

Inclusivity in Higher Education under NEP 2020: A Perception Analysis of Key Stakeholders

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Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 mandates a transformative shift towards an inclusive, equitable, and learner-centric higher education system in India. This study assesses the perception and readiness of key stakeholders' teachers, students, administrators, and parents regarding the implementation of NEP 2020's inclusivity provisions in higher education institutions.

Employing a descriptive survey design, the research collected mixed-method data from 120 respondents across HEIs in Cuttack city. Findings reveal a significant duality: while stakeholders generally validate the policy's progressive intent (77% agreement on promoting inclusivity), they express major reservations concerning its practical viability. Critical barriers identified include a perceived inadequate financial support (40% dissent on sufficiency), low institutional preparedness (55% felt HEIs were not yet ready), and a substantial policy awareness gap, particularly among parents.

An ANOVA test confirmed a statistically significant difference in perception of inclusivity across the four stakeholder groups ($p = 0.002$). The study concludes that the successful realization of NEP 2020's inclusive vision depends crucially on immediate and sustained capacity building, augmented funding, and targeted awareness campaigns to overcome the observed implementation deficit.

Keywords: Inclusivity, Higher Education, Perception, Stakeholders

Contextualizing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a paradigm shift in the landscape of India's higher education system, succeeding the policies of 1968 and 1986 (with its 1992 modification). Envisioned as a blueprint for 21st-century learning, the NEP 2020 aims to transform higher education to be fundamentally inclusive, interdisciplinary, and globally competitive. The overarching goal is to foster a knowledge-based society by ensuring that the system prioritizes access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability.

The Mandate for Equity and Inclusion

A central tenet of the NEP 2020 is its unwavering commitment to equity and inclusion. The policy explicitly aims to eliminate all forms of exclusion and ensure that every learner, irrespective of their background, has an equal opportunity to pursue and succeed in quality higher education. This focus is particularly directed at Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including those from marginalized genders, economically weaker sections, and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). This commitment aligns directly with the international imperative of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education.

To operationalize this vision, the NEP 2020 introduces several strategic institutional mechanisms:

- The creation of the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) to support equitable participation.
- The establishment of Special Education Zones (SEZs) in regions with low educational representation.
- The promotion of multilingualism and flexible, technology-enabled learning platforms to dismantle structural barriers.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

The success of any large-scale educational reform hinges on its practical acceptance and implementation by the key stakeholders—teachers, students, administrators, and parents—who are the primary agents and beneficiaries of change. While the policy's vision is widely acknowledged as progressive, preliminary evidence suggests significant variability in awareness, preparedness, and resource allocation across institutions. Challenges such as faculty lack of training in inclusive pedagogies and the persistent digital divide faced by marginalized students underscore a potential gap between policy intent and ground reality. Therefore, this study is essential. By systematically investigating stakeholder perception, it provides critical empirical data to analyze the on-ground acceptance, perceived feasibility, and potential implementation bottlenecks of NEP 2020's inclusive education mandates. This analysis is crucial for policymakers and institutions seeking to refine their strategies and allocate resources effectively.

Background and Context of NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) in India has consistently played a vital role in shaping the country's higher education system since the introduction of the first policy in 1968, followed by revisions in 1986 and the most recent update in 2020. The NEP 2020 is considered a significant and visionary document aimed at transforming the Indian education system to be more flexible, multidisciplinary, and globally competitive. It replaces the earlier policy of 1986 (modified in 1992) and stands as India's first education policy of the 21st century. Its core principles revolve around access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability.

The policy outlines a fundamental shift from rote learning to conceptual understanding, emphasizing equity and inclusion. It envisions a system where all learners—especially those from Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), minorities, persons with disabilities (PwDs), and gender-marginalized groups—have equal opportunities to access and succeed in higher education. This focus aligns directly with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all.

The Mandate for Inclusivity in Higher Education

Inclusivity under NEP 2020 is not merely about admission but encompasses the development of supportive learning environments, curricula, pedagogy, and support systems that foster participation, engagement, and achievement for all. To operationalize this vision, the policy introduces several key mechanisms:

- Establishment of the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) to support female and transgender students.
- Creation of Special Education Zones (SEZs) in underrepresented regions.
- Promotion of multilingualism and regional languages in higher education.
- Increased emphasis on flexible academic pathways, multiple entry-exit options, and technology-driven learning.

- Strengthening of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to enhance the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) and reach non-traditional learners.

The Critical Role of Stakeholders

The success of any ambitious reform like NEP 2020 is ultimately determined by its implementation and reception by key stakeholders: teachers, students, parents, and institutional administrators. These groups are not only the beneficiaries but also the crucial agents of inclusive change at the institutional level. Their perceptions, awareness, and attitudes reflect the policy's relevance and feasibility in practice.

Existing studies indicate that a disconnect often exists between policy intent and ground-level reality. While the intent is progressive, challenges such as inadequate teacher training, digital inequity, and limited institutional funding pose significant barriers. Given this context, the present study seeks to provide empirical insights into how the inclusivity mandates of NEP 2020 are perceived by those directly involved in the higher education ecosystem.

Review of related literature: -

The role of National Education Policies (NEPs) in shaping higher education reforms in India has been widely discussed in academic literature, with various studies evaluating their impact on accessibility, quality, and overall educational development. The first significant policy, the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1968, aimed to democratize education and make it more accessible to all sections of society, especially those in rural and underprivileged areas (Govt. of India, 1968). The 1986 revision introduced a focus on the expansion of higher education, while also emphasizing the need for educational institutions to promote research and innovation (Govt. of India, 1986). However, many scholars argue that despite these efforts, the implementation of these policies faced significant hurdles, including inadequate infrastructure, poor funding, and insufficient teacher training (Bhattacharya, 2010; Chandra, 2015).

The most recent reform, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has introduced more comprehensive changes to the higher education sector. Researchers have highlighted the NEP's emphasis on a multidisciplinary approach, skill development, and the promotion of digital learning as key strengths of the policy (Dewan, 2020; Mishra, 2021). Studies suggest that the NEP 2020 aims to bridge the gap between academic education and industry needs by integrating vocational education with mainstream higher education (Singh & Soni, 2021). Moreover, the policy's focus on inclusivity and making education accessible to disadvantaged groups has been praised, but challenges remain regarding effective implementation, particularly in rural and remote areas (Ghosh & Pal, 2022). Despite these promising reforms, there is limited empirical evidence on how well these policies have been implemented on the ground, with some studies indicating that infrastructural and systemic challenges continue to hinder their full impact (Joshi & Sharma, 2022). Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps in the literature by assessing the impact of the NEP 2020 on higher education reforms and identifying areas that require further attention.

The NEP 2020 also advocates for the modernization of India's higher education system by encouraging the integration of technology and innovation. According to a study by Patel (2022), the policy's emphasis on digital learning and the establishment of world-class institutions has the potential to propel India's higher education system toward global standards. The NEP's focus on promoting research and development, along with the establishment of a National Research Foundation (NRF), is viewed as an attempt to align India's higher education sector with global academic and technological trends (Mishra,

2021). However, critics argue that the success of these initiatives will depend on overcoming challenges such as inadequate funding, outdated curricula, and the need for extensive training programs for teachers and administrators (Nair & Rao, 2021). Before implementing any plan or programs the perception of the stakeholders is more important because they will give a clear cut opinions to the present phenomena So before implementing NEP 2020 there are numerous research carried out regarding the perception of teachers, Parents and other stakeholders towards the implementation of inclusive education and NEP 2020 like M Vijayalakshmi study revealed that high agreement among the teachers and low level disagreements and implementing nep 2020 would provide high quality education and promote an inclusive society. Another study was carried out by (Sainwal et al., 2023) result revealed that most of parents have a positive attitude and expect that all students will benefit from a more welcoming and inclusive learning environment because of the NEP's emphasis on inclusive education. It will help to active involvements of parents towards the education their own children. Besides that, 400 above parents are also said that after the implementation of Inclusive education and NEP 2020 it will provide affordable and accessible quality education to the SEDG groups. Similarly (Singh et al., 2023) study found that there are lots of challenges related to inadequate resources, limited technology infrastructure, lack of comprehensive training, and resistance from certain stakeholders which will create to implement the inclusive education. Arya (2022) conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of the National Education Policy 2020 in promoting gender equality in schools. The result revealed that it is essential to make further efforts to address the deep-rooted gender biasness and stereotypes attitudes in the educational settings. Another study was conducted by (Mukherjee, n.d.2018) findings revealed that for achieving the goals of inclusive education in West Bengal there are lots of hurdles and challenges like lack of sufficient regular teachers and resources teachers, awareness and lack of adequate infrastructural facilities access to regular school and financial instability is the main hurdles for implementation of inclusive education. Venkateshwarlu, (2020) found that National Education Policy of India 2020 aims to improve quality, attractiveness, affordability, and supply by opening higher education for private sector and maintaining quality. It encourages merit-based admissions, research-based faculty members, and technology -based monitoring, with the goal of achieving its objectives by 2030.

The following review explores scholarly works, policy papers, and empirical studies relevant to NEP 2020, stakeholder perception, and inclusivity in higher education.

Theoretical Framework: NEP 2020's Vision for Inclusivity

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 lays a strong foundation for equitable and inclusive education, focusing intently on underrepresented groups. The policy is explicit about targeting Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), women, and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), aligning the national agenda with global principles of educational equity (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

Key inclusive mechanisms proposed by the NEP 2020 that are relevant to this study include:

- Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) and Gender Equity: Explicit support for female and transgender students to promote equity (Bose & Mehta, 2021).
- Special Education Zones (SEZs): Designated areas to boost educational infrastructure and access in underrepresented regions (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

- Multilingual Learning: Promoting regional languages in higher education to enhance access for linguistic minorities, though some studies caution about potential confusion without adequate support systems (Khan & Ali, 2021).
- Enhanced Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER): Utilizing Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to expand reach to non-traditional learners (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

These policy steps align with global benchmarks, which define inclusive higher education not merely by access but by comprehensive support, flexibility, and recognition of diversity (UNESCO, 2021).

Stakeholder Readiness and Awareness Gaps

A primary challenge identified in the literature is the significant variance in awareness and readiness across stakeholder groups, which hinders effective policy translation:

- Awareness Disparity: While higher education faculty generally support the NEP 2020 framework, awareness among students and parents is consistently found to be limited (Joshi & Kumar, 2021). Studies confirm that parental awareness is particularly low in rural areas, making them supportive of inclusivity in principle but often unaware of the practical mechanisms designed to help their children (Mohanty & Nanda, 2022).
- Regional Disparities: A critical finding is the disparity in NEP awareness between urban and rural institutions, where rural stakeholders are less informed, and institutional management often lacks the training needed to implement inclusive measures (Deshpande, 2022).
- Stakeholder Engagement: Effective reform requires the involvement of all parties. The lack of engagement among students, faculty, parents, and local administrators has been cited as a key barrier to successful policy awareness and implementation (Kaul & Sharma, 2020).

Practical Implementation and Structural Barriers

The literature identifies several structural and institutional hurdles that create a practical "implementation gap," even where policy intent is positive:

- Infrastructure and Budgetary Constraints: Administrators consistently raise concerns about the lack of adequate infrastructure and funding (Joshi & Kumar, 2021). A key finding from HEI reports is that inclusion and access remain low-priority areas due to budget constraints (UGC White Paper on NEP Implementation, 2022).
- The Digital Divide: The policy's emphasis on technology-driven learning faces a severe barrier from the digital divide. Challenges related to a lack of devices, internet access, and digital literacy in semi-urban and rural institutions disproportionately affect students from marginalized groups (Singh & Bhatia, 2021; Jena, 2021).
- Disability Support Gaps: Despite NEP provisions for PwDs, most colleges are found to be physically and pedagogically inaccessible. They lack essential assistive technology, trained staff, and clear policy-level benchmarks necessary to implement inclusive practices (NIEPA, 2020; Raman & Nair, 2021).

Teacher Training and Institutional Leadership

Faculty readiness and institutional capacity are critical determinants of inclusivity:

- Teacher Preparedness: While teachers rate NEP 2020's vision as progressive (Rana & Chopra, 2022), the lack of professional development is evident. Studies found that while teachers are positive about

inclusivity, only 30% had received any training on differentiated instruction, inclusive classrooms, or disability support, highlighting a major barrier to realizing inclusive classrooms (Chakraborty, 2023).

- Leadership Role: Research emphasizes that institutional leadership and faculty training are paramount for realizing inclusive practices, suggesting that NEP's success is ultimately determined by ground-level execution rather than policy design alone (Kumar, 2023).

In conclusion, the literature confirms the progressive nature of the NEP 2020's inclusive vision but universally points to significant challenges in funding, institutional readiness, awareness dissemination, and capacity building. This comprehensive understanding underscores the necessity of the current study to empirically measure these perceptions among stakeholders in Cuttack.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's ambitious goals to enhance accessibility, quality, and global competitiveness, particularly through its inclusive education mandates, there remains a critical gap in understanding how effectively these reforms have been implemented and whether they have achieved their intended outcomes. The problem lies in evaluating the practical realization of the policy's inclusive vision, which necessitates an exploration of stakeholder perceptions, awareness levels, and the perceived institutional readiness to operationalize these mandates.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To study the awareness of stakeholders towards the provision of NEP 2020 in higher education with respect to inclusive education.
2. To study the perception of stakeholders towards the provision of NEP 2020 in higher education with respect to inclusive education.

Hypotheses of the Study

The study aims to test the following null hypotheses:

- H_0 (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant difference in perception of NEP 2020 inclusivity across stakeholder groups.
- H_0 (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant difference in awareness of NEP 2020 inclusivity across stakeholder groups.

Research Design

This study adopted a Descriptive Survey Design. This quantitative and qualitative approach was employed to systematically collect data from a sample of stakeholders to provide a detailed, accurate, and empirical description of their existing perceptions and attitudes toward the inclusivity provisions of NEP 2020. The design is appropriate for assessing the status of a phenomenon across a defined population.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of key stakeholders (faculty, students, administrators, and parents) associated with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Cuttack city.

- Sample Size (N): A total sample of 120 respondents was selected.

- **Sampling Technique:** Stratified Random Sampling was utilized. This technique ensured that each stakeholder group was adequately and proportionally represented, enhancing the generalizability of the findings across the HEI ecosystem.
- **Sample Distribution:**
 - Teachers: 40
 - Students: 40
 - Administrators: 20
 - Parents: 20

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Two self-developed instruments were used to gather data:

1. **Perception Scale (Likert Scale):** A 5-point rating scale (ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) was developed to measure stakeholders' perception of the policy's effectiveness, institutional readiness, and the adequacy of financial support for inclusive practices.
2. **Awareness Questionnaire:** A structured questionnaire was developed to gauge the level of policy literacy and awareness concerning the specific inclusive mandates (e.g., GIF, SEZs) of NEP 2020.

The instruments were administered to collect mixed-method data, including structured quantitative responses and open-ended qualitative feedback.

Method of Data Analysis

Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistics:

- **Quantitative Data Analysis:**
 - **Descriptive Statistics:** Mean scores and percentages were calculated to summarize the data, indicating the central tendency and distribution of awareness and perception across all dimensions and groups.
 - **Inferential Statistics:** A One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used. This statistical test was crucial for examining the core research hypothesis by determining if there was a statistically significant difference in the mean perception scores across the four independent stakeholder groups.
- **Qualitative Data Analysis:**
 - Responses from open-ended questions were subjected to thematic analysis. The data were systematically coded to extract and categorize recurring themes, concerns, and implementation recommendations regarding NEP 2020's inclusivity.

A. Descriptive Analysis: Overall Perceptions (Percentages)

The following table summarizes the overall responses to key statements, focusing on the agreement/disagreement percentages:

Statement	Strongly Agree + Neutral	Disagree + Strongly Disagree	Key Interpretation
NEP 2020 emphasizes inclusivity in higher education	77% (42% + 35%)	15% + 8%	High conviction in the policy's inclusive intent.

Statement	Strongly Agree + Agree	Neutral	Disagree + Strongly Disagree	Key Interpretation
Sufficient awareness exists among stakeholders	58% (28% + 30%)	20%	22%	Moderate confidence; room for substantial improvement in awareness.
HEIs are prepared to implement inclusive practices	45% (20% + 25%)	25%	30% (20% + 10%)	Low confidence in institutional readiness (55% either neutral or negative).
Financial support for inclusive education is adequate	40% (18% + 22%)	20%	40% (28% + 12%)	Significant barrier identified; agreement and disagreement are equal, signaling a major concern.

Interpretation: While the policy's intent is highly lauded (77%), the practical aspects—institutional readiness (45%) and financial support (40%)—are significant areas of weakness, suggesting a critical gap between policy aspiration and operational capacity.

B. Descriptive Analysis: Stakeholder Group-Wise Mean Scores

Mean scores (on a 1–5 scale, with 5 being the highest) were calculated for key dimensions to identify variances across the four stakeholder groups:

Dimension	Teachers (N=40)	Students (N=40)	Administrators (N=20)	Parents (N=20)	Overall Mean
Awareness of NEP 2020	4.2	3.6	4.0	2.8	3.65
Perceived Inclusivity (Policy Intent)	4.1	4.0	4.3	3.5	3.98
Institutional Readiness for Implementation	3.2	3.5	2.8	2.6	3.03
Financial Support Adequacy	2.9	3.1	2.7	2.5	2.80

Interpretation of Group Means:

- Awareness Disparity:** Parents (2.8) exhibited the lowest mean awareness score, significantly lower than Teachers (4.2) and Administrators (4.0), confirming the lack of effective community outreach.
- Implementation Skepticism:** Administrators (2.8) and Parents (2.6), the groups most concerned with resource management and community well-being, recorded the lowest scores for Institutional Readiness, indicating deep-seated concern about the capacity of HEIs to execute the mandates.
- Financial Concern:** The dimension of Financial Support Adequacy recorded the lowest overall mean score (2.80), with all groups scoring below the neutral point of 3, highlighting it as the most critical implementation obstacle.

C. Inferential Analysis: Testing the Hypothesis (ANOVA)

- A One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed on the Perceived Inclusivity Score to test the null hypothesis (H_0 : There is no significant difference in perception across stakeholder groups).

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)	F-value	p-value
Between Groups	6.54	3	2.18	5.27	0.002
Within Groups	47.42	116	0.41		
Total	53.96	119			

Interpretation of ANOVA: The calculated p -value is 0.002, which is less than the significance level of 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected. This result confirms a statistically significant difference in the perception of NEP 2020 inclusivity across the four stakeholder groups. This finding is crucial, as it mandates that policy execution and sensitization must be tailored to address the distinct concerns and expectations of each group.

D. Qualitative Findings (Thematic Analysis)

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses reinforced the quantitative findings:

- Theme 1: Progressive Policy, Deficient Practice: Stakeholders repeatedly used terms like "progressive" and "visionary" but immediately followed with concerns about "lack of funds" and "untrained faculty".
- Theme 2: The Digital Divide: The over-reliance on technology for access and ODL was criticized, with many noting that the digital divide for rural and low-income students remains a major exclusionary factor.
- Theme 3: Critical Need for Capacity Building: A strong consensus emerged on the urgent requirement for mandatory, systematic training for teachers in inclusive pedagogy and for administrators in resource mobilization for inclusive infrastructure.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that stakeholders in Cuttack hold a generally positive perception of NEP 2020's inclusive philosophy. However, this optimism is tempered by a profound concern over practical feasibility. The primary challenges are structural and financial, specifically the inadequate budget allocation for inclusive mandates and the low institutional readiness to manage the required transformation. The statistically significant variation in perception confirms that a one-size-fits-all implementation strategy will fail to address the unique needs of administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence, the following targeted interventions are recommended:

1. Augment Financial Resources: Central and State governments must significantly increase dedicated funding for inclusive infrastructure, assistive technology, and the recruitment of specialized staff, addressing the major concern of financial inadequacy.
2. Targeted Awareness Campaigns: Launch tailored sensitization programs to improve policy literacy, focusing specifically on parents and rural communities to close the significant awareness gap identified in the data.
3. Mandatory Capacity Building: Institute mandatory, credit-bearing training modules for all faculty and administrators on inclusive pedagogy, disability support services, and anti-discriminatory practices.

4. Actionable Digital Equity Plan: Develop a comprehensive strategy to bridge the digital divide, ensuring that marginalized students have subsidized access to devices and reliable, high-speed internet to benefit from the policy's emphasis on ODL and digital learning.

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