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Major Challenges in Higher Education in Context to NEP 2020 with Reference to Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Himachal Pradesh, due to its mountainous terrain and geographical isolation, exhibits persistent socio-economic and educational disparities. Remote and tribal regions remain comparatively underdeveloped because of limited infrastructure, restricted economic opportunities, and poor connectivity. These structural constraints have adversely affected access to quality education, leading to issues such as inadequate infrastructure, faculty shortages, and a pronounced digital divide.

In this context, the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 poses significant challenges. This paper examines the linkage between topographical constraints and regional disparities and evaluates the readiness of the state to implement NEP 2020 from the academic session 2026–27 under the guidance of the Ministry of Education. The study highlights the need for targeted, region-specific interventions focusing on infrastructure, digital inclusion, and institutional capacity building to ensure equitable and effective policy implementation.

Keywords: Himachal Pradesh; Topography; Socio-economic Disparities; Educational Inequality; NEP 2020; Digital Divide; Infrastructure; Regional Imbalance; Inclusive Education.

1. Introduction

Himachal Pradesh is a mountainous region having topographical constrains. Due effect of these constrains cultural and socio-economic disparities sustained from long time. The geographical isolation of many regions has led to the evolution of distinct local cultures, dialects, and traditions. While this diversity is a strength, it has also resulted in limited interaction between communities, thereby sustaining disparities. Remote and tribal areas often remain less developed compared to relatively accessible regions like plains or urban centres.

Economically, the constraints of terrain restrict large-scale industrialization and limit agricultural productivity to small, fragmented landholdings. Dependence on traditional occupations, seasonal employment, and limited market access further widen income disparities. Infrastructure development—such as roads, healthcare, and communication—has also been uneven due to high costs and physical challenges.

This disparity has also made an impact on educational system in the state. Thus, the topographical constraints of Himachal Pradesh have not only preserved cultural uniqueness but also contributed to persistent socio-economic and educational disparities. Addressing these challenges requires region-specific policies, improved infrastructure, digital inclusion, and targeted educational interventions to ensure equitable development across the state. Mean while as per direction of MHRD and ministry of

education our state is also planning to implement the NEP2020 from session 2026-27 onward, now here is a great challenge to us to implement the NEP 2020 in toto. These challenges may resolve through with strategic planning in various levels like infrastructural, academic including certification, orientation, funding, digital gap and faculty shortage etc.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have examined the challenges of NEP 2020 implementation and higher education reforms in India.

NEP 2020 emphasizes multidisciplinary education, flexibility, and skill integration, but implementation gaps remain due to institutional rigidity and lack of preparedness (Government of India, 2020).

Studies indicate that funding constraints and inadequate infrastructure continue to limit educational expansion (Tilak, 2021).

Research highlights that rural and mountainous regions face severe digital divide and access issues (Kumar & Gupta, 2022).

According to recent reports, only 36% of higher education institutions have adopted key NEP reforms like multiple entry-exit systems, indicating slow implementation progress.

The challenge of expanding access is significant, as India must reach 86 million higher education enrolments by 2035 to meet NEP targets.

Further, UDISE+ data reveals systemic issues such as enrolment decline, retention gaps, and inequality in access, reflecting structural weaknesses in the education system.

3. ResearchGap:

Most existing studies focus on national-level challenges; limited research addresses region-specific constraints in hill states like Himachal Pradesh.

4. Value of Certificates/Degrees

Here is challenge in respect of certification of the learning and skills associated with local knowledge. If any institution starts a skill-based course on their own who will certify that course, self-validation may face the credibility issues of acknowledgement at national and international. To resolve this issue there is an urgent need to create an institute or government agency that do this work. Certification through university is tedious and has long procedure.

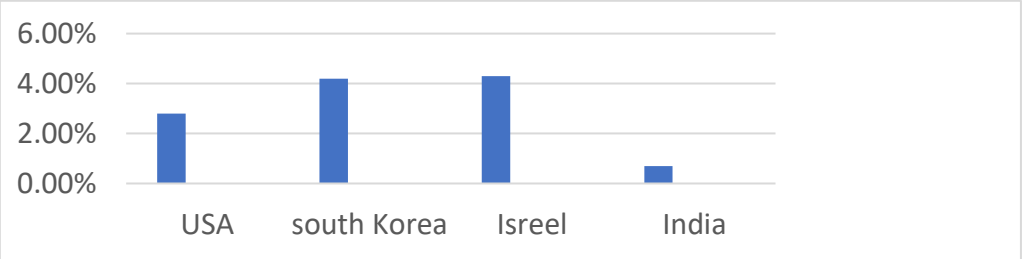
Overemphasis on degrees rather than skills and competencies, Declining credibility of traditional qualifications in the job market, Mismatch between academic credentials and industry requirements Orientation towards Multi-disciplinary Education.

Multidisciplinary education involves studying a topic or solving problems by integrating insights, methods, and perspectives from multiple academic disciplines. Implementing multidisciplinary education in India, driven by NEP 2020, faces significant challenges, including rigid, specialized institutional structures, severe faculty shortages, and a lack of trained educators. These issues must be taken on priority to get maximum output from multi-disciplinary approach. Slow adoption of interdisciplinary approaches, Rigid institutional structures and departmental silos and Lack of trained faculty for multidisciplinary teaching

5. Funding Constraints

Funding constraints in Indian education, often hovering around 3-4% of GDP rather than the recommended 6%, cause severe infrastructure shortages, teacher vacancies, and high pupil-teacher ratios. These shortfalls exacerbate educational inequality, creating a massive digital divide and forcing families to spend up to 30% of income on education. India 0.69% of GDP as compared to 2.8% in the United States of America, 4.3% in Israel and 4.2% in South Korea.

Figure 1 Percentage GDP expenditure on Education



Inadequate government funding for public institutions, Limited financial autonomy and Dependence on external grants and inconsistent funding streams

6. Digital Connectivity

As per the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and its implementation context, the digital divide in India is primarily driven by inequitable access to digital infrastructure, high cost of devices/data, and low digital literacy among teachers and students. This gap is further intensified by rural-urban disparities, gender inequalities, and socioeconomic barriers, hindering effective adoption of technology-driven education. New emerging concepts and ODL model of education is highly depended on the digital connectivity.

In hill state like Himachal Pradesh. Physiographical constrains economic status of people in the state is highly responsible for digital gap in the state. Poor internet access in rural and remote areas, Limited access to digital learning platforms and tools, Lack of digital infrastructure in many institutions.

7. Faculty Shortage

Higher education in India faces a critical, chronic faculty shortage, with vacancies exceeding 35% in central universities and reaching over 50% for senior positions in elite institutions like IITs and IIMs. This crisis is driven by slow recruitment, budgetary constraints, and a shrinking talent pipeline, which compromises educational quality and research output. NEP best suited to targeting a significantly improved student-teacher ratio (STR) to ensure individual attention. UDISE+ 2023-24 data suggest significant improvement, with national averages even lower (e.g., Foundational: 10:1, Middle: 18:1, Secondary: 21:1), ensuring closer interaction than the minimum required. Large number of vacant teaching positions, increasing reliance on contractual or guest faculty and Brain drain and limited opportunities for professional development.

8. Limited Research Opportunities

Research culture in Himachal Pradesh is in a progressive, transformative phase, shifting from a traditional teaching-focused model to a more vibrant, application-oriented research environment.

Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), To seed, grow, and facilitate research across all academic disciplines, including STEM, social sciences, and humanities. Funding: The NRF is designed as an apex body with a proposed ₹50,000 crore budget (over 5 years) to fund competitive, merit-based research, reducing the over-dependence on grants from specific science-based ministries. It aims to democratize research funding, making it accessible to state universities and colleges, not just elite institutions like IITs. Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs)

- Restructuring: NEP mandates transforming higher education institutions (HEIs) into large, multidisciplinary universities by 2040.
- Research Focus: Flagship MERUs are being set up to encourage research that crosses traditional stream boundaries (e.g., combining data science with social sciences or arts).
- Goal: To establish at least one large, high-quality multidisciplinary HEI in or near every district by 2030. 4-Year Undergraduate (UG) Programme with Research
- Research-Intensive Degree: Students can opt for a 4-year degree (Honours with Research) rather than the traditional 3-year degree, dedicating the final year to a research project.
- Direct PhD Pathway: Completion of this 4-year program allows students to directly enter PhD programmes, bypassing the need for a Master's degree. Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) & Research Portfolios
- Credit Portability: The ABC enables students to take courses or research internships across different institutions, storing credits securely in a digital repository.
- Portfolio-Based Evaluation: Shifting focus from single exams to project-based learning and research portfolios, even at the secondary stage (Grades 9-12). Industry-Academia Collaboration Initiatives
- Research & Development (R&D) Cells: 2,261+ R&D cells have been established in HEIs to bridge the gap between academic research and industrial application.
- Professor of Practice: Guidelines enabling industry experts to join academic faculty to foster applied, skill-based research.

9. IDEA Labs:

Setting up 400+ Idea Development, Evaluation and Application (IDEA) Labs to promote experiential learning and prototyping. Promotion of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) & Languages

- Research in Local Context: Establishing 32 IKS centres to catalyse original research in ancient technologies, metallurgy, and traditional practices.
- Translation Initiatives: Launching apps like 'Anuvadini' to translate technical, engineering, and medical books into Indian languages to enable research in native languages. Internationalization of Research
- Collaborative Research: Initiatives like GIAN (Global Initiative of Academic Network) and SPARC (Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration) are strengthened to foster partnerships between Indian and foreign institutions.
- Foreign Campus Presence: Establishing IIT campuses abroad (Zanzibar, Abu Dhabi) and inviting foreign universities to operate in India (GIFT City). Digital Initiatives for Research One Nation One Subscription: Providing access to high-quality international journals and databases to all HEIs. National Digital Library (NDLI): Hosting over 8 crore+ digital resources to facilitate research,

including virtual labs and e-content. Insufficient funding and infrastructure for research, Lack of research culture in many colleges and Limited collaboration with industry and international institutions

10. Curriculum Constraints.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to transform the Indian education system from a content-heavy, rote-learning model to a flexible, multidisciplinary, and competency-based approach. While visionary, the curriculum restructuring faces significant constraints, largely revolving around resource limitations, teacher preparedness, infrastructural gaps, and implementation challenges across diverse states. Needs modification to inculcate value additions in learning. To create linkage between traditional knowledge and to meet the demands of modern society with addition of skill acquisition. And at par to meet the requirements of emerging demands of corporate and industrial sector. Outdated and rigid curriculum frameworks, Slow revision processes and Lack of industry-relevant content and practical exposure

11. Infrastructure Deficits

As of the 2023-24 School Infrastructure Report, over **1.52 lakh** government schools lack functional electricity, and a substantial number lack adequate, functional toilets. Only **57.2%** of schools have functional computers, and just **53.9%** have internet access. This severely limits the implementation of digital education, AI, and smart classrooms mandated by NEP 2020. Only **52.3%** of schools are equipped with ramps, creating significant barriers to inclusive education for children with disabilities. Lack of well-equipped laboratories hinders the practical learning approach proposed for higher classes. Rural schools face acute deficits in safe buildings, drinking water, and recreational spaces compared to their urban counterparts. Inadequate classrooms, laboratories, and libraries, Poor maintenance of existing facilities and Limited access to modern equipment and technology

12. Access and Equity

Access refers to the availability of educational opportunities and resources to all students. Equity refers to providing all students with fair opportunities to succeed, compensating for their individual needs by providing different levels of support and resources. Access and equity in education ensure all students, regardless of background, race, gender, or disability, have equal opportunities to learn, receive fair support, and access quality resources to learn and grow. Assistive technologies need to be available to those who need them, and understood by teaching and technical staff. Institutions should be able to advise students how to get what they need (or provide it outright), and understand how these technologies interface with their curriculum. They should also be able to offer a degree of technical support and be prepared to adjust systems that present newly discovered barriers.

- Financial assistance needs to be both available and targeted, so that students from low-income backgrounds can cover tuition fees, books, and essential costs.
- First-generation higher-education students should be identified and offered specific support to help them navigate academic challenges and adjust to life on campus
- Mentorship and guidance should specifically target underrepresented groups and be made available well ahead of the student having to decide subjects of study or whether they will advance to higher education.

Start with an accessibility first mindset when building your LMS, courses, and content. Accessibility often

benefits everyone. Consider a video with subtitles: if an adult student is on their way home from work and watching a video on the train, they can read the subtitles even if they can't hear the audio. Alternatively, English might be the learner's second language, and those same subtitles will help them better understand the content. Some students (including the author of this piece!) also learn better when they can hear and read along at the same time. Unequal access to higher education across regions and communities, Gender, caste, and economic disparities and Barriers for marginalized and disadvantaged groups

13. Disparity Challenges (Geographical & Socio-economic)

Hill state like Himachal Pradesh has both geographical as well as socio-economic challenges. Tribal areas of the state have very difficult physiographical conditions and these areas have limited resources for learning due to digital gap and connectivity issues. Deprived and poor economic conditions of the people of these areas have difficult conditions for learning.

Rising tuition and associated costs make higher education unattainable for low-income families. Students from poor households often attend underfunded schools, resulting in lower academic achievement compared to affluent peers, which restricts university entry. Wealthier families pass on cultural advantages (networks, resources, knowledge) that aid in navigating higher education systems.

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to attend fewer demanding institutions despite high ability, often due to inadequate guidance or lack of awareness. Students in remote or rural areas often face limited access to quality institutions, fewer qualified teachers, and inferior infrastructure compared to urban areas.

Inadequate digital infrastructure and, in some areas, lack of transportation prevent students from accessing educational opportunities. Significant gaps in literacy rates and educational infrastructure exist between states or regions (e.g., in India, some states have much better educational systems than others), creating regional disparities in enrolment. Urban-rural divide in quality of education Socio-economic barriers affecting enrolment and retention and Limited institutional presence in remote areas

14. Autonomy and Regulations

Autonomy and regulation exist in a dynamic, often reciprocal relationship, balancing independent decision-making with necessary oversight.

The new regulatory framework aims to be "light but tight," reducing bureaucratic hurdles while enforcing strict accountability and academic quality. HECI intends to streamline regulation, ending overlapping oversight and resolving conflicts between state and central laws. Graded autonomy is granted based on accreditation status (NAAC/NBA), encouraging colleges to improve quality to gain freedom. Regulations ensure that autonomy does not lead to the exclusion of marginalized communities, with mandates for free ships and scholarships.

Critics argue that replacing multiple regulators with one centralized HECI could lead to excessive government control over educational institutions. The transition from the old regulatory regime to HECI is complex, and the policy lacks a clear, detailed roadmap for implementation. The success of graded autonomy depends heavily on the evaluation and accreditation process being free from bias and corruption. There is a danger that the new regulatory body may become bureaucratic, stifling the very innovation that autonomy is meant to promote. In Himachal Pradesh autonomy is needed for regional level to increase the efficiency and to time academic progression in the HEIs. Geographical barriers and regional, digital gap create the hinderances in time bond academic targets. So, autonomy very much needed at cluster or

regional level. Excessive regulatory control limiting institutional innovation, lack of true academic and administrative autonomy and Complex approval and compliance procedures.

15. Challenges of Language Policy

Language policies, particularly in multilingual nations like India, face significant challenges, including political resistance to perceived Hindi imposition, logistical hurdles in training teachers for multiple languages, and a shortage of educational resources in regional languages. These issues often create severe educational disparities, trigger regional conflicts, and overburden students.

Acute shortage of trained teachers capable of instructing in regional languages or mother tongues, particularly for second and third languages. Lack of textbooks, digital materials, and bilingual resources, especially in rural areas. Preference among parents for English-medium education over regional or mother-tongue instruction, driven by employment prospects. Political and logistical difficulties in implementing the formula, particularly in states resisting Hindi or facing logistical barriers to offering multiple languages.

Concerns that learning three languages, on top of other subjects, may overload students. Implementing instruction in mother tongues is difficult in areas with extreme linguistic diversity (e.g., tribal areas).

Solutions and Strategies: Massive, specialized, and continuous training programs to equip teachers for bilingual or multilingual teaching.

Using AI, digital platforms, and online resources to provide learning materials in regional languages. Allowing states to adapt the language formula to local needs rather than imposing a strict, uniform policy. Creating awareness about the cognitive benefits of mother-tongue education to shift parental perceptions. Investing in high-quality translation and creation of curricula in local languages. Prioritizing functional proficiency in languages rather than rigorous academic mastery, making the learning process more flexible. Medium of instruction issues (regional vs English). Difficulty in implementing multilingual education and Lack of quality study material in regional **languages**

16. Digital Divide

the gulf between those who have ready access to computers and the internet, and those who do not. "There is a 'digital divide' between rich and poor in terms of computer use" disparity in IT resource availability and access to internet connectivity. Infrastructure Development and Access (Closing the "First-Level" Divide)

Expanding Broadband and Fiber Networks: Investing in high-speed, reliable connectivity, particularly in rural and remote areas (e.g., Bharat Net in India, RDOF in the U.S.).

- Satellite Internet: Utilizing technologies like Starlink to bring high-speed, global coverage to geographically isolated regions.
- Community Networks: Supporting community-owned networks and public Wi-Fi hotspots in community centres, schools, and libraries.
- Leveraging Existing Infrastructure: Installing fiber-optic cables alongside utility infrastructure like railways, pipelines, and roads.

17. Affordability and Financial Support

- Subsidized Devices and Services: Providing government subsidies or low-cost plans (e.g., BT Home Essentials) to ensure low-income families can afford smartphones, laptops, and data plans.

- Digital Wallets and Mobile Money: Promoting digital payment systems and mobile money platforms to expand financial services to unbanked, low-income populations.
- Tax and Licensing Reform: Easing regulations on telecoms to lower entry barriers and reducing taxes on technology infrastructure to decrease costs.
- Digital Skills and Literacy Training (Closing the "Second-Level" Divide)
- Digital Literacy Campaigns: Implementing programs aimed at marginalized groups (e.g., Internet Saathi program for rural women in India) to teach basic internet navigation and safety.
- Embedding Digital Skills in Education: Integrating digital literacy into mandatory curriculum from the primary school level, ensuring all students are trained to use digital tools.
- Lifelong Learning and Upskilling: Creating vocational training and retraining programs to help workers adapt to the evolving digital economy.

Inclusive Content and Usability

- Local Language and Culturally Relevant Content: Developing digital services and content in vernacular or local languages to improve accessibility for non-English speakers.
- Assistive and Adaptive Technologies: Creating tools for people with disabilities, such as speech-to-text, screen readers, and specially designed UI/UX, to ensure inclusive access.
- User-Centric Design: Creating digital public services (telemedicine, e-governance) that are easy to use, requiring minimal prior training.

18. Institutional and Policy Measures

- Digital Equity Policies: Establishing national strategies with measurable targets and cross-sector coordination, focusing on gender equality and rural-urban disparities.
- Data Protection and Cybersecurity: Evolving comprehensive frameworks to secure digital transactions and increase trust in digital services.
- Public-Private Partnerships (P3s): Fostering collaboration between government, tech corporations, and nonprofits to invest in infrastructure and education. Gap between digitally equipped and under-resourced institutions, Students lacking devices and digital literacy , Inequality in access to online education

19. Skill Development and Employability

Rapid economic, social, and technological changes have heightened the focus of higher education on equipping students with the skills needed to thrive in a competitive labour market. This Topical Collection, Skill Development and Employability in Higher Education, aims to explore how institutions can enhance employability by integrating practical skill development, digital competencies, and career development strategies. We welcome research that examines innovative teaching methods, collaborative learning programs, curriculum design, and industry partnerships that bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world career demands. The collection will also explore how higher education institutions can adapt to the evolving workforce needs, foster entrepreneurial thinking, and support diverse pathways to employment.

India is one of the largest higher education systems divided as central universities, state universities, private universities, deemed–to-be universities, autonomous bodies, university level institutions and their

affiliated college are sources for imparting skill training in technical and nontechnical methods. India still lags internationally far behind universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Harvard. The National Skill Development Corporation is introducing the issue of skills going through creating capacity, opportunity and output driven workforce by skill councils. Indian higher education is overcoming inherent deficiencies and moving towards new reforms. Certain parameters are identified in Higher education such as education quality; delivering lecture, employability etc. are still needed at present days. In our country 50% of the population is below age 25 so it is significant to focus on the youth of the country and provide sustainable livelihood through skills to the majority of the population.

Problems are faced by Higher education which is lack of industry recognition to the skill training courses at the Government training institutes which are ICT tools in education, learning materials etc. which should be reformed. The famed Council responsible for coordinating among universities planning development in universities, education at various sectors, colleges are transformed into universities or college-cluster universities, some large affiliating universities are bifurcated to local managed bodies, colleges can be formed as multidisciplinary education institutes, Affiliating universities with CPDC etc. will effectively make for autonomy and governance to the college will hone the skills. As per the NEP 2020 the various skills taken into consideration and acknowledged. The 64 klaas of Indian ancient knowledge system taken in to consideration. In Himachal pradesh here the traditional artifacts and physiographical diversity have created skill regional variations at local level. Gap between academic learning and industry needs, Insufficient focus on vocational and skill-based education, Low employability of graduates and Quality of Education

Quality education focuses on holistic development—social, emotional, mental, physical, and cognitive—ensuring learners gain literacy, numeracy, and life skills in safe, supportive environments. It is defined by effective teaching, relevant curricula, and equitable access. This is crucial for fostering sustainable, productive societies and achieving SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive, equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

Key Components of Quality Education

- Qualified Teachers: Well-trained teachers are critical for delivering quality education and improving learning outcomes.
- Effective Learning Tools: Access to appropriate, engaging learning materials and technology is essential.
- Safe Learning Environment:
- Schools must be safe, inclusive, and well-equipped with infrastructure like electricity and sanitation.
- Holistic Curriculum: A focus on critical thinking, problem-solving, and life skills, rather than mere rote learning.
- Impact and Importance
- Economic Opportunity: Enables stable income and better employment prospects.
- Reduced Inequality: Promotes social inclusion and empowers marginalized groups.
- Global Citizenship: Educates on sustainability, human rights, and gender equality.
- Challenges in Quality Education
- Learning Gaps: Despite high enrolment, many students lack basic competencies in reading and mathematics.
- Infrastructure Gaps: Many schools still lack basic necessities like electricity, safe drinking water, and

sanitation facilities.

- Unequal Access: Disparities exist between regions, with rural or impoverished communities often having limited access to quality education, particularly in India.
- Variations in teaching standards across institutions, Lack of continuous quality assessment mechanisms and Limited emphasis on outcome-based education

20. Re-thinking Assessment and Evaluation

Rethinking assessment shifts the focus from high-stakes, grade-centric testing to holistic, learner-centred evaluation. Key changes include emphasizing formative assessment, providing actionable feedback, and promoting learner autonomy to support growth over mere measurement. Modern systems aim to move beyond rote memorization, valuing critical thinking, creativity, and diverse competencies.

Key Aspects of Modern Assessment Rethinking:

- From "Of" to "For" Learning: Shifting from summative (assessment *of* learning) to formative assessments (assessment *for* learning) that guide student progress and autonomy.
- Holistic Evaluation: Assessing the whole student, including skills like collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity, rather than just academic rote recall.
- Reducing High-Stakes Pressure: Moving away from single, high-stakes exams that cause stress and limit curricular breadth.
- Personalization & Equity: Using diagnostic assessment to understand individual learning journeys and reducing cultural/linguistic biases in testing.
- Integrating Assessment and Learning: Treating assessment as an ongoing part of the learning process rather than a final event, often enabled by technology.
- Key Strategies for Implementation:
- Formative Feedback: Providing frequent, detailed comments to help students understand their performance and improve, notes this SlideShare presentation.
- Portfolio Assessment: Utilizing portfolios, projects, and presentations to showcase student work over time.
- Peer and Self-Assessment: Encouraging students to evaluate their own work and their peers' work to develop metacognitive skills, says a SlideShare presentation.
- Technology Integration: Using digital tools for immediate feedback and to track progress, says a YouTube video.
- Benefits of Alternative Assessment:
- Better Student Wellbeing: Lowered stress levels due to reduced high-stakes testing.
- Improved Engagement: Students are more motivated when they have a say in how they are assessed.
- Higher Quality Learning: Focuses on deep understanding rather than surface-level memorization.
- Overreliance on traditional examination systems
- Lack of continuous and comprehensive evaluation
- Need for competency-based and application-oriented assessment methods

5. Conclusion

The National Education Policy 2020 provides a strong framework for reforming higher education. However, its success depends on effective implementation, adequate funding, institutional capacity, and

continuous monitoring.

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