

Challenges and Perceptions of NEP 2020 Implementation in the Higher Education System in Meghalaya: An Analysis of State Policy Shifts and Stakeholder Perspectives on the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP)

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces transformative reforms, including the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP), aimed at fostering multidisciplinary, holistic education across India. In Meghalaya, a northeastern state with unique socio-economic challenges, these reforms intersect with a historically fragmented education policy landscape marked by reliance on private institutions, politically influenced grant-in-aid systems, and inadequate teacher qualifications. This paper analyzes Meghalaya's state education policies from pre-1972 to the 2018 State Education Policy, critiques their alignment with NEP 2020, and presents findings from a pilot survey of 360 undergraduate students and 40 college teachers across 15 colleges in Shillong (East Khasi Hills) and a few from Jaintia Hills. The results reveal overwhelming concerns, including an overloaded FYUP curriculum (33 papers versus 18 previously for a three-year degree), teacher overburden without training or additional appointments, a lack of textbooks for new courses, rising financial burdens, and student backlogs leading to potential dropouts. With 87% of students reporting complaints about unwieldy syllabi and 43% of teachers citing rushed learning, the study underscores the need for contextualized implementation, infrastructure support, and poverty-sensitive policies. Recommendations include rationalizing FYUP credits, enforcing UGC norms, and prioritizing teacher capacity-building to prevent exclusion of underprivileged students.

Keywords: Four-year undergraduate program (FYUP), colleges, syllabus, policy, grant-in-aid

1.0 Introduction

The education system in Meghalaya reflects a complex interplay of colonial legacies, post-statehood policy inertia, and recent national mandates, such as the NEP 2020. Carved as a separate state in 1972, Meghalaya inherited Assam's model of sparse government schools, dominant government-aided private institutions, and minimal direct state intervention. Education shifted from the State List to the Concurrent List through the 42nd Constitutional Amendment in 1976, yet states retain significant policy autonomy. For decades, Meghalaya operated without a formal policy until the 2018 State Education Policy, which promised inclusivity but faltered in addressing poverty, where over 30% of the population lives below or near the poverty line, with clear indication of rural-urban disparities.

The FYUP, designed in line with the NEP 2020, has been implemented in Meghalaya in colleges affiliated to North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) since 2023. It extends the traditional three-year degree to four years with multiple exit options, emphasizing multidisciplinary courses (MDCs), ability enhancement courses (AECs), skill enhancement courses (SECs), value-added technical courses (VTCs), and internships. However, affiliated colleges face acute challenges, which include teacher shortages, infrastructure deficits, and non-compulsory Common University Entrance Test (CUET) admissions, with only 26% of surveyed students entering via CUET. This paper also includes viewpoints critiquing state policies supported with original pilot data on FYUP perceptions, arguing that without targeted interventions, NEP 2020 risks exacerbating inequities in a state already grappling with 16% higher secondary retention rates and 75% pre-college dropouts.

The study addresses three research questions: (1) How has Meghalaya's policy evolution shaped higher education vulnerabilities? (2) What are students' and teachers' perceptions of FYUP implementation? (3) What reforms are needed for equitable NEP 2020 rollout? Grounded in stakeholder voices from elite and rural colleges, this paper contributes to the discourse on contextualizing national policies in marginalized regions.

1.1 Historical Policy Context in Meghalaya

The policy related to education in Meghalaya can be traced back to the provincialization model introduced by Assam, where government-aided schools dominated post-1980s. Unlike the Assam legislative provincialization, in Meghalaya grants-in-aid (GIA) evolved into various other categories, such as ad hoc colleges, deficit colleges with a system of 75% state salary share, lump-sum grant colleges (where ₹1 lakh per institution is being given by the government post 2000), and the latest addition to the categories of Colleges in Meghalaya is the People's College Scheme offering state-scale salaries sans UGC allowances to 10-15 colleges from 2018. These categories of institutions were started usually through executive orders, often politically driven by favoring institutions linked to constituencies of ministers, creating inequities, with older, deserving colleges being sidelined.

The 2018 state education policy, adopted amid poverty concerns, encouraged private provisioning but ignored post-retirement benefits, risking fee hikes and dropouts. NEP 2020 supersedes it partially, yet a recent Education Commission constituted by the State Government urges alignment, highlighting gaps in teacher training and infrastructure. The NEHU-affiliated colleges initially boycotted FYUP in 2023 over unpreparedness, citing insufficient books, classrooms, and faculty for multidisciplinary demands.

1.2 NEP 2020 and FYUP Framework

The National Education Policy 2020 envisions FYUP to be holistic in nature. The course is designed with 120 credits for a three-year exit versus the 72 credits as offered previously. The new system includes 14 majors, 6 minors, 3 MDCs, 3 AECs, 3 SECs, 2 VTCs, and internships. Admission to the fourth year requires a 7.5 CGPA and 40 additional credits. Benefits include flexibility, but challenges in resource-poor states like Meghalaya, where 95% of elementary schools run without electricity, and 30% untrained teachers, which threatens efficacy. Various studies noted superficial learning from overloaded curricula and mismatched faculty skills.

Considering the overall scenario of education in Meghalaya, teacher education and teacher recruitment have been areas of neglect over the years. The state suffers from teacher recruitment lags where schools ignore NCTE norms regarding recruitment, and teachers without D.El. Ed./MTET are being recruited. Colleges bypassed the UGC NET or PhD requirement via executive orders until 2018.

Limited studies show NEP 2020 strains. The NEHU affiliates reported that 94% dropouts in some universities and enrollment dips from 750 students to 150 students in colleges. Students face exam pressure; teachers handle untrained vocational teaching, where teachers reported that Political Science faculty with knowledge of baking teach baking as a vocational component to the students. Financial burdens rise with fees exceeding ₹45,000 annually, outpacing scholarships. The review, however, reveals a policy-practice disconnect, necessitating empirical validation.

2.1 Methodology

For conducting the present study, a mixed-method design was adopted in which the study reanalyzes the opinion of education experts critiquing various policies implemented in Meghalaya, augmented by pilot surveys conducted in 2025. Quantitative data from 360 fifth-semester students drawn from the first FYUP batch, namely the 2023 entrants across 15 NEHU-affiliated colleges located in Shillong, East Khasi Hills, and Jaintia Hills, covering several strata such as students and teachers from elite and rural colleges, and from the different streams such as arts, science, and commerce, were collected using Google Forms. Respondents represent diverse demographics, with 26% CUET-admitted and the remaining are non-CUET-admitted students. From the teachers' category, 40 respondents were considered, out of which 38% were PhDs, 42% postgraduates, and the teaching experiences ranged from 3 to 30 years' experience, and belonged to different departments from social sciences, humanities, sciences, and commerce.

The data collection tool considered aspects including curriculum load in terms of papers and credits, admission processes, teaching resources such as textbooks, notes, and other internet resources, MOOCs preference, backlogs, fees, internships stipends and costs, overall satisfaction, and complaints. Teachers were asked their opinion on workload, infrastructure, assessments, multidisciplinary risks, and CUET concerns. Thematic analysis was done, resulting in coded qualitative responses such as "unwieldy syllabus". Descriptive statistics in the form of percentages were used to summarize findings.

Ethical considerations: This study adhered rigorously to ethical principles in human subjects' research, ensuring participant protection and data integrity. Anonymity was maintained throughout by collecting responses via Google Forms without capturing identifiable information such as names, email addresses, or institutional affiliations, thereby minimizing risks of coercion or reprisal in a small academic community like Meghalaya's colleges. Informed consent was obtained digitally at the survey outset, where participants received a clear, concise explanation of the purpose of the study, which is to gauge FYUP perceptions through the sample's voluntary participation, the approximate 10–15-minute duration, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences; affirmative opt-in was required before proceeding.

2.2 Analysis of the State Policy Evolution and Its Implications

Education governance in Meghalaya prioritizes private participation over direct intervention, yielding a landscape of 80% aided private institutions. The pre-1976 state exclusivity gave way to concurrent powers, yet policies remained reactive. Post-1972, Assam's footprint persisted, with few government-aided schools being provincialized legislatively in Assam but not in Meghalaya. The Grant in aid proliferation was introduced as a deficit grant providing basic and DA only, followed by the provision of an ad-hoc grant to colleges. The system further became complicated by the introduction of lump-sum grants to colleges from the early 2000s. A few years ago, the People's Scheme was introduced in 2018, hinged on political proximity, not merit.

According to the feedback from stakeholders, political interference transformed education into a competitive arena where pleasing constituents took precedence over maintaining standards. This led to an excessive focus on general degrees. Private colleges, facing financial constraints, offered arts programs while neglecting science, technical, or teacher training options.

Since the era of liberalization in 1991, thousands have migrated in search of employment or teaching certifications. Many eventually returned with questionable qualifications obtained through relaxed requirements from the National Institute of Open Schooling, which allowed equivalency from tenth grade to the senior secondary level without formal classroom attendance. Furthermore, standards set by the National Council for Teacher Education were overlooked in the aided and private sectors. Requirements for the National Eligibility Test or a doctorate established by the University Grants Commission were also bypassed by executive orders in 2000 and 2012 that ruled a postgraduate degree was sufficient.

Service conditions continue to deteriorate because private salaries remain stuck between five thousand and six thousand rupees, with a maximum of twenty-five thousand. No formal regulations have been established to address this issue despite the existence of the 1981 School Act Section 91.

Furthermore, the 2018 state education policy shifts have moved the post-retirement financial burden onto school management, which creates a significant risk of fee spikes and social exclusion within a region already facing multidimensional poverty. Following its introduction in 2020, the National Education Policy demands extensive infrastructure and new teacher hires that remain unaddressed in the private and aided college sectors. While the government assists with governance, it fails to offer the necessary support for skill development.

The consequences identified by this situation are numerous and include the presence of unqualified teachers in schools and colleges, along with substandard institutions, high migration rates, and low employability. The Four-Year Undergraduate Programme further amplifies these problems because placing the financial burden on private entities without providing grants leads to a superficial implementation of the curriculum.

2.3 Results as per Student Perceptions of FYUP

Based on the feedback from 360 respondents, the academic syllabi have expanded significantly. A standard three-year degree now consists of 33 papers, which include 14 major subjects, 6 minor subjects, 3 multidisciplinary courses (MDC), 3 ability enhancement courses (AEC), three skill enhancement courses (SEC), 3 value-added courses (VAC), and 2 other subjects plus an internship. This is a substantial increase compared to the eighteen papers required before the implementation of the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme.

The total credits have also risen to one hundred twenty from the previous requirement of 72 credits. The optional fourth year adds another 40 credits consisting of either 5 major and 2 minor subjects or a dissertation. 18% of students reported backlogs and identified the overloaded syllabus as the primary cause rather than teacher performance or financial poverty. Furthermore, 87% of participants preferred direct learning over Massive Open Online Courses, while only 11% to 12% reported using digital platforms. Respondents cited high costs, general cumbersome, and poor accessibility as barriers to online education, with 67% favoring face-to-face instruction for better comprehension.

Given the scarcity of resources, research indicates that 57% of vocational teaching is conducted by individuals who lack specific expertise in those fields. For example, Political Science instructors are teaching baking, Mathematics teachers are overseeing piggery courses, and some individuals are teaching beauty and wellness based solely on personal appearance. Only about 7% respondents stated that these

courses are taught by qualified college faculty, while a small number of institutions have managed to hire external professionals.

The transition to the new curriculum is further hindered by a total absence of textbooks for new courses. Consequently, 57% of students rely primarily on class notes, while only 17% use textbooks, and 27% turn to the internet for information. The financial burden on students is significant, with 28% paying between ten thousand and twenty-five thousand rupees for suburban arts programs. Another 28% stated that they pay between twenty-five thousand and forty-five thousand rupees, and a final 28% face costs exceeding forty-five thousand rupees for admission to the science stream. These figures do not include additional expenses for books, exams, and hostel fees, which place a heavy strain on impoverished students since existing scholarships are insufficient to cover the totals.

Finally, the internship component of the program is currently chaotic. 40% of these internships are unpaid, and the majority of students are forced to self-fund substantial related costs. These challenges are compounded by a lack of clear guidelines and a shortage of host organizations to accommodate the student population. Overall analysis indicated that 27% are unhappy, the majority neutral; and 87% complaints about unwieldy syllabus (less major focus), exam pressure, infrastructure gaps, unqualified teachers, unplanned rollout.

2.4 Results as per Teachers' Perceptions

Interviews with 40 experienced teachers across multiple disciplines highlight several critical concerns regarding the current educational framework. These educators report that the curriculum has become overloaded, characterized by a vast amount of content crammed into semesters that are far too short. This has led to a significant increase in faculty workload without any corresponding institutional support, as teachers are now expected to manage extra courses, specialized training, administrative duties, and frequent examinations simultaneously.

Furthermore, the transition has exposed severe gaps in infrastructure and faculty numbers, with rural institutions suffering the most. Teachers face extreme assessment pressure, often grading between one hundred and four hundred scripts while managing high student-to-teacher ratios. These systemic challenges are contributing to rising dropout rates and a decline in new admissions, particularly among weaker or rural student populations.

Many stakeholders also characterized the multidisciplinary approach as superficial and argued that the Common University Entrance Test is an unnecessary barrier for marginalized students. Approximately forty-three percent of the key remarks from this group emphasized that the learning process is being rushed and that there is a total lack of experts available to guide research or vocational training.

2.5 Discussion of Findings

The findings from the study align with broader critiques of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 implementation in resource-constrained settings such as Meghalaya. The introduction of the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) represents a significant increase in academic workload, with a 67% rise in required credits compared to the previous three-year degree structure. This has led to a rushed learning environment, as evidenced by resistance and boycotts from colleges affiliated with North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), and a dramatic fall in student enrollment, from 750 to 150 in some institutions. The mismatch between vocational courses and faculty expertise is striking, with 57% of vocational classes being taught by untrained or unqualified, or unskilled teachers—such as political science teachers handling baking or beauty courses—greatly undermining the intended skills-development agenda of NEP. The absence of adequate textbooks and learning materials aggravates the problem, compelling students to rely

heavily on class notes and internet resources, which risks superficial and fragmented learning. Furthermore, an 18% student reporting backlog rate, largely attributed to the overloaded syllabus, signals increasing dropout risks, compounding Meghalaya's already high pre-college dropout rate of approximately 75%, largely tied to pervasive poverty in the state.

Policy legacies play a critical role in amplifying these challenges. The grant-in-aid (GIA) system operates without clear, merit-based criteria, perpetuating systemic inequities through politically influenced allocations. Historically, the state has tolerated the employment of unqualified teachers, ignoring pre-NEP norms that are essential for managing the guidelines of the FYUP multidisciplinary demands. The current fee structures, with over 28% of colleges charging more than ₹45,000 annually, effectively exclude underprivileged students, especially given that 80% of institutions fall within the private or government-aided category where infrastructure and NEP-mandated support remain grossly inadequate. These structural shortcomings are reflected in significant teacher workload pressures; a reported 43% of teachers experience overload without corresponding increases in training or staffing, a concern sharply contrasting NEP's emphasis on teacher empowerment and professional development.

Contextual factors unique to Meghalaya compound these issues. The tribal and rural poverty landscapes of the state necessitate flexible policy adaptations. For example, the optional nature of the Common University Entrance Test (CUET), which 74% of surveyed students have bypassed, reflects attempts at inclusivity but also signals challenges for standardized admission criteria. Meanwhile, internships, a mandatory FYUP component, have been implemented in an unplanned manner, adding financial and logistical burdens on students. While multidisciplinary exposure offers educational benefits, the lack of systemic support transforms this advantage into an additional burden rather than empowerment. In comparison to the more structured provincialization of aided institutions in Assam, the education sector in Meghalaya urgently requires legislative reform that rationalizes the GIA system, enforces qualification standards, and ensures resource adequacy to align with NEP objectives and regional realities.

2.6 Limitations of the study

This study, while offering valuable preliminary insights into the FYUP perceptions, is constrained by several methodological limitations inherent to its pilot-scale design and data collection approach. Pilot studies like this one are not powered for efficacy testing or effect size estimation, potentially leading to uninterpretable results or flawed power calculations for future full-scale research, and they may overlook large-scale implementation issues such as resource scalability or contamination effects if participants overlap with subsequent studies. Further, the regional focus on Shillong, East Khasi Hills, and Jaintia Hills excludes Garo Hills and non-affiliated colleges, reducing generalizability across Meghalaya's diverse tribal and geographic contexts, while the cross-sectional timing captures only fifth-semester views of the inaugural FYUP batch, missing longitudinal outcomes like completion rates or long-term employability.

2.7 Recommendations and conclusion

To address the overloaded FYUP curriculum, policymakers should rationalize the structure by capping the three-year degree at 100 credits, prioritizing core major subjects over peripheral courses to reduce student backlogs and enhance focus, as echoed in the recent Meghalaya State Education Commission (MSEC) Report 2025, calling for outcome-based reforms. Enforcing qualification norms requires legislative backing for UGC and NCTE standards across aided and private institutions, coupled with mandatory training programs through upgraded bodies like the proposed State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) and District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), to equip teachers for multidisciplinary demands.

The grant-in-aid (GIA) system demands urgent reform toward merit-based allocation via legislative acts, replacing political favoritism with transparent criteria, while channeling funds specifically for NEP-mandated infrastructure like classrooms and labs in 80% private/aided colleges. Targeted support measures include developing textbooks and MOOCs for new AEC/SEC/VTC courses, introducing stipend internships with clear guidelines, and imposing fee caps alongside expanded scholarships for students. Further, future research should prioritize longitudinal tracking of FYUP cohorts for dropout and employability outcomes, aligned with MSEC's data-driven monitoring via annual 'Meghalaya Education at a Glance' reports. Prioritizing teacher empowerment through these reforms will inherently strengthen students, but holistic change in Meghalaya necessitates robust state intervention tailored to tribal poverty and rural inequities.

In conclusion, it may be mentioned that the recent rollout of the FYUP as part of NEP 2020 implementation reveals systemic fissures in aspects such as policy politicization, unqualified educators, and resource voids, exacerbating FYUP strains and exclusion risks. Further, the problem is compounded by students' and teachers' distress over increasing workloads and other burdens, which in turn threaten NEP's equity vision. Therefore, proactive steps should be taken by the government towards prioritizing teachers and strengthening students, such that holistic reforms in higher education are achieved.

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