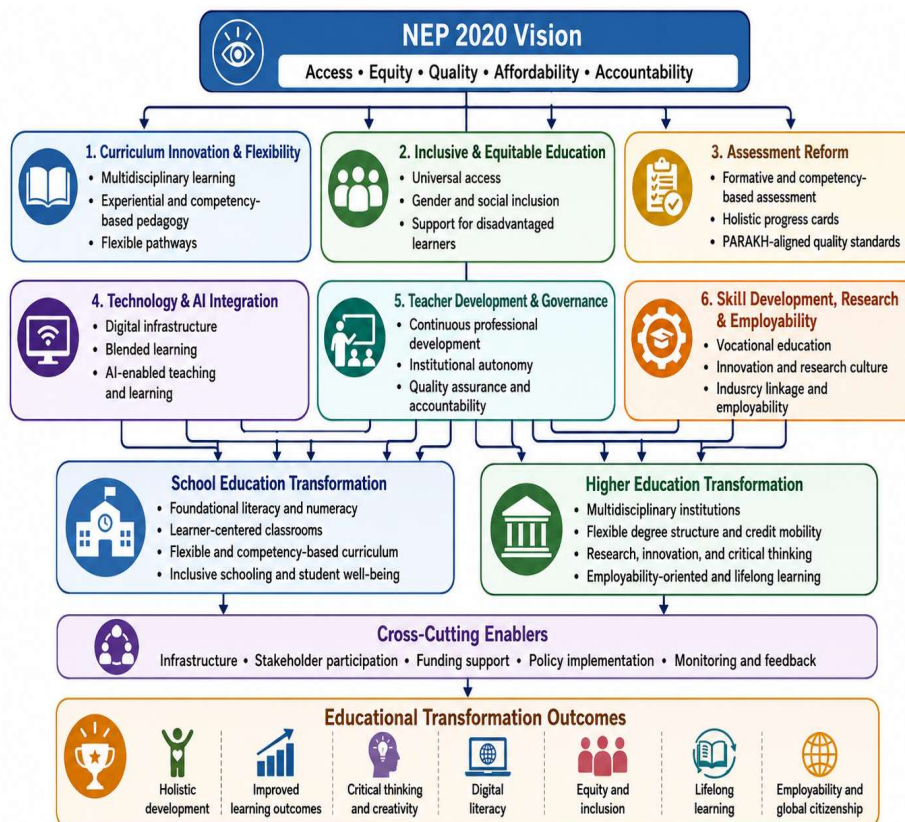


Figure 1. Integrated Framework for NEP 2020-Based Educational Transformation

Proposed Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework shows that NEP 2020 reforms should not be implemented separately. Curriculum, inclusion, assessment, and employability are interdependent. A skill-based curriculum without inclusive access will widen inequality. Inclusive classrooms without assessment reform will not identify learning gaps [38]. Assessment reform without curriculum change will remain superficial. Employability without foundational learning will benefit only already-privileged students. Therefore, the success of NEP 2020 depends on integrated implementation [39].

The framework also emphasizes that learner development must remain the centre of educational reform. When reform becomes overly administrative, institutions may focus on compliance rather than learning. A learner-centred implementation strategy would ask whether the student is actually developing stronger conceptual understanding, better communication, ethical reasoning, creativity, confidence, and readiness for life and work [40].

Research Gaps Identified from the Review

Although NEP 2020 has generated extensive discussion, several research gaps remain. First, there is a gap between policy intention and classroom-level evidence. Many studies discuss NEP 2020 conceptually, but fewer studies examine how teachers are actually implementing competency-based curriculum, experiential learning, multilingual pedagogy, and holistic assessment in classrooms [41].

Second, there is insufficient research on inclusive implementation. NEP 2020 uses strong inclusion language, but more empirical studies are needed on how reforms affect rural learners, children with disabilities, first-generation learners, tribal communities, linguistic minorities, and economically disadvantaged students [42].

Third, there is a gap in evaluating higher education flexibility. Multiple entry-exit, Academic Bank of Credits, and multidisciplinary structures are promising, but their actual acceptance by students, universities, employers, and professional bodies needs deeper investigation [43].

Fourth, employability is often discussed in terms of skills, but there is limited research on pedagogy for employability. More studies are needed on which teaching methods actually improve graduate employability in Indian contexts. Fifth, assessment reform remains under-researched. There is a need to study whether holistic progress cards, competency-based assessments, and PARAKH-aligned reforms improve learning or simply create additional administrative work [44].

Challenges in Implementation

The major challenge of NEP 2020 is not vision but translation. The policy uses progressive terms—holistic, multidisciplinary, inclusive, flexible, competency-based, experiential, learner-centred—but these terms require institutional capacity. Without capacity, they may become decorative language in official documents [45].

Teacher preparation is the most critical challenge. A teacher trained in lecture-based, exam-oriented pedagogy cannot automatically shift to project-based, inclusive, multilingual, and competency-oriented teaching. Professional development must be continuous, practice-based, and discipline-specific. Short workshops will not be enough [46].

The second challenge is infrastructure. Inclusive and innovative education requires libraries, laboratories, internet, assistive devices, safe classrooms, sports facilities, counselling support, and digital resources. The third challenge is assessment alignment. If board examinations, university examinations, and entrance tests remain memory-heavy, teachers and students will continue to prioritize rote learning [47].

The fourth challenge is equity. Flexible systems can benefit privileged students more if disadvantaged students lack counselling, digital access, language support, or financial security. The fifth challenge is institutional autonomy and governance. Higher education reforms require academic freedom, curriculum design capacity, industry collaboration, research funding, and transparent regulation [48].

Conclusion

NEP 2020 represents a major attempt to transform Indian education from a rigid, examination-dominated, content-heavy system into a flexible, inclusive, multidisciplinary, competency-based, and

employability-oriented learning ecosystem. Its importance lies in the fact that it connects school education and higher education within a continuous developmental framework. Foundational literacy and numeracy, child-centred pedagogy, multilingual education, curriculum flexibility, holistic assessment, multidisciplinary higher education, vocational exposure, credit mobility, and employability are not separate reforms; they are interconnected parts of a larger educational transformation.

However, this review also shows that NEP 2020's success cannot be assumed. The policy's transformative language must be matched by teacher training, institutional readiness, infrastructure investment, inclusive financing, assessment redesign, curriculum development, and reliable monitoring. The real test of NEP 2020 will not be whether institutions mention it in syllabi or policy documents, but whether students experience deeper learning, greater confidence, stronger foundational skills, fairer assessment, wider inclusion, and better preparation for life and work.

The future of NEP 2020 depends on whether India can avoid two dangers: first, reducing reform to administrative compliance; and second, allowing flexibility to become a privilege only for already-advantaged learners. If implemented with seriousness, NEP 2020 can become a foundation for a more humane, equitable, and future-ready education system. If implemented superficially, it may remain a visionary document without sufficient classroom transformation..

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