The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 3 | Issue 8 | August 2025
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online)
Website: www.theacademic.in

From Vision to Transformation: Tracing India's Higher Education Policy from the Kothari Commission (1964-66) to NEP 2020.

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DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17129606

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 25-08-2025

Published: 10-09-2025

Keywords:

Higher Education, Policy development, Kothari Commission, NPE,1986, NEP, 2020, Development of Higher Education.

ABSTRACT

The evolution of higher education policy in India reflects the nation's shifting socio-economic priorities and its aspiration to create a globally competitive knowledge society. Beginning with the Education Commission (1964–66), chaired by Dr. Daulat Singh Kothari, the policy framework emphasised equitable access, expansion of institutions, promotion of scientific temper, and strengthening of research capabilities. Subsequent decades witnessed gradual reforms through the National Policies on Education (1968, 1986, and 1992), the liberalisation era, and quality assurance mechanisms, which collectively sought to address the challenges of access, equity, and quality. The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative shift towards holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible learning pathways, with goals such as achieving a 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio by 2035, integrating technology, and fostering global academic linkages. This paper traces the trajectory from the Kothari Commission to NEP 2020, highlighting continuities, divergences, and the persistent implementation challenges that shape the future of Indian higher education

Introduction

Higher education serves as the backbone of a nation's intellectual capital, innovation capacity, and socio-economic progress. In India, policy directions in higher education have undergone substantial

transformation since the mid-20th century, shaped by national developmental goals, global academic trends, and the demands of a rapidly changing economy. The Education Commission (1964–66), popularly known as the Kothari Commission, was the first comprehensive attempt to design an integrated education system, emphasising expansion, equity, scientific temper, and research excellence. Its recommendations laid the groundwork for the National Policy on Education (1968) and set the tone for subsequent reforms. Over the following decades, higher education in India underwent phases of expansion, diversification, and quality assessment, influenced by the National Policy on Education (1986, revised in 1992), the liberalization of the economy in the 1990s, and the emergence of new regulatory and accreditation mechanisms. Despite these efforts, challenges of access, equity, employability, and research output persisted. The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a paradigm shift, envisioning a holistic, multidisciplinary, and globally competitive higher education ecosystem. With provisions such as flexible degree structures, multiple entry and exit options, a target of 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio by 2035, and a unified regulatory framework, NEP 2020 seeks to align India's higher education with 21st-century needs. This paper traces the evolution of higher education policy in India from the Kothari Commission to NEP 2020, analysing policy continuities, structural changes, and the evolving vision for higher education in the context of national and global imperatives.

Higher Education Policy under the Kothari Commission

The Education Commission (1964–66), under the chairmanship of Dr. Daulat Singh Kothari, approached higher education as a strategic instrument for national development, cultural enrichment, and the cultivation of a modern, scientifically minded citizenry. The Commission recognised that India's post-independence progress depended heavily on producing a highly skilled and socially responsible workforce. It is therefore recommended that a planned expansion of higher education be made with a careful balance between quantity and quality. This included increasing the number of universities and colleges, but with strong quality control mechanisms to avoid what it called "indiscriminate proliferation" of institutions. Structurally, it proposed a three-tier academic system, undergraduate, postgraduate, and research levels, designed to streamline progression and promote excellence at each stage. The Commission gave primacy to research and innovation, especially in science and technology, arguing that these fields were essential to industrial growth, agricultural modernisation, and self-reliance in defence and economic production. It emphasized the modernization of curricula, advocating for the integration of liberal, professional, and vocational education so that graduates would possess both specialized expertise and a broad-based understanding of society.

Equity was a recurring theme, with the Commission calling for a Common School System at the foundational level to eliminate disparities in educational opportunity, thereby enabling students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education on an equal footing. It recommended scholarship and fellowship schemes, hostel facilities, and targeted financial aid to support meritorious and needy students. Teacher quality was considered the cornerstone of academic excellence, leading to the proposal for rigorous teacher preparation programs, professional development opportunities, and the creation of national centers of excellence for pedagogy and research. The University Grants Commission (UGC) was envisioned as a central coordinating and funding body with enhanced powers to plan, monitor, and maintain standards across the higher education system. The Commission also placed great emphasis on national integration and value orientation, urging that higher education foster scientific temper, secularism, and democratic ideals, alongside nurturing leadership and civic responsibility. In essence, the Kothari Commission's recommendations aimed to establish a cohesive, inclusive, and future-oriented higher education system that would simultaneously meet the country's manpower needs, uphold academic standards, and contribute to national development. This vision influenced not only the National Policy on Education (1968) but also subsequent reforms over the next five decades.

Educationalists have offered varied interpretations of the Kothari Commission's vision for higher education, with many praising its comprehensiveness while others highlighting its limitations in implementation. Supporters argue that the Commission was ahead of its time in recognising higher education as a driver of socio-economic transformation, scientific advancement, and national integration (Naik, 1975; Aggarwal, 2002). Its emphasis on a balanced expansion, increasing access while maintaining quality, was seen as a visionary response to India's growing youth population and developmental needs. Advocates also commend the Commission for its interdisciplinary approach, linking liberal education with vocational and professional training, thus anticipating the multidisciplinary orientation of policies like NEP 2020. Scholars such as J.P. Naik and B.R. Ambedkar-inspired educational thinkers have lauded the equity measures, including scholarships, hostels, and the Common School System, as progressive tools for bridging rural-urban and socio-economic divides in higher education. Furthermore, the Commission's prioritisation of research and teacher preparation has been regarded as a critical intervention for enhancing academic excellence and global competitiveness.

However, critics contend that the Kothari Commission's proposals, though theoretically sound, were overly ambitious given India's economic and administrative constraints in the 1960s (Tilak, 1989; Buch, 1991). The push for large-scale institutional expansion without adequate funding mechanisms was seen

as creating pressures that later contributed to quality dilution in certain segments of higher education. Some scholars have argued that the Common School System, while conceptually equitable, was politically and socially resisted, resulting in its near non-implementation and perpetuation of inequality in access. Others point to the Commission's heavy focus on science and technology as having unintentionally marginalised the humanities and social sciences in funding and prestige, a trend that has had long-term implications for the holistic development of knowledge systems. Additionally, governance recommendations, such as strengthening the UGC's role, have been criticised for promoting excessive centralisation, which some educationalists believe constrains institutional autonomy.

Higher Education Policy through the National Policy on Education, 1968

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968 marked a significant turning point in the evolution of India's higher education system, as it was the first comprehensive education policy framed after independence. Drawing heavily from the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964–66), the policy aimed to provide a cohesive vision for strengthening higher education as a means of fostering national development, promoting equality, and advancing the quality of learning. At its core, the policy recognised higher education as a crucial instrument for producing skilled manpower, generating new knowledge, and promoting national integration. One of its most influential features was the emphasis on equal access to education, advocating for special measures such as scholarships, fellowships, and the development of institutions in rural and backward areas to bridge socio-economic disparities. The NPE 1968 also laid stress on quality improvement, calling for better teacher preparation, enhanced research facilities, and a more rigorous evaluation of academic standards.

A notable aspect of the policy was its advocacy for a uniform educational structure, recommending the adoption of the 10+2+3 system across the country. This framework sought to bring uniformity in secondary and higher secondary education, facilitating a smoother transition to higher education and promoting curricular coherence. The policy also highlighted the need for strengthening science and technology education to meet the demands of industrialisation and economic growth, while also recognising the importance of arts, humanities, and social sciences for fostering cultural values and critical thinking. It called for the expansion of higher education institutions but cautioned against unchecked growth that might compromise quality. Emphasis was placed on improving governance and funding mechanisms, recommending the strengthening of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and enhancing state support for higher education.

However, the implementation of NPE 1968 faced challenges. While the vision was progressive, resource constraints, political will, and socio-economic disparities hindered its full realisation. Many of the recommended equity measures, such as the Common School System and rural institutional development, remained partially implemented. Yet, the policy's influence persisted, as it provided the conceptual and structural basis for subsequent reforms in 1986, 1992, and eventually the National Education Policy 2020. In retrospect, NPE 1968 stands as a landmark in India's higher education policy, representing an early attempt to balance expansion, equity, and excellence, while aligning educational goals with national development priorities in a newly independent nation striving for socio-economic transformation.

Educational scholars have acknowledged the visionary scope of the National Policy on Education (1968), but many also critique its vagueness and implementation deficits. On the positive side, the policy represented the first coherent attempt to reform post-independence education through systemic expansion, coordination, and social equity. It laid out a broad framework for equity, uniform standards, and emphasis on science and technology, laying a foundation for subsequent reforms (Teachers Institute). However, several educationalists have also highlighted limitations. One common criticism is that the policy was too vague; it failed to specify mechanisms, responsibilities, or adequate funding for its lofty goals, making its implementation patchy at best (Teachers Institute). The "three-language formula," meant to foster national integration, often faced backlash for being imposed without sensitivity to regional contexts, notably in non-Hindi states (Inflibnet and Teachers Institute). Moreover, while NPE 1968 aimed to expand higher education, capacity constraints led to overcrowding, resource shortages, and uneven institutional quality (Teachers Institute).

Further, educationalist J. P. Naik lamented that no political party was truly committed to a radical transformation of education, with constitutional amendments providing only partial solutions amid persistent underfunding and fragmented governance (The Wire). Overall, while the policy was instrumental in shaping India's evolving educational narrative, educationalists broadly emphasize that its transformative potential remained limited due to a lack of clarity, political will, and administrative capacity.

10th and 12th FYP 2002-2012

The Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002–2007) and the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2012–2017) in India placed significant emphasis on expanding access, enhancing quality, and promoting equity in higher education, responding to the demands of a rapidly globalizing economy and a growing youth population. The Tenth

Plan highlighted the need to increase enrolment in higher education through expansion of infrastructure, establishment of new universities and colleges, and promotion of private sector participation under appropriate regulatory mechanisms. It stressed improving quality through accreditation, curriculum reform, faculty development, and integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in teaching–learning processes. Special focus was placed on marginalized groups, particularly women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minorities, to ensure inclusive growth. By contrast, the Twelfth Plan aligned with the knowledge economy vision emphasized the creation of world-class institutions, internationalization of education, and greater autonomy for higher education institutions, while also prioritizing research and innovation ecosystems. It underscored the role of the National Knowledge Network for linking universities, reforms in governance through transparent accreditation systems, and outcome-based funding. Both Plans collectively sought to balance quantity with quality, envisioning a system that could simultaneously meet domestic development needs and compete globally.

Several scholars and policymakers argue that the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002–2007) rightly prioritized expanding access to higher education by encouraging infrastructure development and private-sector participation, alongside efforts to improve quality via accreditation and ICT integration. However, they challenge the Plan's effectiveness due to persisting regional and social disparities that limited its inclusive impact. Moving to the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2012–2017), prominent voices such as Narendra Jadhav (then Member, Planning Commission) highlight a notable shift from mere expansion to a stronger emphasis on quality improvement across higher education. Jadhav urged improvements in accreditation frameworks and the vitality of research culture, warning that India's higher education system risked losing its demographic advantage if excellence wasn't established (Jadhav, as cited in *Inclusion*, 2014). Critics of the Twelfth Plan also raise concerns about its drive for increased private-sector involvement. Dr. Vijender Sharma observes that while the Plan suggested innovative measures allowing nonprofit private institutions access to public funds akin to public institutions, the absence of stronger social accountability mechanisms raised fears of unchecked privatization (Sharma, 2013).

The Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), 2013

It laid down a comprehensive set of recommendations aimed at overhauling India's state higher education system by focusing on access, equity, quality, and governance reforms. One of its primary recommendations was the creation and strengthening of State Higher Education Councils (SHECs) to serve as autonomous planning, monitoring, and advisory bodies, thereby ensuring a decentralized and coordinated approach to higher education development. It is recommended that states prepare State

Higher Education Plans (SHEPs) to map existing resources, identify gaps, and strategically plan new initiatives, with funding linked to these plans. RUSA emphasized the improvement of infrastructure in existing institutions, including the construction of classrooms, laboratories, libraries, hostels, and ICT facilities, alongside the establishment of model degree colleges in educationally backward districts to address regional disparities. The policy also recommended faculty recruitment and capacity building, including filling long-standing vacancies, providing opportunities for professional development, and attracting qualified talent through competitive selection and incentives. In terms of academic reform, RUSA stressed the need for curriculum modernization, the introduction of a choice-based credit system (CBCS), the promotion of interdisciplinary and skill-based courses, and the strengthening of research and innovation through funding and collaborations. On the governance front, it recommended greater institutional autonomy in academic, administrative, and financial matters, while ensuring robust quality assurance through mandatory NAAC accreditation and performance-linked funding. It also advocated for the integration of equity initiatives, such as targeted scholarships, special facilities for disadvantaged groups, and gender-sensitive policies, to make higher education more inclusive. By linking financial assistance to measurable outcomes, RUSA sought to incentivize states to implement long-term structural reforms rather than short-term fixes, aligning state systems with the vision of a globally competitive, inclusive, and high-quality higher education sector.

B. Venkatesh Kumar & Ashok Thakur highlight RUSA's promise as "a game-changer for higher education" by shifting funding from elite central institutions to the vast number of state-run universities and colleges, and by conditioning central grants on institutional reforms, governance improvements, and accreditation efforts. Dr. Raj Shree Dhar emphasizes that RUSA addresses multiple dimensions of higher education reform, access, equity, quality, research, governance, curriculum, and student support, underscoring the importance of linking teaching with research and the need for teachers with both broad expertise and enthusiasm. Chukka Ramaiah critiques certain implementation aspects, recommending that the matching grant requirement (typically 35%) be waived, especially citing Andhra Pradesh's failure to mobilise the state share, and urges for stronger research incentives and industry partnerships to strengthen university research capacity Jakirhossen Mandal critically analyses RUSA in his MPhil thesis, commending its focus on improving access, equity, and quality through strategic state-level planning and outcome-based funding, while also highlighting persistent challenges related to financing, governance, institutional capacity, and accreditation.

NEP, 2020 Vision, and overall goals for Higher Education

NEP 2020 sets a broad, mission-level vision for higher education: a holistic, multidisciplinary system that is equitable, accessible, research-oriented, and globally competitive. The policy explicitly targets a major expansion of the sector and reorients higher education toward skills, critical thinking, and research linked to national development objectives. Analysts have described NEP 2020 as the most far-reaching reform package since independence, though they note that the policy's success depends heavily on implementation capacity and finance.

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and expansion targets- A cornerstone commitment of NEP is to raise the GER in higher education (including vocational education) from around mid-20s percent to 50% by 2035, implying the creation of millions of additional seats and many more institutions. Scholars welcome the ambition but warn that meeting the target requires sustained public funding, state-level planning, and careful attention to quality as enrolments expand. Undergraduate restructuring: Four-year degrees & multiple entry/exit (Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)). NEP introduces a flexible, multidisciplinary undergraduate model, principally a four-year undergraduate programme (FYUP) with multiple exit and entry points, an Academic Bank of Credits to store transferable credits, and encouragement of multidisciplinary study. The literature generally regards this as a progressive move toward student mobility and breadth of learning, but raises practical concerns about curriculum design, credit transfer logistics, degree recognition by employers, and readiness of affiliating universities and colleges to adapt.

Regulation, governance, and institutional restructuring (HECI proposal)- The policy calls for a major overhaul of the regulatory architecture by replacing multiple overlapping statutory bodies with a single, overarching regulator for higher education (the Higher Education Commission of India, HECI), while separating regulation from adjudication and funding functions. Commentators generally support reducing regulatory fragmentation but caution about the need to balance standard-setting with institutional autonomy and to ensure accountability and capacity at the national and state levels. Research, innovation, and the National Research Foundation (NRF)- NEP proposes the establishment of a National Research Foundation to catalyse, fund, and coordinate research across disciplines and institutions, addressing the long-standing weakness of India's research ecosystem. Analyses highlight NRF as a positive signal for boosting research funding and fostering interdisciplinary projects, but stress that NRF's impact will depend on predictable funding, merit-based allocations, autonomy, and systems to translate research into innovation and industry collaboration.

Quality assurance, accreditation, and faculty development- NEP strengthens emphasis on accreditation (NAAC and others), outcome-based regulation, and large-scale faculty development (including

Institutional Development and Teacher Education reforms). Reviews note progress in prioritizing faculty capacity and quality metrics, but also warn of accreditation becoming perfunctory unless accompanied by substantive institutional support (training, research grants, merit hiring, and incentives for pedagogic innovation). Multidisciplinarity, curricular flexibility, and vocational integration- The policy promotes the dismantling of rigid disciplinary silos and mainstreaming of vocational education into higher education, encouraging interdisciplinary programmes and partnerships with industry. The literature sees this as aligned with global trends and 21st-century skills requirements, but points out practical barriers to teacher readiness, syllabus redesign, and building credible industry linkages at scale. Digital education and online learning- NEP underscores digital infrastructure and online education (SWAYAM, virtual labs, national digital library) as enablers for widening access and blended learning. Scholars affirm digital tools' potential (especially for reach and flexibility) but caution about the digital divide, variations in institutional ICT maturity, and the need for pedagogically sound online course design and assessment. Internationalisation and global engagement- NEP encourages foreign universities to set up campuses in India and promotes transnational partnerships to improve quality and global standing. Analysts welcome the opening but highlight regulatory, quality control, and equity questions, e.g., ensuring standards, avoiding a two-tier system, and protecting access for domestic students.

Equity, inclusion, and support for SEDGs (socio-economically disadvantaged groups)- NEP includes numerous equity measures, scholarships, outreach, support for disadvantaged groups, and promotion of regional, gender, and language inclusion. Literature recognizes these intentions but stresses that meaningful equity outcomes will require targeted funding, data-driven policies, affirmative hiring, and mechanisms to ensure that expansion doesn't widen inequalities across regions and social groups. Financing and implementation challenges- Across the literature, there is recurrent emphasis on funding as the key constraint: NEP's reforms imply substantial public and private investment (in infrastructure, faculty, research, and digital platforms). Many scholars and commentators argue that without a clear, sustained financing strategy, strong state-level capacity building, and phased, realistic timelines, NEP's ambitions risk under-delivery. Implementation case studies and progress reports (early monitoring) indicate mixed adoption, some structural changes are underway, while several reforms remain slow or uneven.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark reform in India's education sector, setting a comprehensive vision for the transformation of higher education to meet the needs of the 21st century. Replacing the National Policy on Education of 1986 (revised in 1992), the NEP 2020

emphasizes access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability as the guiding pillars for systemic change. In the higher education domain, the policy aims to create a holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible learning environment that fosters critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong learning. It advocates a shift from rigid disciplinary silos to a multidisciplinary curriculum with multiple entry and exit points, supported by an Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) to facilitate student mobility. The policy envisions the phasing out of the affiliation system, replacing it with large, well-governed autonomous institutions or clusters, while also establishing the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) as an overarching regulatory body to streamline governance. Additionally, NEP 2020 calls for enhancing gross enrolment ratio (GER) to 50% by 2035, promoting research and innovation through the establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF), and integrating technology-enabled learning. Given its transformative scope, the NEP 2020 has been widely discussed in academic literature, with scholars analyzing its potential to bridge quality gaps, enhance employability, and align Indian higher education with global standards. This thematic literature review synthesizes the diverse scholarly perspectives on NEP 2020's higher education recommendations, examining the reforms under key thematic areas such as governance, curriculum, research, equity, and technology integration.

Pratap Bhanu Mehta, former Vice-Chancellor of Ashoka University, calls the NEP "for the most part admirable" but questions what systemic supports will enable its bold ideas to succeed. Shyam Menon (former VC of Ambedkar University Delhi) emphasizes that "much of the mediocrity in the system... stems out of a culture of mistrust and control," issues that a reform document alone cannot fix without a deeper cultural shift. Centralization vs. federal autonomy- D. Ramesh Patnaik (CPI-ML Red Star) strongly criticizes the policy's move toward centralization. He argues that NEP 2020 marginalizes state governments by concentrating power in bodies like the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) and the National Testing Agency (NTA), undermining the federal character of India's education system and democratic rights of states(Red Star Online). Risks of corporatization and access inequality- A commentary by *JURIST* warns that NEP's push for autonomy in private colleges could encourage corporatization, tuition hikes, and increased dropout rates. With greater financial autonomy and multiple exit options, they argue the policy might deepen disparities and weaken the Right to Education(JURIST). Equity concerns for marginalized groups- An article in *IntechOpen* highlights NEP's digital and administrative reforms as problematic. It argues that reliance on smart classrooms and online education may exacerbate inequities for rural and marginalized learners, and that the shift to campus-free models neglects social interactions critical for inclusive learning environments(IntechOpen). Ideological and cultural concerns in curriculum- Tanika Sarkar, discussing the broader context of NEP, criticizes

ideological overtones in the push for Indian Knowledge Systems. She sees NEP as infused with RSS-derived ideology, blending ethnocentric relevance with neoliberal privatization—thus potentially eroding equitable, secular education(ThePrint). Skill gaps and weak internationalization- University of Hyderabad Vice-Chancellor B. J. Rao, among other academics, points to NEP's internationalization goals falling short due to poor industry linkages and foundational skill gaps. A QS I-GAUGE study found many institutions lacking international collaboration capacity, infrastructure, or reserved seats, limiting NEP's global (The Times of India). Long-term impact and implementation timeline- Former UGC Secretary Rajnish Jain suggests that NEP's real impact will only be visible after 15 years only then will a student educated fully under the policy complete their academic journey. He stresses the need for improved infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and institutional governance to make NEP's goals achievable (The Times of India). Skills relevance and academic revival- Prof. B. Timmegowda (former VC, Bangalore University) praises NEP's innovative curricula and skill focus, especially for enhancing employability and industry relevance, emphasizing active, student-centric pedagogies

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