

# NEP 2020: WHAT IS NEEDED IS A NEW KIND OF THINKING

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

One thing struck me as a major difference between the new National Education Policy and its predecessor. The previous policy, National Policy on Education 1986/1992, presented itself as an attempt to consolidate and build on all the earlier efforts, particularly NPE 1968. The new policy, NEP 2020, on the other hand, is very keen to establish that it is different (even in its name!) from everything of the past.

Nowhere in the policy does this attitude come across as starkly as it does in the section on higher education, which begins with a credo that “this policy envisions a complete overhaul and re-energising of the higher education system...” (p. 34). The policy starts with listing the problems currently faced by India’s higher education. The listing may be comprehensive, but there is no diagnosis of the underlying maladies. It is as though there is nothing to understand about what has made it possible, historically, for some of the current institutions, arrangements and practices to succeed even within the general gloom, and some successful ones of the past to have regressed into mediocrity.

The vision for higher education itself is quite wordy, and at places somewhat repetitive (for instance, the term “multidisciplinary” comes up repeatedly in the document and despite so much articulation on the subject, one is still left wondering what it is really all about), but comes across fairly clearly about how the higher education ecosystem will be by 2040. By that time, if the policy has its way, the Indian higher education ecosystem will be populated with higher education institutions (HEIs) comprising universities and colleges, public as well as private, all of which will be “multidisciplinary” and each populated by more than 3,000 students, at least one “in or near every district” (p. 35).

Universities will do research as well as postgraduate and undergraduate teaching, some research intensive and others teaching intensive, while colleges will be largely teaching at the undergraduate level, a number of them having “medium of instruction in local/Indian languages or bilingually” (p. 35). The colleges may manifest in clusters around universities as constituent colleges, or may be stand-alone autonomous ones. Ideally, all HEIs will eventually become “independent self-governing institutions” (p. 49) with considerable “faculty and institutional autonomy” (p. 34), having complied with a series of regulatory exercises that are “light but tight” (pp. 34, 47) operated by a large number of private accreditors overseen by a new set of regulatory institutions at the national level. By 2035, India’s higher education system will have doubled the Gross Enrolment Ratio to 50 per cent. The doubling of enrolment will be made possible by larger student strength in each HEI, a large number of new HEIs mostly in the private sector, by a refurbished Open and Distance Learning system and through the use of technologies including online modes.

While the vision is laid out pretty elaborately, the fact that we are starting not with a tabula rasa, but with existing imperfect institutions, both HEIs as well as the regulatory structures, the policy does not clarify how we will get there in two decades, indeed how we will accomplish the promised “complete overhaul and re-energising of the higher education system.” What the policy envisages is to build the edifice of an entirely new ecosystem of independent self-governing institutions with considerable autonomy for teachers from the debris of a “fragmented ecosystem” of “low standard teaching,” “lesser emphasis on research,” “suboptimal governance and leadership” and “ineffective regulatory system” (p. 33). No clear roadmap is laid out in the

policy for this complete makeover.

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The problem, as I see it, is that much of the mediocrity in the system that the policy rightly identifies stems out of a culture of mistrust and control, the seeds of which are in the very DNA of our larger system, not confined to higher education. So, it is a bit disappointing that the policy employs structures and mechanisms that are built out of the same genetic material to engineer the structural transformation of the entire ecosystem of higher education that it envisions.

When the policy envisages a set of national level regulatory institutions, it is willy-nilly giving in to centralisation and imposition of a uniform template. In fact, the NEP 2020 itself is an exercise of imposing uniformity and standardisation along a single axis of control and power, which is paradoxical given India's size, population, diversity and constitutional federalism. The "light but tight" approach (whatever that means) in the regulatory processes is obviously well intentioned. But, from past experiences we know that these are mostly subverted by the deeply entrenched bureaucratic culture that will pervade any new institution created within the larger governmental ecosystem. One old institution may mitotically divide into four new ones, but the genetic material out of which these are created remains the same, and so does the institutional culture.

What is needed, perhaps, is a new kind of thinking, more along the lines of the "rhizomatic" model for social organisation and culture that Deleuze and Guattari (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 1980, A Thousand Plateaus, Translated by Brian Massumi. London and New York: Continuum, 2004) have propounded. It is important to recognise that institutions are organic entities with their own histories and rooted firmly in, and engaging dynamically with, specific social and cultural contexts. Creation of a new ecosystem cannot be engineered through top-down fiats. Drawing an instance from ancient India, as the policy time and again does, [Nalanda](#) and Vallabhi did not reach their pinnacle of glory by complying with fiats that sought to prescribe their curricula and regulate their scholarship.

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In fact, each of the ancient universities was unique; they were not cast in the same mould. They flourished in an environment of trust and freedom in which they themselves determined what their scholarly pursuits and teaching would be. Their patrons simply trusted their wisdom to carry out their work and supported them without breathing down their necks.

*This article first appeared in the print edition on August 8, 2020 under the title 'NEP 2020: The new old'. The writer is professor, Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi and former vice chancellor, Ambedkar University Delhi.*

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