

STRUCTURAL REFORMS FOR NEP 2020

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

With the COVID-19 pandemic easing and normal academic activity being gradually resumed, the Central government's New Education Policy (NEP) is back in focus. While the policy covers a wide spectrum of issues, including reforms in school and higher education, the emphasis should also be on the need to restructure the governing bodies for universities and autonomous colleges.

First, the system of appointments of vice-chancellors and syndicates, or governing councils, the key authorities for any university, needs to be revised. The appointments are often mired in controversies, with frequent reports in the past of aspirants for the post of vice-chancellors and membership of syndicates indulging in unethical practices to gain favour. Luckily, the NEP talks of creating new structures, such as a Board of Management, to replace the syndicate system. To implement this recommendation, State governments must bring in a slew of bold reforms, some of which are outlined below.

For the Board of Management structure, the existing system of syndicates, consisting of government nominees and those nominated by Governors or chancellors, should be dispensed with. Often, people lacking merit but with an eye on memberships of affiliation, building, and purchase committees, among others, get nominated to these bodies.

Further, with the vice-chancellor as chairman, the Board should consist of former vice-chancellors drawn from other universities, members drawn from industry, the alumni, eminent public intellectuals, principals of affiliated colleges on rotation and members representing the non-teaching staff. The Board's decisions should be taken by consensus or by a majority of the members present. Proceedings should be conducted in virtual mode and made available for stakeholders' viewership.

For the appointment of vice-chancellors of universities, search committees constituted for such purposes must be thoroughly restructured. The government's and chancellors' role in such committees must be done away with. The practice of having government nominees, chancellor's nominees and university nominees should be stopped and it should be replaced by drawing an eminent former vice-chancellor or academician of proven integrity and administrative capability for the post of chairman.

Applications for the post of vice-chancellors can be invited through advertisements on the university website and through newspapers. Biodata of candidates must also be published on the websites. The committee may then allot marks to candidates' scholarship in terms of teaching and research, administrative capabilities, and capacity for fundraising. The scores obtained by candidates should be consolidated and the names of shortlisted candidates then submitted in the order of merit to chancellors for deciding on formal appointments.

Another important issue is accountability of faculty, and the best way to ensure that is to put in place an institutional structure of 'academic audit'. Faculty members must mandatorily upload on university websites their annual plans for research and innovative modes of teaching. Their annual self-appraisal reports can be evaluated by external peers and their recommendations should be strictly implemented. There is an urgent need to overcome faculty shortage by recruiting teachers in order to overcome the existing trend of higher educational institutions relying on guest faculty.

Finally, in order to improve the higher education ecosystem, excellence in teaching, research, innovation, entrepreneurship and social contribution must be encouraged. The NEP's recommendations, like the introduction of four-year courses that have the option of re-entry and exit, one- or two-year postgraduate courses, and setting up of an Academic Bank of Credit for credit transfers, may be helpful.

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