



# International Journal of Advance Research Publication and Reviews

Vol 03, Issue 9, pp 330-339, September, 2026

## NEP-2020 and the Transformation of Higher Education in Odisha: An Empirical Assessment of Access, Equity, Quality and Employability

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### ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a major shift in the philosophy, structure and delivery of higher education in India. Its emphasis on multidisciplinary education, flexibility, skill development, inclusion, digital learning, research, vocational education and graduate employability has significant implications for the higher education system of Odisha. This study examines the emerging transformation of higher education in Odisha through four interconnected dimensions: access, equity, quality and employability. A mixed-method research design is proposed, combining a structured survey of students and teachers with interviews of institutional administrators and analysis of institutional and policy documents. The study focuses particularly on the implementation of NEP-related reforms in universities and undergraduate colleges, with attention to rural, urban and tribal contexts. The proposed analytical framework examines whether increased educational flexibility is accompanied by equitable access, whether curricular reforms contribute to quality enhancement, and whether skill- and competency-oriented education improves students' perceived employability. The study also investigates institutional preparedness, faculty workload, digital infrastructure, student awareness, curriculum implementation and industry linkages as major determinants of successful policy implementation. The paper argues that the transformative potential of NEP 2020 in Odisha depends not merely on policy adoption but on institutional capacity, faculty preparedness, digital inclusion, regional sensitivity and effective monitoring. The article concludes by proposing a state-specific implementation framework for making higher education more inclusive, flexible, skill-oriented and employment-responsive.

**Keywords:** NEP 2020, higher education, Odisha, access, equity, quality, employability, multidisciplinary education, skill development, policy implementation

### Introduction

Higher education is an important instrument of social transformation, economic development and human-capital formation. In India, however, the expansion of higher education has historically been accompanied by concerns relating to unequal access, variations in institutional quality, graduate employability, skill gaps, regional disparities and inadequate research capacity. The National Education Policy 2020 seeks to address several of these concerns through a comprehensive restructuring of the education system.

NEP 2020 envisages higher education institutions that are multidisciplinary, autonomous, inclusive and research-oriented. It emphasizes holistic education, flexible curricular structures, multiple entry and exit opportunities, vocational education, technology-enabled learning, Indian languages, academic credit mobility and stronger connections between education and employment. These reforms represent a shift from a predominantly degree-oriented system towards a more flexible and competency-oriented model.

For Odisha, the implementation of NEP 2020 is particularly significant because the state has considerable variation in educational development across geographical and socioeconomic contexts. The higher education landscape includes universities, autonomous colleges, government degree colleges, private institutions and institutions serving rural and tribal populations. Differences in connectivity, infrastructure, family income, language, institutional capacity and access to academic resources may influence how students experience the reforms.

The transformation envisaged under NEP 2020 therefore cannot be evaluated only in terms of policy adoption. It must also be examined in terms of whether students from different social and geographical backgrounds can access the new opportunities, whether institutions possess the capacity to

implement curricular reforms, whether teachers are adequately prepared, and whether graduates acquire competencies relevant to employment and further education.

The present study proposes an empirical assessment of NEP 2020 in Odisha using four central dimensions—access, equity, quality and employability. These dimensions are treated as interconnected rather than independent. Increased access without equity may reproduce existing inequalities; curricular reform without quality faculty development may have limited impact; and skill-oriented education without meaningful industry linkages may not substantially improve employability.

## Background and Context of NEP 2020

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NEP 2020 seeks to transform Indian higher education by encouraging multidisciplinary institutions, flexible curricula, institutional autonomy, research and innovation, vocational education and technology integration. The policy also advocates a holistic understanding of education in which disciplinary knowledge is combined with communication, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and other competencies.

One important feature of the policy is the movement towards greater curricular flexibility. Students are expected to have greater opportunities to select courses across disciplines, develop major and minor areas of study and participate in internships and skill-based learning. The policy also provides a framework for multiple entry and exit and the use of academic credit systems to facilitate mobility.

The Odisha higher education system has consequently entered a period of substantial curricular and institutional transition. Undergraduate programmes are being aligned with the NEP framework, requiring institutions to reorganize curricula, assessment systems, course choices and academic administration.

However, implementation in a state such as Odisha raises several questions. Can rural and tribal colleges provide the same range of courses as well-resourced urban institutions? Do students understand the implications of multiple entry and exit? Are teachers adequately trained to undertake multidisciplinary and competency-based teaching? Are digital resources available to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds? Do vocational courses and internships actually improve employment prospects?

These questions provide the basis for the present research.

## Review of Related Literature

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Research on NEP 2020 has largely focused on its transformative potential, implementation challenges and implications for curriculum and institutional governance. Several studies have highlighted the policy's emphasis on multidisciplinary education, flexibility and holistic learning. Other studies have pointed to challenges associated with infrastructure, faculty development, digital inequality and institutional preparedness.

Research on higher education in India has also consistently demonstrated that access is influenced by socioeconomic status, geographical location, gender, caste, tribal identity and family educational background. Expansion in enrolment does not necessarily guarantee equal participation or completion.

The employability literature similarly suggests that possession of a degree alone does not guarantee employment. Employers increasingly demand communication skills, digital literacy, problem-solving ability, teamwork, adaptability and practical knowledge. Consequently, the emphasis of NEP 2020 on internships, vocational education and experiential learning is potentially significant.

However, there remains a need for state-specific empirical research examining how these reforms are experienced by students and faculty. Odisha provides an important setting for such research because of its distinctive rural, tribal and regional diversity.

## Objectives of the Study

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The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the extent of awareness and implementation of NEP 2020 among higher education institutions in Odisha.
2. To assess the impact of NEP-related reforms on students' access to higher education.
3. To examine whether NEP 2020 contributes to greater educational equity among students from different socioeconomic, rural, urban and tribal backgrounds.
4. To assess changes in curriculum flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, teaching-learning practices and assessment.
5. To examine faculty preparedness and institutional capacity for implementing NEP 2020.

6. To investigate the relationship between skill-based education, internships and students' perceived employability.
7. To identify major challenges affecting the implementation of NEP 2020 in Odisha.
8. To propose policy measures for strengthening NEP implementation in the state's higher education system.

## Research Questions

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The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are students and teachers aware of the major provisions of NEP 2020?
2. Has NEP implementation increased students' curricular and academic choices?
3. Are the benefits of NEP implementation distributed equally across rural, urban and tribal populations?
4. How adequately are higher education institutions prepared to implement multidisciplinary and skill-oriented education?
5. What changes have occurred in teaching, learning and assessment practices?
6. Does participation in internships, vocational courses and skill-development programmes influence students' employability perceptions?
7. What are the principal institutional and socioeconomic barriers to effective implementation?

## Hypotheses

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The following hypotheses may be tested quantitatively:

**H1:** Awareness of NEP 2020 is significantly associated with students' perception of curricular flexibility.

**H2:** Institutional preparedness has a significant positive relationship with perceived quality of NEP implementation.

**H3:** Students participating in skill-development and internship programmes report significantly higher perceived employability than students without such exposure.

**H4:** There is a significant difference in perceived access to NEP-related educational opportunities between rural and urban students.

**H5:** Socioeconomic background significantly influences students' access to digital and academic resources.

**H6:** Faculty training is positively associated with effective implementation of multidisciplinary and competency-based teaching practices.

## Conceptual Framework

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The study conceptualizes NEP implementation as the independent variable and educational transformation as the dependent outcome.

Independent/Implementation Variables

- NEP awareness
- Curriculum flexibility
- Major-Minor options
- Multidisciplinary courses
- Digital learning
- Faculty training

- Internship opportunities
- Vocational education
- Academic support
- Institutional infrastructure

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## **Four Outcome Dimensions**

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### ***Access***

- enrolment opportunities
- affordability
- geographical accessibility
- digital accessibility
- continuation and retention

### ***Equity***

- socioeconomic inclusion
- rural-urban equality
- tribal inclusion
- gender equity
- support for disadvantaged students

### ***Quality***

- teaching-learning practices
- curriculum relevance
- student engagement
- assessment
- faculty preparedness
- research opportunities

### ***Employability***

- technical skills
- communication
- digital competence
- problem-solving
- internship experience

- career readiness
- employment confidence

## Methodology

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The present study adopts a descriptive and empirical research design to assess the impact of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 on higher education in Odisha, with particular focus on four dimensions: access, equity, quality and employability. The study uses both primary and secondary sources of data.

Primary data are collected through a structured questionnaire from selected students and faculty members of higher education institutions in Odisha. The respondents are selected using an appropriate sampling technique to ensure representation of different institutional and socio-economic backgrounds. The questionnaire measures respondents' perceptions regarding accessibility of higher education, inclusiveness and equal opportunities, quality of teaching and learning, infrastructure and digital facilities, skill development, industry exposure and employment preparedness.

Secondary data are obtained from government reports, NEP-2020 documents, higher education statistics, institutional reports and other relevant publications. These data are used to examine trends in enrolment, participation, institutional development and other indicators associated with higher education transformation in Odisha.

The collected quantitative data are analysed using frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation, while comparative and inferential techniques may be used wherever appropriate. Qualitative responses are analysed thematically to identify major achievements, challenges and implementation gaps. The four dimensions—access, equity, quality and employability—are assessed through relevant indicators, enabling an integrated evaluation of the emerging impact of NEP-2020 on higher education in Odisha.

The study also recognizes that NEP-2020 is a long-term reform and its full impact cannot yet be measured conclusively. Therefore, the findings are interpreted as an assessment of the emerging changes, perceptions and implementation **status** rather than as a definitive causal evaluation of the policy.

## Proposed Analytical Indicators

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To make the empirical assessment more rigorous, four composite indices may be developed.

### *Access Index*

Possible indicators:

- availability of programmes
- affordability
- geographical accessibility
- digital access
- availability of scholarships
- retention opportunities

### *Quality Index*

Possible indicators:

- teacher preparedness
- student-centred teaching
- curriculum relevance
- assessment quality

- digital resources
- research opportunities
- student feedback

### ***Employability Index***

Possible indicators:

- communication skills
- digital skills
- problem-solving
- teamwork
- internship exposure
- vocational skills
- career guidance
- confidence in obtaining employment

These indices can be constructed from Likert-scale items after reliability testing.

## **Expected Findings and Discussion**

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Since the present article is designed as a research framework rather than a report of completed fieldwork, the following should be treated as expected areas of investigation rather than fabricated empirical findings.

### ***Access***

NEP 2020 is expected to increase academic flexibility through expanded programme choices and alternative learning pathways. However, actual access may vary according to institutional resources. Students studying in well-resourced urban institutions may have access to a wider range of courses, digital in Odisha. Students from tribal and economically disadvantaged communities may face barriers associated with household income, transportation, language, digital resources and extracurricular opportunities than students in remote colleges.

Thus, policy-level flexibility may not automatically produce equal opportunity at the institutional level.

### ***Equity***

The equity dimension is particularly important in Odisha. Students from tribal and economically disadvantaged communities may face barriers associated with household income, transportation, language, digital connectivity and access to academic support.

Consequently, the success of NEP 2020 should be evaluated not simply by overall enrolment but by the participation, retention and successful completion of students from disadvantaged communities.

### ***Quality***

The introduction of multidisciplinary curricula and competency-based learning can potentially improve educational quality. However, curricular innovation requires trained faculty, adequate infrastructure, appropriate teaching materials between the flexibility promised by the policy and the actual capacity of smaller colleges to offer and skill development has the potential to improve graduate employability. However, the impact will depend heavily on the quality of internshipsely introducing skill courses may not produce better employment outcomes unless students and effective academic administration.

One potential implementation challenge is the mismatch between the flexibility promised by the policy and the actual capacity of smaller colleges to offer a wide range of courses.

**Employability**

The emphasis on vocational education, internships, practical learning and skill development has the potential to improve graduate employability. However, the impact will depend heavily on the quality of internships, relevance of vocational courses and strength of institutional-industry partnerships.

Merely introducing skill courses may not produce better employment outcomes unless students receive meaningful practical experience and career guidance.

**Major Challenges in NEP Implementation in Odisha**

The empirical investigation is likely to identify several important challenges.

**Infrastructure Constraints**

Some institutions may lack adequate laboratories, libraries, ICT facilities, classrooms and digital resources required for implementing multidisciplinary to adopt more flexible, interdisciplinary and student-centred approaches. Lack of systematic access for some students while excluding others who lack reliable internet connectivity, devices or digital and technology-supported education.

**Faculty Preparedness**

NEP requires teachers to adopt more flexible, interdisciplinary and student-centred approaches. Lack of systematic professional development may constrain implementation.

**Digital Inequality**

Digital education can increase access for some students while excluding others who lack reliable internet connectivity, devices or digital literacy.

**Rural and Tribal Disparities**

The availability of academic choices may differ substantially between urban universities and rural or tribal colleges.

**Administrative Complexity**

Multiple courses, credit structures, student mobility, internships and flexible degree pathways can increase administrative responsibilities.

**Student Awareness**

Students may not fully understand the implications of Major-Minor choices, credit accumulation, multiple entry and exit and skill-based courses.

**Industry Linkages**

The employability objectives of NEP require stronger connections between institutions and employers. Institutions may face difficulties in establishing sufficient high-quality internship and placement opportunities.

**Language and Cultural Context**

Higher education reform in Odisha also needs to account for regional and tribal linguistic contexts. The availability of appropriate learning resources and academic support in local languages may influence educational participation and comprehension.

**Policy Implications**

Based on the proposed analytical framework, several policy interventions can strengthen NEP implementation in Odisha.

**Strengthen Faculty Development**

Regular NEP-oriented professional development programmes should focus on:

- competency-based teaching

- multidisciplinary pedagogy
- digital teaching
- formative assessment
- research methodology
- student mentoring

#### **Develop a Rural and Tribal Higher Education Support Programme**

Additional resources should be provided to institutions serving disadvantaged populations. Infrastructure support should be linked to measurable educational outcomes.

#### **Establish Institutional NEP Monitoring Cells**

Universities and colleges could establish dedicated NEP implementation cells responsible for monitoring:

- curriculum implementation
- student choices
- internships
- skill courses
- faculty development
- student feedback
- equity indicators

#### **Strengthen Industry-Academia Partnerships**

A state-level internship and apprenticeship network could connect colleges with industries, government departments, NGOs and local enterprises.

#### **Improve Digital Inclusion**

Digital transformation should be accompanied by:

- campus connectivity
- device-support programmes
- digital literacy
- accessible digital learning materials
- community digital learning centres

#### **Create an Odisha Higher Education Equity Index**

The state could develop an annual index measuring differences in higher education access and outcomes across:

- districts
- rural and urban institutions

- social groups
- gender
- economic categories

This would enable evidence-based allocation of resources.

## Conclusion

NEP 2020 provides an important opportunity to transform higher education in Odisha from a predominantly degree-centred system towards a more flexible, multidisciplinary, inclusive, competency-oriented and employment-responsive system. However, policy transformation does not automatically translate into educational transformation.

The real impact of NEP will depend on how effectively its principles are implemented within universities and colleges and, most importantly, on how students experience those changes. Access, equity, quality and employability should therefore be treated as interconnected indicators of educational transformation.

For Odisha, the central challenge is to ensure that institutional differences do not produce unequal NEP outcomes. A student in a remote rural or tribal college should have meaningful access to the same educational flexibility, digital resources, skill development and career opportunities as a student in a well-resourced urban institution.

The proposed empirical framework can provide evidence on whether NEP 2020 is narrowing or widening existing educational inequalities. It can also identify the institutional conditions under which curriculum flexibility, skill development and multidisciplinary learning translate into improved educational quality and employability.

Ultimately, the success of NEP 2020 in Odisha should not be measured only by the number of institutions adopting new curricula or regulations. It should be measured by whether students are more able to enter higher education, remain in it, learn effectively, acquire relevant competencies and successfully transition to employment or further study. A sustained evidence-based monitoring system, supported by faculty development, digital inclusion, equitable resource allocation and stronger industry linkages, will be essential for achieving these objectives.

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