



NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020 AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE IN INDIA: INSTITUTIONAL REFORM, FLEXIBILITY AND PUBLIC POLICY CHANGE

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ABSTRACT This paper examines National Education Policy 2020 as a major turning point in the governance of higher education in India. It argues that the policy is significant not merely because it revises curricula or academic structures, but because it seeks to redesign the institutional, regulatory, and learner-facing architecture of higher education through multidisciplinary restructuring, graded autonomy, credit mobility, digitalization, research support, and a more flexible public-policy framework. The study follows a descriptive and analytical methodology based on secondary data drawn from policy documents, official implementation updates, and recent public institutional records. The paper finds that the reform process is already visible in measurable indicators: higher education enrolment reached 4.46 crore in 2022–23 (provisional), higher education institutions rose to 60,380, the Academic Bank of Credits through the Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry has been adopted by 2,543 institutions with over 4.56 crore student identifiers, and SWAYAM crossed 5 crore cumulative enrolments with 401 universities adopting credit regulations. The paper concludes that National Education Policy 2020 is transforming higher education governance by shifting the system from fragmentation and rigidity toward flexibility, institutional autonomy, academic mobility, and digitally enabled governance; however, its long-term success will depend on institutional preparedness, faculty capacity, state-level implementation, and the ability to convert policy ambition into durable system-wide change.

KEYWORDS : National Education Policy 2020, higher education governance, institutional reform, flexibility, academic mobility, Academic Bank of Credits, public policy change, multidisciplinary education, digitalization, India

1. INTRODUCTION

India's higher education system entered the third decade of the twenty-first century with a dual reality: rapid quantitative expansion and persistent structural strain. Enrolment grew to **4.46 crore** in 2022–23 (provisional), the number of higher education institutions increased to **60,380**, and female enrolment rose to **2.18 crore**, yet the system continued to face fragmentation, rigid pathways, weak research intensity in much of the sector, overloaded affiliating structures, and uneven flexibility for learners. It is in this context that National Education Policy 2020 acquired major importance. The policy linked governance reform with student-centred flexibility, multidisciplinary restructuring, research culture, technology integration, and long-term future-readiness, while setting a target of **50 per cent Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education by 2035**. In public-policy terms, therefore, National Education Policy 2020 is best understood as a systemic reform agenda aimed at transforming how higher education is governed, organized, experienced, and expanded in India.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine National Education Policy 2020 as a governance reform framework for higher education in India.
2. To study how flexibility, student mobility, and learner-centred reforms are reshaping higher education pathways.
3. To evaluate the present and future promise of the policy for access, equity, quality, and public benefit in higher education.
4. To identify the major implementation and policy constraints that may affect long-term outcomes.
5. To analyse the major institution, regulatory and structural changes proposed under the policy

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a **descriptive, analytical, and research-oriented methodology** based entirely on secondary data. The source base consists primarily of official policy documents, regulatory guidelines, implementation dashboards, and recent public institutional releases on higher education reform, learner mobility, research support, digital governance, and enrolment trends. The method is interpretive rather than econometric. It does not attempt to derive a single causal coefficient linking National Education Policy 2020 to higher education outcomes. Instead, it analyses the policy as a public-policy transformation and examines its effects through institutional design, governance restructuring, credit mobility, digital platforms, research infrastructure, and access-oriented reforms. This approach is appropriate because the policy's most important effects are systemic and institutional, not reducible to one numerical indicator alone.

4. National Education Policy 2020 as a Governance Reform Agenda

National Education Policy 2020 places governance reform at the heart of higher education transformation. It identifies the main weaknesses

of the older system as fragmentation, low research emphasis, suboptimal governance, ineffective regulation, and the burden of large affiliating universities that weaken undergraduate quality. Its response is ambitious: higher education institutions are to be transformed into large multidisciplinary universities, colleges, and knowledge hubs, each ideally with 3,000 or more students, with at least one such institution in or near every district over time. The policy also proposes a gradual phasing out of the affiliating college system over fifteen years through graded autonomy, mentoring, and institutional strengthening. This is one of the most important governance shifts in the policy because it attempts to move Indian higher education away from a mass affiliation model toward more self-governing degree-granting institutions.

Institutional restructuring under the policy is tied to a new typology of institutions. The reform vision differentiates among research-intensive universities, teaching intensive universities, and autonomous degree granting colleges, thereby moving the debate from mere nomenclature to functional design. The policy also envisions an umbrella Higher Education Commission of India, with four verticals for regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standards. The underlying philosophy is often described as “light but tight” regulation less duplication and more coherence.

Autonomy is the other defining element of this reform agenda. National Education Policy 2020 proposes that all higher education institutions should progressively aim to become independent self-governing institutions with empowered Boards of Governors by 2035. The policy's reform agenda is not only administrative.

5. Flexibility, Student Mobility and the Learner-Centred Turn

Four-year undergraduate programme is one of the most visible shifts under National Education Policy 2020 because it changes the structure of student progression. The University Grants Commission's undergraduate curriculum and credit framework allows either three-year or four-year programmes with **multiple entry and exit points**, including a certificate after one year, a diploma after two years, a bachelor's degree after three years, and a bachelor's degree with honours, or honours with research, after four years. The four-year structure is treated as the preferred option because it allows fuller multidisciplinary exposure, stronger major-minor combinations, and research orientation where relevant. This reform is important because it weakens the old binary between completion and dropout. It creates intermediate recognition and makes the system more responsive to real student trajectories.

Academic Bank of Credits operationalises this flexibility by creating a digital architecture for credit accumulation, storage, transfer, and redemption. Through the **Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry**, more than **4.56 crore** students had created lifelong academic identifiers by October 2025, and **2,543 universities and higher**

education institutions had been onboarded. This reform is administratively significant because it changes the unit of governance from the fixed institution to the portable learner record. A student's learning journey becomes more transferable across time and institutions, which can help reduce the penalty associated with interruption, migration, or change of academic direction. In governance terms, the reform enhances interoperability across institutions and gives academic mobility a record-based administrative backbone.

National Credit Framework extends the idea of flexibility beyond higher education alone. It functions as an umbrella framework integrating credits from school, higher, vocational, and skill education, and it is designed to support assignment, accumulation, storage, transfer, and redemption of credits across these domains. It also explicitly supports creative curricular combinations and multiple entry-multiple exit options. This matters because the older higher education system treated academic learning, vocational learning, and experiential learning as relatively separate worlds. The new credit framework attempts to break that separation and align learning mobility with the broader objectives of lifelong learning and employability.

SWAYAM and related digital reforms strengthen the learner-centred turn by reducing dependence on the physical boundaries of one campus. Regulations now allow students to earn up to **40 per cent** of their credits through SWAYAM courses. By October 2025, **401 universities** had adopted these regulations; cumulative enrolment on the platform had crossed **5 crore**; more than **16,530 courses** had been developed; and the platform was issuing about **10 lakh certifications annually**. The same digital policy environment also supports simultaneous pursuit of two academic programmes, blended learning, and digital governance tools such as **SAMARTH**, which has been adopted by around **13,000 universities and higher education institutions across 32 States and Union Territories**. Taken together, these reforms mark a shift from institutional rigidity toward **portability, optionality, and learner agency**.

6. Research, Quality, Digitalization and Institutional Capacity

Anusandhan National Research Foundation represents one of the most important institutional responses to the policy's research agenda. National Education Policy 2020 had originally proposed a National Research Foundation to seed, grow, and strengthen research across universities and colleges. This vision has moved into institutional form through the **Anusandhan National Research Foundation Act, 2023**, under which the Foundation has been established as an apex body to promote research and development, foster a research culture, and connect universities, colleges, research institutions, and laboratories. This is a major governance shift because it treats research capacity not as a privilege of a few elite institutions alone, but as a systemic requirement for the transformation of higher education.

One Nation One Subscription complements this research agenda by widening access to scholarly literature. Phase I of the scheme, operational from **1 January 2025**, provides access to **over 13,000 journals** for more than **6,300 government academic and research institutions**, covering nearly **1.8 crore students, faculty, and researchers**. The significance of this reform lies in its equalising potential. Research quality cannot improve if access to global scholarship remains concentrated in a small number of well-funded institutions. By extending access more widely, the reform strengthens the informational foundation of research, teaching, and postgraduate training.

Digitalization and institutional capacity under the policy are not limited to teaching platforms. Official implementation pages identify five major themes for monitoring progress—learner-centric education, digital learning, industry-institute collaboration, academic research and internationalization, and Indian Knowledge System. Digital governance systems such as **SAMARTH** are now meant to support transparency, ease of administration, and data-based management across the student life cycle. At the same time, language-related reforms and digital content creation are expanding the scope of participation. By 2025, a major initiative for digital textbooks in **22 Indian languages** had been announced, with a planned development of **2.43 lakh textbooks** during 2025–2028 and an estimated outlay of **5,100 crore**. These reforms show that National Education Policy 2020 is not only about making institutions more flexible; it is also about making them more capable, more research-oriented, and more digitally governed.

7. Access, Equity and the Present-Future Promise for Higher

Education in India

Access and enrolment expansion remain central to the policy's promise. Higher education enrolment increased to **4.46 crore** in 2022–23, female enrolment reached **2.18 crore**, and female Gross Enrolment Ratio rose to **30.2**. Women also accounted for **43 per cent** of enrolments in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics disciplines, which is among the higher global participation rates in this domain. These figures matter because they show that expansion and gender inclusion are already advancing alongside policy reform. National Education Policy 2020 strengthens this direction by combining institutional expansion with more flexible pathways, online options, credit mobility, scholarships, and policy attention to socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

Language inclusion, student support, and future readiness deepen the policy's longer-term significance. Higher education institutions are being encouraged to expand programmes in Indian languages, and large-scale initiatives have been launched to produce educational material in multiple languages. By 2025, institutions offering Indian language courses had nearly doubled since 2014–15, and enrolment in such courses had risen to over **8.4 lakh** in 2022–23. The **Bharatiya Bhasha Pustak Pariyojana** aims to create **2.43 lakh digital textbooks in 22 Indian languages**, while **Prime Minister Vidyalakshmi** has been given an outlay of **3,600 crore** for 2024–25 to 2030–31 to support access to higher education for **22 lakh students** across **860 qualifying institutions** through collateral-free and guarantor-free loans. These measures matter because the policy's future promise lies not only in better governance, but in a more inclusive, multilingual, mobile, and employability-oriented higher education system. If implemented well, the policy can help Indian higher education become more equitable in the present and more resilient and future-ready in the decades ahead.

8. Challenges and Policy Constraints

Implementation remains uneven, and this is the first major challenge. National Education Policy 2020 requires coordinated action by the Union, States, Union Territories, higher education institutions, and multiple regulatory and academic bodies. The policy itself acknowledges that implementation needs collective effort, and official monitoring now tracks progress across five major themes. This indicates that reform success depends not only on policy design, but on administrative capacity across jurisdictions.

Institutional preparedness and faculty capacity form the second challenge. Multidisciplinary restructuring, credit mobility, research orientation, and blended delivery all require major curricular redesign, academic advising strength, digital capability, and leadership capacity. A policy can mandate flexibility, but institutions must possess the staffing, governance systems, and pedagogic readiness to deliver it. The same holds for research reform: access to journals and new funding architecture help, but research culture cannot be built by notification alone.

Digital divide and regulatory transition form the third challenge. Platforms such as SWAYAM, APAAR, and SAMARTH can widen flexibility, but they also presume varying degrees of digital readiness among students and institutions. Likewise, the shift from an affiliation-heavy system to graded autonomy, Boards of Governors, and a reorganized regulatory landscape is a long transition rather than an immediate change. Funding, institutional inequality, and the distance between policy intent and everyday practice will continue to shape outcomes.

9. CONCLUSION

National Education Policy 2020 is transforming higher education in India not simply by introducing new curricular ideas, but by recasting the governance philosophy of the sector. Its major changes—multidisciplinary restructuring, graded autonomy, flexibility in pathways, credit portability, digital governance, research support, language inclusion, and learner-centred design together mark a movement away from fragmentation and rigidity toward a more integrated and future-ready system. The policy's importance lies precisely in this breadth: it seeks to change how institutions are organized, how students move through the system, how research is supported, and how higher education is aligned with India's long-term social and economic aspirations.

The future significance of the policy will depend on implementation

depth. If institutional restructuring, flexibility tools, digital systems, research reforms, and access-oriented measures are sustained and harmonized, the policy can strengthen both the democratic reach and the intellectual quality of Indian higher education. If implementation remains uneven, however, its transformative promise may remain partial. The central judgement of this paper is therefore balanced but clear: **National Education Policy 2020 has already altered the architecture of higher education governance in India, and it possesses the capacity to reshape the present and future of the sector—provided governance reform is matched by continuous institutional commitment.**

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