

From Promise to Practice: Implementing NEP 2020 through Internationalisation, Creative-Economy Skills and Governance Reforms

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Abstract

The study systematically assesses how well the National Education Policy of 2020 (NEP 2020) has been implemented using three major areas as part of Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) restructuring. The progress towards achieving an equitable outcome for the approximately 260 million students of India is threatened by the urban bias that remains a major component of the policy framework of the NEP 2020; the funding shortages that exist in the development of policies related to internationalisation of Indian education and federal tensions that remain unresolved. Using data from ORF Tracking Data, NITI Aayog Policy Roadmaps and Budget Analyses, this study examines the structural achievements made toward executing the NEP 2020 goals but also highlights the gaps in implementation. Recommendations are also presented with the goal of addressing the urban-centric bias of the NEP 2020 prior to India's demographic dividend peaking in 2030, which will determine if the ambition of the NEP 2020 results in transformative education for all Indians.

Keywords: NEP 2020, internationalisation, demographic dividend

Introduction

India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), the country's most comprehensive education reform since gaining independence is redefining a massive educational ecosystem serving 260 million students across 1.5 million institutions.¹ The policy is a new approach compared to the various reform strategies that were developed over the last few decades, as it represents a holistic approach to reforming the education sector and combining the four separate segments of teacher, vocational, higher and school education into one single, unified education system as envisioned for Viksit Bharat @2047 and as outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 4.²

Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) and National Achievement Surveys (NAS) have provided a brutal expose of the many systematic failures identified by the policy; 55% of Grade 5 students in the country cannot read Grade 2 texts; the country has too many single stream colleges (over 40,000); the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education is 26.3% and will fall short of the target of 50% by

¹ Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). National education policy 2020. Government of India.

² NITI Aayog. (2025). Internationalisation of Higher Education in India: prospects, potential, and policy recommendations (PIB PRID 2207555).

2035 and teacher absenteeism in public schools average 25%.³ The policy includes a number of ambitious targets for its implementation- the implementation of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) for all children by grade three; a fifty percent increase in the Gross Enrolment Ratio for higher education by 2035; 100 percent Gross Enrolment Ratio from preschool to secondary by 2030 and the conversion of ninety-four percent of single-stream institutions to interdisciplinary universities.⁴ Additionally, the policy also implements the separation of the current academic/vocational silos through the creation of the single window Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and the National Credit Framework (NCrF), thus switching the regulatory philosophy from a "heavy but loose" to "light but strict" philosophy of regulation.⁵

The seriousness of concrete milestones set by the policy, four years after its release (February 2026) include the Budget 2026-27's provision of Rs 1,500 crores for the establishment of AVGC labs in 15,000 schools; the UGC's Foreign Campus Regulation 2023 permitting the campus of Deakin University and the University of Wollongong to operate; NIOS' plans to grow to 20 million secondary students and the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill to unify the three existing regulators.⁶ However, according to the Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER) 2024, despite the serious efforts of the government to implement the policy, there are still several other critical problems- a continuing issue of FLN (78% of third-grade students cannot read); regional differences (92% of students in Kerala can perform fifth-grade arithmetic while only 42% of students in Bihar can); and a plateau in the quality of higher education (only two percent of NAAC A++ institutions).⁷

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the implementation of the NEP based on three interconnected themes: (1) internationalisation of higher education via twinning and foreign campuses; (2) orange economy skills via the AVGC push in the Budget 2026-2027 and (3) VBSA Bill governance restructuring. In order to measure the extent of the progress made against structural obstacles, this research uses NITI Aayog's internationalisation agenda, ORF's comprehensive tracking of the NEP and Budget 2026-27 documents.⁸

The Implementation Architecture of the NEP

The implementation of the NEP was reformed into a new format which is 5+3+3+4 and rejected the cognitive mismatch of the traditional 10+2 structure.⁹ In accordance with research findings regarding neuroscience, executive functions do not develop until the individual is approximately 16 years of age, unlike the previously suggested 10+2 model. Boards are also being redefined as demonstrating student skills rather than assessing student knowledge.¹⁰ Due to the results of Pratham-ASER, which reported that 97 percent of grade five students were enrolled, yet 97 percent were at grade two levels, it became

³ ASER Centre. (2022). Annual status of education report 2022. Pratham Foundation.

⁴ Press Information Bureau. (2024, July 21). Empowering Youth for a Developed India: Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue

⁵ Press Information Bureau. (2025). Higher Education under NEP 2020: Reimagining India's Academic Landscape.

⁶ The Better India. (2026, February 3). What Is the 'Orange Economy' & Why Budget 2026 Matters to Creators, Gamers & Designers

⁷ Observer Research Foundation. (n.d.-e). Tracking Regional Disparities in Learning Outcomes

⁸ NITI Aayog. (2025). Internationalisation of Higher Education in India: prospects, potential, and policy recommendations (PIB PRID 2207555).

⁹ Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). National education policy 2020. Government of India.

¹⁰ NCERT. (2023). National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023

imperative to prioritize the foundation of learning (FLN).¹¹ To accomplish this goal, the NIPUN Bharat Mission has established 1.5 lakh community volunteers, 2 lakh Anganwadi enhancements and 22 language versions of Foundational Learning Study materials.¹²

In order to create a higher education revolution and to transform 40,000 plus institutions that each have an average of 300 students each to 100 sizable multifunctional universities by 2035, the existing higher education system is to be transformed.¹³ ABC has created four-year undergraduate programs providing multiple entry-exit points including a one-year certificate program, a two-year diploma program, a three-year degree program and a four-year honors or research program.

Through HECI’s four verticals- the National Higher Education Regulatory Council (regulation), the General Education Council (standards), the Higher Education Grants Council (financing) and the National Accreditation Council (quality), the regulatory framework has consolidated different overlapping bodies (MHRD 2020, p. 45). The consolidation is operationalized through the VBSA Bill 2025.

Table 1: NEP Implementation Milestones (2020-2026)

| Instrument | Launch Date | Coverage | Impact |
|------------------|-------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| ABC Portal | 2021 | ~2,500 HEIs | 4.5+ crore students |
| FYUP | 2022–23 | Multiple universities (UGC framework) | _____ |
| NCrF | 2023 | School + HE + Vocational | _____ |
| NIPUN Bharat | 2021 | All districts | _____ |
| Foreign Campuses | 2023 | Multiple approvals (UGC) | Deakin & Wollongong operational |

Source: Author’s compilation based on policy documents and official releases from the National Education Policy 2020, Ministry of Education and the University Grants Commission. Figures on coverage and impact are indicative, based on the latest available data.

Internationalising Higher Education

Currently, India ranks 23 in terms of international student mobility, behind China and the USA, however the New Education Policy (NEP) targets placing India in the world's top 10 most popular places for international students by 2030.¹⁴ Turning the tables could provide funding for 10 IITs every year since 13 lakh Indian students pay out \$50 Billion abroad annually.¹⁵ The three streams of internationalising Higher Education include- "at home" (globally focused research), "outbound" (Indian students abroad) and "inbound"(foreign students/faculty). We can discuss about them as mentioned below-

Stream 1: The UGC regulations 2023 allow the top-100 global universities to establish their own campus in India, providing full academic freedom, flexible tuition fee and no equity limitations.¹⁶ Deakin and

¹¹ ASER Centre. (2024). Annual status of education report 2024. Pratham Foundation.

¹² Ministry of Education. (2021). NIPUN Bharat guidelines. Government of India.

¹³ Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). National education policy 2020. Government of India.

¹⁴ Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). National education policy 2020. Government of India.

¹⁵ NITI Aayog. (2025). Internationalisation of Higher Education in India: prospects, potential, and policy recommendations (PIB PRID 2207555).

¹⁶ University Grants Commission. (2023a). Foreign campuses regulations.

Wollongong have received clearance to open their respective campuses in India, with two more to receive approval and a further two will do so shortly thereafter. It is predicted that by 2028, 50,000 students will be enrolled in one of the international campuses established in India, which will have tuition rates of 30-50% less than that of other international campuses.¹⁷

Stream 2: The UGC Regulations 2023b permit the 1+1, 2+2 and 3+1 models of twinning.¹⁸ Among the 127 partnerships approved by the Ministry of Education (2025) include IIT Delhi & Monash, Amity & London Met, and Manipal & Duke. In 2024, there were 1300 international students in India and 8000 Indian students abroad through twinning programs.¹⁹

Stream 3: The UGC has requested universities to create an Office of International Relations in each university, while few offices are to be created by 2025. It focuses on creating deep partnerships between Indian and foreign institutions to foster through Collaborative Mechanisms, Mobility, Credit Recognition etc.

An extensive analysis was performed by NITI Aayog involving a survey of 160 HEIs, which identified several key barriers such as there is no centralized system for international students; there are 2 million fewer beds for international students and the time required to receive a visa is 45 days comparing to Singapore's 3 days.²⁰ At present, India is home to 72,000 international students- compared to 500,000 in China and 700,000 in Australia. While the U.S., UK and other countries still lead in terms of attracting foreign students, India has seen significant gains in its soft power- 42 percent of the 12,000 students from Africa are now studying in India, a figure that has increased significantly from the 8 percent that were reported in 2014.

Table 2: Internationalisation Metrics (2014-2025)

| Indicator | 2014 | 2025 | NEP Target 2035 |
|------------------------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| Foreign Students | 31,000 | 72,000 | 5 lakhs |
| Indian Students Abroad | 4.5-5 lakh | 8-9 lakh | Policy goal |
| QS Asia Rank | 11 | 54 | _____ |

Source: Author's compilation using AISHE, Ministry of Education data, MEA and UNESCO data, QS Asia Rankings data and NEP 2020 for policy targets.

The National Education Policy (NEP) calls for 50% vocational training exposure by 2025.²¹ The 2026-2027 budget allocates Rs. 1500 crores for the 'Orange Economy' that includes animation, visual effects, gaming and comics (AVGC) which is estimated to generate Rs. 50 billion in revenue and provide employment opportunities to approximately 2 million people by 2030.²² In comparison, India has 1.5% share of the \$400 billion Global AVGC Market with China and the U.S. having 12% and 40% respectively.

¹⁷ LegitQuest. (2023, November 7). University Grants Commission (Setting Up And Operation Of Campuses Of Foreign Higher Educational Institutions In India) Regulations, 2023

¹⁸ University Grants Commission. (2023b). Twinning, joint and dual degrees regulations.

¹⁹ Ministry of Education. (2023). Performance grading index (PGI) 2020–21: For states and Union Territories. Government of India.

²⁰ NITI Aayog. (2025). Internationalisation of Higher Education in India: prospects, potential, and policy recommendations (PIB PRID 2207555).

²¹ Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). National education policy 2020. Government of India.

²² The Better India. (2026, February 3). What Is the 'Orange Economy' & Why Budget 2026 Matters to Creators, Gamers & Designers

India Institute of Creative Technologies (IICT), Mumbai is expected to have AVGC labs in 15,000 secondary schools and 500 other institutions by 2028. Each lab is estimated to cost Rs. 2-5 lakhs.²³ AVGC elective courses in grades 6-12 represent 40% of NcrF Occupational Credits. By 2027, there will be a shortage of 1.2 million AVGC skills; 80% of unemployed youths prefer to work in creative jobs as opposed to working in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO).²⁴ The budget also proposes the creation of five Centres of Excellence (CoE) in Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Chandigarh to train 50,000 trainers annually. There is 100% deduction on tax incentives on creation of AVGC IP till 2030. However, if teachers (scientific=85%; Arts=2%) don't receive upskilling and the AVGC lab materials are created in local language (90% of current tools are only in English), AVGC labs may remain "shiny objects".²⁵

Reform of the governance structure

The VBSA bill is expected to provide a unified regulatory system with four verticals and will consolidate the roles of UGC, AICTE and NCTE into one entity called Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA). This VBSA bill includes the following verticals:

1. Higher Education Regulation Council (HERC): To regulate fees and restrict enrollment
2. National Accreditation Council (NAC): To require institutional accreditation
3. Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC): To provide need-based funding
4. General Education Council (GEC): To establish standards for credit hours and curriculum frameworks

Under the powers granted by this legislation, the central government will have the authority to oversee accrediting agencies to issue legally binding policy directives and to replace existing commissions for a period of two years. Additionally, under the proposed legislation, each state would receive representation on the boards of the new entities in direct proportion to the number of institutions in their respective states.²⁶

Supporters of the VBSA bill claim it will improve the international recognition of Indian degrees through uniform quality standards and clear approval processes for FYUP/multidisciplinary programs. However, opponents of the VBSA bill argue that the federal structure is being compromised as education falls under the concurrent list, but the Centre will control national curricula, accreditation (100%) and financing (80%) through grants. They also point out that the entry 66 list I overrides the Article 246 threat.²⁷

Table 3: Pre vs Post VBSA Regulation

| Aspect | Current (2026) | VBSA (Proposed) |
|---------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Regulators | Multi Regulator system | Single umbrella regulator system |
| Accreditation | 20-40% coverage | 100% mandatory |
| Funding | Centrally coordinated via UGC | HEGC need-based |

Source: Author's compilation based on NEP 2020, the VBSA Bill 2025; accreditation coverage figures are indicative, derived from NAAC data trends.

²³ Observer Research Foundation. (n.d.-b). Assessing Budget 2026–27's Push to Build Orange Economy Talent

²⁴ TeamLease. (2024). 30-32 Million Skills Gap in India by FY 2025: A TeamLease Study

²⁵ Observer Research Foundation. (n.d.-b). Assessing Budget 2026–27's Push to Build Orange Economy Talent

²⁶ New Indian Express. (2025, December 28). Reshaping higher education governance via VBSA Bill

²⁷ Sidhu, K. B. S. (2025, December 14). Over-Regulation as Strangulation in Higher Education: Chasing Quality, Centralising Control, and Whittling Down State Autonomy

Without a Rs 2 lakh crore yearly increase in financial support, ORF warns of an uneven application of light touch regulations to the IITs and heavy-handed regulations for tier-3 colleges.²⁸ For the VBSA to be successful in its goal to ensure all higher education providers are accredited, NAAC independence is necessary. However, if a government appointed board were to run NAAC, there is a high risk of political interference and the potential of 35% of universities having no accreditation after 10 years.

As of January 2026 (UGC 2026), the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), the most innovative program of the NEP has enrolled 31.7 million students from over 1700-1900 higher education institutions. Over 14000 colleges have implemented four-year undergraduate programs (FYUP) with numerous entry and exit points; students are able to suspend and resume their education; to move credits between universities; to earn vocational credits from industrial training and to combine credits from other educational providers. The ABC provides a digital repository of credits allowing students to seamlessly transition between institutions. For example, a student at Delhi University earned an interdisciplinary honors degree by combining credits from IIT workshops, NSD acting classes and NSQF hospitality training.²⁹ The technical viability of the NEP was proven by the successful implementation of the ABC when the government invested in the necessary infrastructure and provided the appropriate regulatory clarity. Six foreign university campuses are currently operating in India, and as of May 2023, they have been issued six operational approvals under UGC Regulations 2023- Deakin University (GIFT City, Gujarat), University of Wollongong (Rajkot) and four others are in the final stages of development.³⁰ As of 2025, Deakin's campus in India enrolled 1200 students at a 40% lower tuition rate than at their Australian campus, thereby reducing India's annual outflow of USD 50 billion in education remittances. The presence of these campuses indicates that prestigious international universities may be attracted to India without undermining the country's regulatory independence, so long as academic autonomy and international rankings (a requirement to enter QS top 100) can be achieved simultaneously.³¹

AVGC Labs also carried out a pilot project in Maharashtra and provided 1000 schools with workstations for animation and gaming. Due to the high level of participation by girls (40%), which is notable given the STEM gender gap, and due to the fact that 60% of trained students landed internships at studios in Mumbai, student engagement reached 85%.³² The creation of opportunities for creative abilities beyond urban enclaves occurs when vernacular content pipelines are in place, thereby supporting the Rs 1500 crore cluster model proposed in Budget 2026-27 linking schools, district hubs and state studios.³³ VBSA legislative momentum was used to overcome parliamentary obstacles to create UGC, AICTE and NCTE regulations that allow institutions to seek a single window approval. The regulatory clarity created by VBSA allowed for the flexibility required for the multidisciplinary pivot of NEP 2020.

²⁸ Observer Research Foundation. (n.d.-c). VBSA Bill 2025: Standardisation, Trust, and Mobility in Higher Education

²⁹ Ministry of Education. (2023). Performance grading index (PGI) 2020–21: For states and Union Territories. Government of India.

³⁰ LegitQuest. (2023, November 7). University Grants Commission (Setting Up And Operation Of Campuses Of Foreign Higher Educational Institutions In India) Regulations, 2023

³¹ NITI Aayog. (2025). Internationalisation of Higher Education in India: prospects, potential, and policy recommendations (PIB PRID 2207555).

³² The Better India. (2026, February 3). What Is the 'Orange Economy' & Why Budget 2026 Matters to Creators, Gamers & Designers

³³ Observer Research Foundation. (n.d.-b). Assessing Budget 2026–27's Push to Build Orange Economy Talent

Critical Tensions under NEP 2020

There is strong urban bias in 80% of the projects under NEP and most are located in Tier-1/2 cities. Also 92% of ABC adoptions are found in urban universities and only 45% in rural universities; international campuses are only located around metro areas and AVGC pilots are only allowed in Maharashtra and Karnataka.³⁴ The IIT-IIM monopoly on global opportunities is preserved by Tier-3 universities, which have 65% of the total number of students but less than 10% international collaboration and no overseas campus (ORF n.d.-a).³⁵

Sufficient funding does not exist to implement the plans outlined. According to NITI Aayog, it is estimated that \$10 billion would be required annually to implement the NEP plans from 2025 until 2035,³⁶ currently the country spends approximately \$300/student compared to \$1,800/student in China and \$3,800/student in Brazil; while teacher salaries account for 65% of institutional spending, only 12% of spending goes towards infrastructure.³⁷ Additionally, without a funding grid, it is likely that 20,000 institutions with an average of 250 students each may fail when they cannot meet the VBSA's accreditation standards.

Following the VBSA, federal tensions rose, 12 states took their case against the Centre's override powers to the Supreme Court³⁸ and both Tamil Nadu and Kerala delayed implementation of the plan until federal safeguards were established. In the area of concurrent list education, 90% of institutions are operated by the states and therefore there are significant accountability gaps since the Centre controls 80% of the grants. There is also a 60% enrollment gap between Kerala (42%) and Bihar (14%), and thus the state higher education councils demand for 50% board representation (which is now 20%) and veto authority over national curricula was reasonable.³⁹

Although structural changes were made, quality stagnation continued. Of the 45,000 colleges in India, only around 100-200 have received an A++ grade and only 12% of the institutions are accredited by the NAAC (the goal is 100% by 2026). Furthermore, research productivity is stagnant at 4% of the world-wide share and QS topical rankings did not include any Indian universities in the top 50 in humanities.⁴⁰ Although receiving an ABC credit allows students to receive certificates/diplomas, the quality of these degrees is still suspect- 75% of FYUP students chose to pursue familiar disciplines versus multidisciplinary combinations.

The successes mentioned above indicate that NEP has an architecturally sound base to fulfill its goals; however, the tension mentioned above indicates the politics of how NEP is being implemented. Therefore, if the nation fails to create balance across the three major matrices (urban/rural, center/state, funding/quality) then the potential of this demographic dividend will pass before the 2030 demographic window closes.

³⁴ UDISE+. (2025). Unified district information system for education 2024–25.

³⁵ Observer Research Foundation. (n.d.-a). From Promise to Potential: Tracking NEP's Agenda for Internationalising Indian Education

³⁶ NITI Aayog. (2025). Internationalisation of Higher Education in India: prospects, potential, and policy recommendations (PIB PRID 2207555).

³⁷ Economic Times. (2026, January 29). Need to retain students beyond Class 8: Economic Survey

³⁸ The Rise. (2025, December 20). VBSA Bill 2025: Reform or Centralisation of Higher Education?

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⁴⁰ QS Rankings. (2026). QS world university rankings 2026: Top global universities.

Pathways to Implement NEP 2020

In addition to the regional internationalisation hubs ambitions of NEP 2020, there are also many other ways to democratize access to global exposure for students from outside metros. For example, 60% of non-metro students who are now being denied access to Deakin/Wollongong opportunities could be served by second tier city clusters that host twinning programs with universities in Asia (Japan, Korea) and African scholarship tracks by using their language strengths (for example, Odia literature hub, Assamese cultural studies).⁴¹

To provide AVGC training in rural areas, it is important to provide translations of Blender instructions in 12 scheduled languages and to generate regional intellectual property (for example, Odia comics based on tribal mythology, Tamil gaming clusters, Assamese animation factories). This would enable the use of Hindi/Bengali interfaces in 5,000 rural ITIs with a sub-allocated Rs 500 crores under IICT, which would allow 40 lakh rural youngsters to have access to vocational training instead of the 4 lakh urban youngsters that currently do so. 40% of the girls who were part of the Maharashtra experiment report that they no longer perceive barriers to entry in the area of STEM due to the availability of vernacular materials.⁴²

Full Scholarships for SC/ST students, free tablets and NCeF credit transfers to traditional institutions for 1 crore students could be provided with an investment of Rs 2,000 crores. Currently, 25 lakhs of dropouts can be covered by the Rs 200 crores allocated in this year's budget for Rs 800 per student. Work-study integration and quarterly on-demand testing (Economic Survey 2024) could recover 70% of the 1.2 million yearly Class 8+ dropouts. By 2029-2030, the year India's demographic dividend peaks, each areas with institutions, political support and funding could convert NEP's legislative momentum into equitable outcomes.

Conclusion

From the number of ABC's 1.8 crore subscribers and the successful foreign campuses to AVGC pilot programs and VBSA momentum, NEP 2020 has shown an exceptional level of ambition from both a legislative and an infrastructure perspective. However, the possibility of an unfair realization of NEP is still intact as 80% of all projects have been executed in Tier 1 cities only. NEP 2020 budgeted for Rs 1.2 Lakh Crore and it is believed to need at least Rs 10 Lakhs Crore. The pathways proposed- Youth Constitutional Forums, State Safeguards for VBSA, Regional Internationalisation Hubs, Rural Vernacular AVGC Tracks and an additional Rs 2000 crores into NIOS- offer very specific, targeted, institutional and financial solutions. In order for 260 million children to be able to take advantage of 21st Century opportunities rather than inherit educational segregation, there must be alignment of political will with the Architectural Vision of NEP over the next 48 months, because India's Demographic Dividend is expected to reach its peak by 2029-2030.

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