

DISRUPTION, DECLINE, & ADAPTATION

Public Policy and Market Mediation in Indian Higher Education

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A new education policy reflects India's efforts to reposition the sector within a changing context and its aspiration to develop the country as a global higher education hub. The policy proposals for the universalization and internationalization of higher education, and for the restructuring of curriculum, reinforce these perspectives. Although the institutional framework for policy implementation is not yet fully in place, a shift in orientation toward centralization, market mediation, and a reduced reliance on public institutions seems core to the reforms.

India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), launched after 34 years of anticipation, aimed to reposition the sector within the evolving economic and social context of development. Unlike previous policies, the 2020 policy was framed against the context of the sector attaining maturity and massification and placing increased reliance on market forces to shape the direction of change. For the past five years, all discussions about reform in the sector have centered around the policy, but slow progress in implementation has kept the policy proposals largely untested.

Progress Toward Implementation

Promises made in the policy include the universalization of higher education, institutional consolidation, transition to a multidisciplinary orientation, opening of the sector to foreign providers, strengthening research, and transformation through new arrangements to ensure light but tight regulations.

Differing from earlier policies, the NEP 2020 encourages expansion of the higher education sector through its focus on universalization. As the country remains at the early stages of massification, there is immense scope for enrolling more youth to universalize the sector. The policy recognizes the need for skills-based education that will allow the country to take advantage of its youth bulge. However, there are challenges in practice. The think tank NITI Ayog projects that universalization of the sector, which implies almost doubling the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), will require an additional intake of nearly 50 million students to increase the total student enrollment to 90 million by 2035. The introduction of four-year undergraduate programs, which extend the duration of undergraduate studies by an additional year, may help to achieve the universalization target.

The policy expects that, by 2040, higher education institutions (HEIs) will become multidisciplinary with multiple entry and

exit options into and out of four-year undergraduate programs. Reviews show that most institutions have introduced four-year undergraduate programs (FYUP) but have done so without adequate curriculum reorganization and teacher preparations. In the absence of planning, there is substantial confusion and uncertainty around what to do with the additional year, especially regarding the required fourth-year research component.

The proposal for institutional consolidation envisages a minimum enrollment of 3,000 students per higher education institution. This proposal looks unrealistic because not more than 5 percent of Indian institutions enroll 3,000+ students. A majority of institutions enroll less than 1,000 students. Further, a consolidation of institutions is difficult because they operate under varying ownership and management. Many institutions remain small in size because they were established in the less developed and rural areas in order to promote equity. Closing down or relocating them will adversely affect equity efforts.

The policies related to the internationalization of higher education envisage that India will emerge as a global higher education hub. While joint degrees, dual degrees, and twinning programs have always been allowed, foreign universities and their branch campuses were not permitted prior to the NEP. Since its implementation, two foreign universities have established branch campuses in India, and many more are in process.

Challenges related to curriculum, the level of fees, and repatriation of a surplus of branch campuses are beyond the purview of national regulatory authorities and nationalistic considerations. Equity and inclusion may become a casualty when market-friendly foreign campuses and elite institutions—levying high fees, relying on selective admissions, and following English medium instructions—become the norm for quality higher education.

The policy also emphasizes the promotion of research, although no more than 10 percent of Indian institutions are actively engaged in research and publications. For example, state universities account for more than 80 percent of enrollment but produce only 14.7 percent of research publications. In contrast, although elite institutions account for less than 10 percent of enrollment, they produce more than 50 percent of research publications. The policy envisages establishing a National Research Foundation (ANRF) to promote and fund research. Developing the mechanisms for channeling these research resources toward a more equitable research ecosystem is a challenging task, given the poor research base of institutions currently.

The NEP 2020 recommends a new structure for reorganizing governance and management of higher education. At present the sector is regulated by more than fifteen bodies. The structure—the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI)—is expected to bring all regulatory authorities under one umbrella. It will have four independent verticals, one each for regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standard setting. This body is yet to take a final shape.

What Constrains Policy Implementation?

Implementation of the NEP suffers from an inability to create effective institutional arrangements and capacity. Public funding support is also not forthcoming, with budgetary allocations to education not encouraging in the initial years following policy formulation.

The Ministry of Education generally follows a committee approach and relies on existing institutions for policy

implementation. Several committees have, therefore, been constituted, and several institutions have been identified, very often without any provision for additional resources, which has crippled policy implementation processes.

The creation of FYUP has also increased the workload of teachers, challenged the infrastructure capacity of institutions, and increased the cost for students with doubtful gains in the quality of skill acquisition and learning. Surveys among teachers and students indicate a fear of FYUP diluting core disciplinary competencies. There is an urgent need for introducing system-wide capacity development programs to support teachers to restructure curricula, integrate technology in teaching-learning processes, adopt new pedagogical practices, and strengthen research orientation among students.

Conclusion

The aspirations reflected in the NEP 2020 policy seem to be misaligned with the implementation strategies. New regulatory structures are yet to emerge and over-reliance on existing institutions seems to be constraining policy implementation. Absence of enhanced budgetary support also severely constrains new initiatives. How far markets can be relied upon to implement public policy in education is debatable. The available trends indicate that policy implementation promotes an unstated silent restructuring process for centralizing control, weakening the role of public institutions and privileging elite private and foreign institutions in higher education policy and planning. These trends tend to erode the policy promise of equitable and inclusive quality higher education in the country.

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