

A POLICY WITH MANY A RIGHT INTENTION

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

Thirty-four years after the last National Policy on Education was introduced, in 1986, the [National Education Policy, 2020](#) has been announced. It has been [approved by the Union Cabinet](#), and will hopefully be approved by Parliament soon. It has several innovative ideas and daring proposals, but also makes a few problematic assumptions.

A majority of the path-breaking proposals submitted by the Dr. K. Kasturirangan Committee, in the 2019 draft National Education Policy, seem to have been approved. Those proposals saw extensive debates and discussions in the country and generated a lot of feedback. Very few important proposals that figured in the draft have been ignored in the final policy. There are a couple of major new proposals in the 2020 policy which were not proposed in the draft or which have been marginally modified from the draft policy. While I welcome the policy as it promises a large set of transformative reforms of the entire education system, I refer to some proposals and issues here.

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It is heartening that there are statements in the policy such as “education is a public good” and “the public education system is the foundation of a vibrant democratic society”. I wish these statements forcefully guide the formulation of the policy in all aspects. The recognition of education as a public good has important implications for public policy in planning, providing, and financing education. It also has important implications for the state’s approach towards private education. In fact, benevolent private players and private philanthropists draw inspiration from the nature of education as a public good. It is public education that contributes to the building of nations, their growth — socially, economically, politically, culturally, and technologically — and the building of a humane society. There are many more statements in the policy that may be welcomed. For instance, the policy promotes a holistic education as well as “each student’s holistic development in both academic and non-academic spheres”, emphasises extra-curricular activities, emphasises research, speaks of “substantial investment in a strong, vibrant public education system”, and so on.

The major recommendations of the Committee that have been approved include a 5+3+3+4 system in school education that incorporates early childhood care and education; universal education that includes the secondary level; adoption of school complexes; breakfast in the school meal programme; and introduction of vocational education at the upper primary level. A series of reforms have been proposed in higher education too. These include a multidisciplinary system offering choices to students from among a variety of subjects from different disciplines; integrated (undergraduate, postgraduate and research levels) education; a four-year undergraduate programme; and overhauling of the governance structure in higher education. There will be just one regulatory body for the entire sector in the Higher Education Commission of India. The policy also places emphasis on the liberal arts, humanities, and Indian heritage and languages; facilitates selective entry of high-quality foreign universities; aims to increase public investment in education to 6% of the GDP; promises to provide higher education free to about 50% of the students (with scholarships and fee waivers); and aims to increase the gross enrolment ratio in higher education to 50% by 2035. Some of these proposals were suggested by earlier committees such as the Yashpal Committee and C.N.R. Rao Committee, and several experts. As they have immense scope in revitalising the system, we may applaud many of these moves.

Some policy decisions are bold. For instance, the policy says, “Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5... will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language.” It also says the three-language formula will be implemented. The first proposal, which should apply to all schools including private schools, will reduce elitism and dualism in schools to a great extent, though one might expect a bolder move like a common school system, which would be a greater equaliser. The three-language formula will promote national integration. Reforms like revamping the University Grants Commission and abolishing the affiliating system were only dreamt of earlier by many experts. Of course, implementation of these audacious reforms is still a major challenge.

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What are the proposals or statements that were emphatically made in the draft but are missing in the policy? One important statement that was repeatedly made in the draft policy, that all commercially oriented private institutions will be closed, is missing in the final policy — though the 2020 policy promises closure of substandard teacher education institutions only. Now the policy simply states, “The matter of commercialization of education has been dealt with by the Policy through multiple relevant fronts, including: the ‘light but tight’ regulatory approach that mandates full public self-disclosure of finances”, though almost every policymaker and administrator in education recognises that there is a serious problem with the private education sector in India. Second, the draft policy promised doubling public expenditure on education to 20% of the total government expenditure, from 10%. The 2020 policy simply reaffirms the commitment to allocation of 6% of GDP.

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A few other recommendations of the Committee did not find a place in the final policy. They include setting up of a National Education Commission at the national level and a similar one at the State level. There is no mention of State School Education Regulatory Authorities in the 2020 policy. At the State level, the Department of School Education is regarded as the apex body. There is also no promise of ‘full’ recruitment of teachers at all levels, though the policy promises robust recruitment mechanisms to be put in place.

Among the few new proposals, the establishment of a model Multi-Disciplinary Education and Research University in every district is one. In school education, a National Assessment Centre has been promised to make assessment and evaluation more holistic. The policy, unlike the draft, rightly recognises the need to strengthen the Central Advisory Board of Education.

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Apart from a few controversial proposals, a few untenable basic beliefs and assumptions of the Committee prevail. The Committee seems to have great faith in “light but tight” regulation, confidence in the private sector in making honest self-disclosures of all aspects of their operations, and faith in the adequacy of common norms for public and private institutions. It also seems to have faith in the government’s ability to implement many reforms — for example, in doing away with the affiliating system and making all colleges autonomous degree-awarding colleges of high quality, ensuring institutional and faculty autonomy, and in the autonomous functioning of institutions of governance with no external interference. Policymakers and administrators have been struggling unsuccessfully with some of these issues for years. A major challenge policymakers will continue to face is how to differentiate the benevolent philanthropic private sector from undesirable but powerful market forces in the education sector and regulate the entry and growth of the latter.

Jandhyala B.G. Tilak is ICSSR National Fellow, New Delhi. Jtilak2017@gmail.com

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