

FINE-TUNING THE EDUCATION POLICY

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

The draft policy seeks to revamp all aspects of the sector and does not shy away from suggesting brave new ideas. | Photo Credit: [Ritu Raj Konwar](#)

After about four years in the making, the draft National Education Policy, 2019 is out in the public domain, with comments sought from all stakeholders till June 30. Drawing inputs from the T.S.R. Subramanian Committee report and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), the K. Kasturirangan Committee has produced a document that is comprehensive, far-sighted and grounded in realities.

The idea that lifelong education is based on four pillars — learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be — has inspired the committee to cover every aspect of the education sector: school, higher, vocational and adult education. It also includes the whole gamut of professional education — engineering, medicine, agriculture, law, etc. It explains the scientific rationale behind the policy's prescriptions and suggests how the proposals can be translated into practice at the State and Central levels.

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In school education, one such idea is to cover children of 3-18 years [instead of the present 6-14 years under the Right to Education (RTE) Act], three years under early childhood care and education (ECCE) and four years under secondary education. Based on evidence from neuroscience that over 85% of a child's cumulative brain development occurs prior to the age of six and that 'school preparedness' at Anganwadis is light on educational aspects, ECCE would facilitate play and discovery-based learning for children of that age group.

Another innovative idea is to achieve 'universal foundational literacy and numeracy' through initiatives like the National Tutors Programme and the Remedial Instructional Aides Programme. Introduction of school complexes, a system of modular Board Examinations to allow flexibility, setting up Special Education Zones in disadvantaged regions, recognising teachers at the heart of the system, moving teacher education into the university system, and stressing the importance of learning new languages are among the key recommendations.

The way ahead for higher education has also been marked by bold propositions. The aim is to double the Gross Enrolment Ratio from 25% to 50% by 2035 and make universities the hubs of research (with Tier I universities/institutions devoted primarily to research and some teaching, Tier 2 universities devoted to teaching and some research, and Tier 3 institutions comprising mainly colleges that are to be converted gradually into degree-giving autonomous institutions). The policy recognises the crucial importance of liberal arts (it recommends setting up five Indian Institutes of Liberal Arts offering four-year courses) and the study of modern and classical languages (it recommends setting up National Institutions for Pali, Prakrit and Persian). It proposes separate institutions for regulation, funding, standard setting and accreditation, a National Research Foundation, and a Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog/ National Education Commission. Interestingly, vocational education, meant for 50% of the students, is sought to be integrated with school and higher education.

These are progressive ideas, but there are roadblocks in their implementation. These mostly relate to funding requirements and governance architecture.

First, what is recommended is a doubling of public funding to 6% of the GDP and increasing overall public expenditure on education to 20% from the current 10%. This is desirable but does not appear to be feasible in the near future given that most of the additional funding has to come from the States. Though innovative financing schemes have been proposed, involving the private sector, how those schemes will shape up remains to be seen.

Second, while establishing new institutions for Pali, Prakrit and Persian appears to be a novel idea, shouldn't the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysuru be strengthened and perhaps even upgraded to a university with an extended mandate to take care of these languages?

Third, expanding coverage under the RTE Act to include pre-school children is extremely important, but should perhaps be introduced gradually, keeping in mind the quality of infrastructure and teacher vacancies. Amendment of the Act can perhaps wait for a while.

Fourth, the idea of setting up the Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog under the Prime Minister and having it serviced by the MHRD is crucial in order to integrate the approaches and programmes of multiple departments. However, it is fraught with many administrative problems and possible turf battles. Bringing medical or agricultural or legal education under one umbrella is likely to be met with stiff opposition. What is going to happen, for example, to the National Medical Commission Bill, 2017?

Fifth, the idea of regulation being brought under the National Higher Education Regulatory Authority, standard setting under the General Education Council and funding under the Higher Education Grants Council may require a revisit so that there is synchronisation with the current Bill for the Higher Education Commission of India. Besides, the draft policy is silent on the Institutions of Eminence and agencies like the Higher Education Funding Agency.

Last, language issues have to be handled sensitively in view of their emotional overtones, as witnessed recently. Protests are often made without understanding the spirit of the text.

The details about financing and institutional structures should be fleshed out at the earliest, perhaps by an inter-departmental committee under the Cabinet Secretary. It is time for all conscientious persons to study the report and suggest the best path forward. If the political leadership backs it, implementation of the policy will transform our nation.

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