



From Policy to Practice: Assessing the Implementation and Impact of NEP-2020 on Higher Education in Odisha

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents one of the most significant attempts to restructure Indian education in the post-independence period. Its vision for higher education moves beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries and emphasizes multidisciplinary learning, curricular flexibility, multiple entry and exit options, skill development, research, innovation, digital learning, Indian knowledge traditions, vocational education, institutional autonomy, and inclusive access. For a state such as Odisha, with considerable geographical, socio-economic, linguistic, tribal, and cultural diversity, the implementation of NEP-2020 presents both substantial opportunities and complex institutional challenges. The Government of Odisha formally notified the implementation of NEP-2020 in undergraduate programmes under the administrative control of the Higher Education Department from the 2024–25 academic session. The state framework introduces a four-year undergraduate degree structure, multiple entry and exit provisions, multidisciplinary and skill-based courses, value-added learning, and mandatory internship opportunities.

This paper examines the transition of NEP-2020 from policy formulation to institutional practice in Odisha. It analyses the major areas of implementation, including curricular restructuring, multidisciplinary education, Academic Bank of Credits, multiple entry and exit, vocational and skill-oriented education, internship and experiential learning, Indian knowledge systems, digital education, research orientation, assessment reform, faculty preparedness, and institutional governance. The paper argues that the implementation of NEP-2020 in Odisha should not be understood merely as a structural modification of undergraduate programmes. Rather, it represents a gradual transformation in the philosophy, organization, pedagogy, and social purpose of higher education. At the same time, challenges relating to infrastructure, faculty workload, digital inequality, institutional capacity, student awareness, coordination among universities and colleges, and the availability of interdisciplinary courses may affect the effectiveness of implementation. The study concludes that the long-term impact of NEP-2020 in Odisha will depend on the extent to which policy provisions are translated into meaningful classroom experiences, flexible academic pathways, stronger research ecosystems, employable skills, cultural rootedness, and equitable educational opportunities.

Keywords: NEP-2020, higher education, Odisha, multidisciplinary education, academic flexibility, multiple entry and exit, skill development, Academic Bank of Credits, Indian Knowledge System, higher education reform

Introduction

Education has historically been one of the most important instruments of social transformation, economic development, cultural continuity, and nation-building. In contemporary societies, however, the role of higher education has expanded considerably. Universities and colleges are expected not only to transmit disciplinary knowledge but also to cultivate critical thinking, creativity, innovation, ethical awareness, employability, social responsibility, research capability, and the capacity to respond to rapidly changing technological and economic environments. The transformation of higher education therefore requires reforms that address curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, institutional governance, research, technology, and student support simultaneously.

The National Education Policy 2020 was introduced with the objective of bringing a comprehensive transformation to India's education system. In higher education, the policy proposes a movement towards large multidisciplinary institutions, flexible curricular structures, greater institutional autonomy, improved research, enhanced access and inclusion, integration of vocational education, and stronger connections between education and society. NEP-2020 particularly emphasizes the development of well-rounded individuals through an educational model that combines specialization with exposure to different fields of knowledge. The policy envisages that undergraduate education should provide opportunities for students to study across disciplinary boundaries while also developing communication, analytical, vocational, technological, and social competencies.

The significance of NEP-2020 becomes especially visible when its national vision is examined within specific state contexts. Higher education in India is not implemented through a single institutional structure. Universities, colleges, state governments, regulatory bodies, academic councils, teachers,

administrators, and students all participate in the implementation process. Consequently, the actual effects of a national policy depend heavily on regional conditions and institutional preparedness.

Odisha provides an important context for examining this transition. The state possesses a diversified higher education system comprising state public universities, private universities, central institutions, deemed universities, autonomous colleges, affiliated colleges, and specialized institutions. The Higher Education Department of Odisha lists a substantial network of universities under different administrative categories, illustrating the institutional diversity within which NEP-2020 is being implemented.

A significant milestone occurred when the Government of Odisha notified the implementation of NEP-2020 in undergraduate courses offered by higher education institutions under the administrative control of the Higher Education Department beginning with the 2024–25 academic session. The notification identifies multidisciplinary education, skill enhancement, a choice-based credit structure, multiple entry and exit, and increased educational flexibility as central objectives. It also provides for a four-year undergraduate degree structure with multiple exit possibilities, multidisciplinary and skill-based courses, and internship opportunities.

The transition from policy document to institutional practice, however, is neither immediate nor automatic. A policy may establish a new academic structure, but its success ultimately depends on how students experience the curriculum, how teachers interpret and deliver it, whether institutions possess adequate infrastructure, how academic credits are managed, and whether the new system actually expands educational opportunity. Therefore, the central concern of this study is not merely whether NEP-2020 has been formally adopted in Odisha, but how far its principles are being translated into meaningful academic practice.

Background of NEP-2020 and Higher Education Reform

The National Education Policy 2020 emerged from the recognition that India's higher education system requires structural and qualitative transformation. The policy identifies fragmentation, rigid disciplinary boundaries, inadequate research orientation, limited institutional autonomy, insufficient access, and weaknesses in teaching-learning processes among the issues requiring attention.

NEP-2020 proposes an integrated higher education ecosystem in which professional, technical, vocational, and general education are progressively brought into a coherent framework. It also proposes the development of multidisciplinary universities and colleges and seeks to reduce rigid separations among academic disciplines.

One of the most important philosophical principles of the policy is holistic and multidisciplinary education. Rather than viewing knowledge as isolated disciplinary compartments, NEP-2020 advocates an educational structure in which students can combine different fields according to their interests and aspirations. The policy specifically identifies arts, humanities, languages, sciences, social sciences, vocational subjects, professional disciplines, and soft skills as important components of a comprehensive education.

The policy also recommends a flexible undergraduate structure. Students may pursue three- or four-year undergraduate programmes, with multiple exit opportunities. A student completing one year may receive a certificate, while completion of two years may lead to a diploma, followed by the bachelor's degree upon completing the required programme. The four-year multidisciplinary undergraduate programme is identified as the preferred model, with opportunities for major and minor areas of study.

Another significant innovation is the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC). The ABC is intended to digitally store academic credits earned by students from recognized higher education institutions and facilitate credit transfer and academic mobility. In principle, this can reduce the rigidity of the traditional university system and allow learners greater flexibility in managing their educational pathways.

NEP-2020 and the Odisha Context

The implementation of a national education policy in Odisha must be understood against the state's distinctive social and educational environment. Odisha has a significant rural population, geographically dispersed educational institutions, tribal communities, economically diverse student populations, and a rich linguistic and cultural heritage. These characteristics create a special need for an education policy that combines modernization with cultural and regional relevance.

The Odisha government's decision to implement NEP-2020 in undergraduate education from the 2024–25 academic session represents an important institutional transition. The official notification establishes a new credit-based undergraduate curriculum and a four-year degree structure with multiple entry and exit provisions. It also specifically emphasizes multidisciplinary, vocational, skill-based, and value-added courses and requires internship opportunities for students.

This transition is particularly significant because undergraduate education constitutes the largest interface between higher education and the student population. Changes at this level can potentially influence employability, postgraduate progression, professional orientation, research interest, and lifelong learning.

Odisha had also developed experience with higher education reform through initiatives such as the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA). The state joined RUSA in 2013 and subsequently participated in RUSA 2.0, with emphasis on access, equity, quality, efficiency, transparency,

accountability, and institutional development. Such earlier reform experiences provide an institutional background for understanding the state's transition toward NEP-2020.

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following major objectives:

1. To examine the major provisions of NEP-2020 relating to higher education.
2. To analyse the implementation framework of NEP-2020 in Odisha.
3. To examine the transformation of undergraduate curriculum and academic structures in the state.
4. To assess the introduction of multidisciplinary, vocational, skill-based, and value-added education.
5. To examine the significance of multiple entry and exit provisions for students in Odisha.
6. To analyse the potential role of the Academic Bank of Credits in improving academic mobility.
7. To examine the changing role of teachers, institutions, and students under the new educational framework.
8. To identify the major opportunities and challenges associated with NEP-2020 implementation in Odisha.
9. To assess the emerging and potential impact of NEP-2020 on quality, employability, research, inclusion, and cultural education.
10. To suggest measures for strengthening the implementation of NEP-2020 in Odisha.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research design. It is primarily based on documentary analysis of policy documents, government notifications, official higher education materials, and relevant academic literature.

The principal source is the National Education Policy 2020 issued by the Government of India, particularly the sections relating to higher education, multidisciplinary learning, curricular flexibility, research, vocational education, institutional restructuring, and student mobility. The study also examines the Government of Odisha's notification concerning the implementation of NEP-2020 in undergraduate courses from the 2024–25 academic session.

The analytical approach follows a Policy–Implementation–Outcome framework:

Policy provisions → Institutional mechanisms → Academic practices → Student experiences → Educational outcomes

This framework is useful because the existence of a policy provision does not necessarily demonstrate its successful implementation. For example, introducing multidisciplinary courses at the policy level does not automatically guarantee that students will have genuine interdisciplinary choices. Similarly, establishing multiple entry and exit provisions does not by itself ensure that students can easily navigate between institutions or re-enter higher education.

The study therefore distinguishes between formal implementation and substantive implementation. Formal implementation refers to institutional adoption of policy structures, regulations, curricula, and administrative procedures. Substantive implementation refers to whether these structures actually improve teaching-learning, flexibility, student choice, employability, research orientation, inclusion, and educational quality.

From Policy to Practice: Major Areas of Implementation in Odisha

Transformation of the Undergraduate Structure

One of the most visible consequences of NEP-2020 implementation in Odisha is the restructuring of undergraduate education. The state notification provides for a four-year undergraduate degree with multiple entry and exit options.

The traditional model generally treated the bachelor's degree as a fixed-duration programme with relatively limited flexibility. Under the new framework, the student's educational journey can potentially become more adaptable.

The conceptual structure may be represented as:

One year → Certificate

Two years → Diploma

Three years → Bachelor's Degree

Four years → Bachelor's Degree with Honours/Research

This structure has important implications for students who experience financial difficulties, employment responsibilities, family circumstances, geographical mobility, or other interruptions to education.

However, multiple exit becomes meaningful only when certificates and diplomas have genuine academic and employment value. Institutions and employers must recognize these qualifications appropriately. Otherwise, multiple exit could unintentionally become a mechanism through which disadvantaged students leave education earlier rather than an instrument of genuine flexibility.

Multidisciplinary Education

Multidisciplinary education represents one of the central philosophical shifts introduced by NEP-2020. The policy seeks to move away from rigid disciplinary boundaries and create opportunities for students to study subjects beyond their principal specialization.

For Odisha, multidisciplinary education has considerable potential. Students of science may acquire exposure to social sciences and humanities; students of humanities may study data-related or technological subjects; commerce students may explore entrepreneurship and cultural studies; and students across disciplines may engage with environmental education, communication, ethics, Indian knowledge traditions, and vocational learning.

Such a model may promote:

- critical thinking;
- creativity;
- communication;
- interdisciplinary problem-solving;
- cultural awareness;
- adaptability;
- innovation;
- employability.

Nevertheless, multidisciplinary education requires institutional capacity. Colleges with limited faculty strength may find it difficult to provide a wide range of elective subjects. Therefore, successful implementation may require inter-institutional collaboration, digital course delivery, credit transfer mechanisms, faculty sharing, and academic partnerships.

Academic Bank of Credits and Student Mobility

The Academic Bank of Credits represents a technological and administrative innovation associated with NEP-2020. Its fundamental purpose is to enable academic credits earned from recognized institutions to be digitally stored and transferred under appropriate conditions.

For Odisha, ABC could have particular importance because students may move between institutions for educational, personal, economic, or geographical reasons. A functioning credit-transfer mechanism could make higher education less dependent on uninterrupted residence in a single institution.

The potential benefits include:

1. greater academic mobility;
2. recognition of previously earned credits;
3. flexible learning pathways;
4. support for multiple entry and exit;
5. opportunities for interdisciplinary study;
6. facilitation of lifelong learning.

However, the effectiveness of ABC depends on accurate credit recording, institutional interoperability, student awareness, standardized academic procedures, and reliable digital infrastructure.

Thus, ABC should not be viewed simply as a digital database. It represents a new philosophy of academic mobility in which educational achievement is increasingly understood as a cumulative learning record rather than merely the product of uninterrupted enrolment in one institution.

Skill Development and Employability

A significant objective of NEP-2020 is to strengthen the relationship between education and employability. The Odisha implementation framework explicitly includes vocational, skill-based, and value-added courses and provides for internship opportunities.

This is important because conventional degree education has often been criticized for insufficient practical exposure. NEP-2020 attempts to bridge this gap by connecting academic learning with practical experience.

Skill education can include:

- communication;
- digital literacy;
- entrepreneurship;
- financial literacy;
- data-related competencies;
- professional writing;
- local crafts;
- cultural industries;
- tourism;
- performing arts;
- creative industries;
- environmental management;
- community engagement.

Odisha possesses considerable potential for linking higher education with local economic and cultural resources. Handicrafts, handlooms, tourism, tribal art, folk performance, cultural heritage, performing arts, creative industries, and traditional knowledge can become areas of experiential and entrepreneurial learning.

Such integration can help redefine employability beyond conventional corporate employment. Students can also be prepared for self-employment, entrepreneurship, cultural entrepreneurship, social enterprise, and community-based economic activities.

Internship and Experiential Learning

The introduction of internship opportunities represents an important attempt to connect classroom learning with real-world situations. The Odisha notification identifies internship provision as a component of NEP-2020 implementation.

Internships can provide students with opportunities to understand professional environments, organizational culture, community problems, field practices, and occupational expectations.

For humanities and social science students, internships need not be restricted to corporate organizations. They can include:

- museums;
- archives;
- libraries;
- cultural organizations;
- NGOs;
- local government institutions;
- educational institutions;
- media organizations;
- art galleries;
- heritage institutions;

- tourism organizations;
- craft centres;
- research institutions.

In Odisha, such an approach could help establish a meaningful connection between higher education and the state's cultural economy.

However, internship quality requires supervision, institutional partnerships, clear learning outcomes, assessment mechanisms, and protection against treating internships as merely compulsory paperwork.

Indian Knowledge System and Regional Cultural Knowledge

NEP-2020 places considerable importance on Indian knowledge traditions. This creates an important opportunity for Odisha to incorporate its own intellectual, artistic, cultural, ecological, and knowledge traditions within higher education.

Odisha's cultural heritage provides a wide field for such integration, including:

- Odissi music;
- Odissi dance;
- Mardala traditions;
- Pattachitra;
- palm-leaf manuscript traditions;
- folk and tribal dances;
- indigenous ecological knowledge;
- traditional crafts;
- temple architecture;
- maritime heritage;
- oral traditions;
- folk literature;
- tribal knowledge systems;
- traditional performing arts.

The inclusion of such subjects should not be limited to symbolic representation. They can become serious areas of academic inquiry through research, documentation, fieldwork, performance studies, conservation studies, cultural entrepreneurship, and digital archiving.

This is particularly relevant to Odisha because cultural knowledge can simultaneously contribute to identity, education, research, employment, tourism, and heritage preservation.

NEP-2020's emphasis on languages, arts, literature, music, dance, theatre, and related fields creates conceptual space for strengthening such areas within multidisciplinary higher education.

Changes in Teaching and Learning

NEP-2020 proposes a shift from content-heavy and examination-centred learning toward more interactive, experiential, analytical, and competency-oriented education. The policy emphasizes communication, discussion, debate, research, interdisciplinary thinking, community engagement, internships, and practical learning.

This requires a corresponding transformation in classroom culture.

The traditional model can broadly be represented as:

Teacher → Lecture → Student → Examination

The emerging model seeks to move towards:

Teacher → Facilitator

Student → Active learner

Classroom → Learning environment

Assessment → Continuous demonstration of learning

Knowledge → Application + interpretation + creation

Such a transition requires teachers to adopt new pedagogical approaches, including project-based learning, seminars, group discussions, fieldwork, case studies, presentations, community-based projects, blended learning, and interdisciplinary assignments.

The transformation therefore concerns not only curriculum but also the professional identity of the teacher.

Assessment Reform

Curricular flexibility becomes incomplete if assessment remains entirely dependent on conventional written examinations. A multidisciplinary and competency-oriented curriculum requires assessment methods that can measure different dimensions of learning.

Potential assessment approaches include:

- project work;
- presentations;
- portfolios;
- field reports;
- practical assignments;
- internships;
- research projects;
- classroom participation;
- community engagement;
- reflective writing;
- continuous assessment.

Assessment reform is particularly important in interdisciplinary courses. A student studying cultural studies, for example, may demonstrate learning through field documentation, visual analysis, oral history, digital archiving, or community-based research rather than through a conventional examination alone.

The challenge is to develop assessment systems that remain academically rigorous while recognizing diverse forms of learning.

Faculty as the Key to Successful Implementation

No educational reform can succeed without teachers. Policies may restructure courses, but teachers transform curricula into learning experiences.

NEP-2020 therefore requires faculty members to acquire competencies in:

- multidisciplinary teaching;
- digital pedagogy;
- experiential learning;
- research supervision;
- continuous assessment;
- outcome-oriented teaching;
- interdisciplinary collaboration;
- technology-enabled education.

The transition may generate additional responsibilities. Teachers may need to prepare new course materials, supervise projects, organize internships, manage continuous assessment, participate in interdisciplinary teaching, and adapt to new academic regulations.

Faculty development is consequently not an optional component of NEP implementation. Regular orientation programmes, refresher programmes, workshops, peer-learning networks, digital training, research support, and institutional mentoring are necessary.

A particularly important issue is workload. If curricular innovation is introduced without corresponding institutional support, teachers may experience reform fatigue, which could reduce the quality of implementation.

Digital Transformation and Higher Education

Technology has become increasingly important to the implementation of flexible higher education. Digital platforms can support credit management, online learning, blended education, digital libraries, virtual classrooms, electronic resources, and student services.

The Ministry of Education identifies the Academic Bank of Credit, digital education architecture, and other technology-oriented initiatives among the implementation mechanisms associated with NEP-2020.

For Odisha, digital education offers particular advantages for geographically dispersed learners. Students in rural and remote regions may benefit from access to lectures, electronic books, digital repositories, online courses, and virtual academic resources.

At the same time, digitalization can create inequalities when students do not possess reliable internet access, suitable devices, adequate digital literacy, or appropriate learning environments.

Therefore:

Digital expansion $\neq$ Digital inclusion

True digital inclusion requires infrastructure, affordability, accessibility, technical support, and digital literacy.

Research and Innovation

NEP-2020 places strong emphasis on research and innovation. The policy envisions a higher education system in which universities and colleges increasingly become centres of knowledge creation rather than merely knowledge transmission. It also proposes stronger research ecosystems and interdisciplinary collaboration.

For Odisha, this provides an opportunity to develop research around areas that combine global academic concerns with regional knowledge.

Potential research domains include:

- tribal studies;
- indigenous knowledge;
- climate and ecology;
- coastal studies;
- cultural heritage;
- performing arts;
- Odia language and literature;
- folk culture;
- traditional medicine;
- crafts and creative industries;
- migration and development;
- rural transformation;
- social inclusion.

Interdisciplinary research can be particularly productive. For example, a study of Pattachitra could combine art history, anthropology, economics, tourism, digital humanities, conservation science, and cultural studies.

Such approaches would make Odisha's distinctive knowledge resources part of the broader national and international knowledge system.

Inclusion and Equity

NEP-2020 emphasizes access, equity, and inclusion in higher education. The policy recognizes the need to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups and to make learning environments accessible to students with disabilities.

For Odisha, inclusion must be examined through several dimensions:

- rural-urban disparities;
- socio-economic inequality;
- gender;
- tribal and indigenous communities;
- students with disabilities;
- linguistic diversity;
- digital access;
- geographical distance.

Flexible academic structures may benefit disadvantaged students by enabling them to temporarily exit and later continue education. However, flexibility should not become a substitute for institutional support.

A student leaving a degree programme because of poverty requires opportunities for re-entry, credit recognition, scholarships, counselling, and academic support. Without such mechanisms, the formal availability of multiple exits may not produce substantive educational equity.

Potential Impact of NEP-2020 on Higher Education in Odisha

The impact of NEP-2020 can be examined across several dimensions.

Academic Impact

The most immediate academic impact is the movement toward flexible and multidisciplinary curriculum. Students are expected to have greater freedom to combine different areas of knowledge.

Pedagogical Impact

The policy encourages movement toward experiential, discussion-oriented, research-based, and application-oriented learning.

Employability Impact

The incorporation of skill courses, vocational components, internships, and practical learning has the potential to improve employment readiness.

Research Impact

Greater emphasis on interdisciplinary study can stimulate new research questions and collaborations.

Cultural Impact

The emphasis on Indian knowledge traditions creates opportunities for integrating Odisha's diverse cultural and indigenous knowledge into formal education.

Social Impact

Flexible pathways can potentially improve access for learners who cannot follow conventional uninterrupted educational trajectories.

Technological Impact

Digital credit systems and blended learning can increase academic mobility and resource accessibility.

Discussion

The implementation of NEP-2020 in Odisha represents a significant shift from a relatively standardized model of undergraduate education toward a more flexible and multidisciplinary framework. The state's formal decision to introduce the policy in undergraduate programmes from 2024–25 provides the institutional foundation for this transformation.

However, policy implementation should be understood as a process rather than an event. The introduction of a new curriculum is only the first stage. The deeper objective is to transform the relationship between students, teachers, knowledge, institutions, and society.

The success of the new system will depend substantially on institutional preparedness. A university may technically provide multidisciplinary courses, but if students cannot access adequate electives, the intended flexibility remains limited. Similarly, a multiple-entry-and-exit framework is meaningful only when students can preserve their academic credits and return to education without unnecessary administrative barriers.

Another critical issue is the relationship between modernization and cultural rootedness. Higher education reform should not lead to the marginalization of regional knowledge. Instead, Odisha's cultural resources can become valuable components of the multidisciplinary university. The policy's recognition of arts, languages, music, literature, and related fields creates an opportunity to connect local knowledge with contemporary academic frameworks.

The implementation of NEP-2020 can therefore be viewed as an opportunity to develop a distinctive model of higher education in Odisha—one that combines global competencies with local knowledge, employability with cultural awareness, technology with inclusion, and specialization with interdisciplinarity.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy 2020 has initiated a fundamental rethinking of India's higher education system. Its significance lies not merely in changing the duration or structure of undergraduate programmes but in attempting to redefine the purposes and processes of higher education.

In Odisha, the formal implementation of NEP-2020 in undergraduate education from the 2024–25 academic session represents an important milestone. The new framework introduces a four-year undergraduate structure, multiple entry and exit options, multidisciplinary and skill-oriented learning, value-added education, and internship opportunities.

The potential benefits are considerable. Students may receive greater academic flexibility, broader exposure to knowledge, improved opportunities for skill development, practical experience, and greater possibilities for interdisciplinary learning. Academic Bank of Credits can potentially facilitate mobility, while digital education can expand access to learning resources. The emphasis on research and Indian knowledge traditions can also provide new opportunities for integrating Odisha's rich intellectual and cultural heritage into higher education.

At the same time, policy implementation is accompanied by significant challenges. Infrastructure, faculty availability, workload, digital inequality, student awareness, institutional coordination, assessment reform, and quality assurance require sustained attention. The success of NEP-2020 cannot therefore be determined solely by the formal adoption of its curricular framework.

The ultimate measure of success should be whether students experience greater choice, deeper learning, stronger skills, better research opportunities, meaningful practical exposure, cultural awareness, and more equitable access to higher education.

For Odisha, the transition from policy to practice offers an opportunity not simply to implement a national reform but to develop a context-sensitive model of higher education. Such a model can draw upon the state's cultural diversity, indigenous knowledge, artistic traditions, ecological resources, and social realities while preparing learners for a rapidly changing national and global environment.

NEP-2020 should consequently be understood as a continuing process of institutional transformation. Its success will depend on sustained cooperation among government, universities, colleges, teachers, students, communities, industries, cultural institutions, and other stakeholders. If implementation is accompanied by adequate resources, faculty development, institutional autonomy, student support, rigorous quality assurance, and meaningful integration of regional knowledge, NEP-2020 can become a significant instrument for strengthening the quality, relevance, inclusiveness, and cultural vitality of higher education in Odisha.

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