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Research Article

Impact of India's National Education Policy 2020 on Higher Education and the Development of Students' Social Competencies

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Abstract
The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India brings a tectonic change in the corpus of educational policy of the country by suggesting radical changes in higher education with a focus on the development of students as a whole entity. This review paper discusses the implications of NEP 2020 in higher education institutions through a strength-based approach, focusing on developing social competencies among students. Based on a review of policy literature, emerging research and theoretical literature, this paper examines how NEP 2020's interdisciplinary focus, the flexible implementation of curriculum and experiential learning aspire to offer opportunities for students to develop their social skills, emotional intelligence and collaborative skills. The implications are that while NEP 2020 gives strong lingual support for integrating social competencies into higher education, its achievement entails substantial institutional redefinition, faculty preparation and continued policy backing. The challenges and opportunities in translating policy intentions to desired educational outcomes that enable students to navigate the dilemmas of complex societies are framed from this review.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, higher education, social competencies, holistic development, multidisciplinary education.

INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which was approved by the Indian Cabinet on July 29, 2020, stands as the first thorough reform of India's education system in Mind since the National Policy on Education 1986. This radical neoliberal policy document reimagines the entire education system of India, from early childhood to tertiary level, with the principal goal of achieving comprehensive development and the fostering of lifelong skills (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). NEP 2020 stands in stark contrast to conventional educational policies that gave major weightage to cognitive and academic attainments. Being a social constructivist theory of self-knowledge, NEP 2020 emphasises the enhancement of students' social competencies, such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration & communication and ethical reasoning. The current timing of NEP 2020 is also striking since

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It emerges in light of growing requirements of the global economy and technological dislocation, along with an increasingly calling for graduates that are equipped not only with domain knowledge but also with interpersonal (and intrapersonal) competences enough to cope with intricate social setups (Kumar, 2021). Social competencies, which can be defined as the ability to understand and handle social interactions in a successful manner, are becoming more and more acknowledged as an important predictor of success in working life, civil society involvement, and personal happiness (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020).

This paper reviews NEP 2020's higher education aspects and analyses as to how the same promotes students' social skills. It examines, in particular, the policy's focus on an interdisciplinary approach to education and flexible curricular options, experiential learning, community engagement, and assessment reform. Drawing from the literature and policy analyses, this paper recognises the mechanisms through which NEP 2020 expect to promote development of societal competences and assesses associated challenges and opportunities that lie ahead during its implementation.

2. Conceptual Framework: Social Competencies in Higher Education

Social skills are simply a string of behaviours, by which we react to one another in the multitude of dynamic interactions that constitute the environment around us. The CASEL model outlines five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). In higher education, these include not just general social skills but also empathy, ethical reasoning, the ability to work with others on complex problems of common interest and civic responsibilities more generally. The evidence is clear: Social skills are important predictors of school achievement, career success and overall life satisfaction. Students who have good social skills are more academically engaged and less stressed and more likely to stay in school (Durlak et al., 2011). Moreover, employers are paying more attention to social skills when deciding whom to hire by realising that technical competencies alone will not be enough in today's working environments with their requirement for joint effort and dealing with diversity (World Economic Forum, 2020).

The traditional Indian Higher Education has been criticized for its focus on discipline, silence and limited scope to develop social competencies (Agarwal, 2006). Such compartmentalisation of knowledge in discipline-specific silos, and exam systems that place value on the recall of facts rather than critical thinking and teamwork has produced graduates equipped with academic mastery but deficient in social-emotional skills vital for all-round success (Chauhan, 2019). NEP 2020 aims to address these limitations more intentionally by seeking a complete restructuring of higher education with the introduction of social facets in each and every part of learning.

3. Key Provisions of NEP 2020 Relevant to Social Competency Development

Multidisciplinary and Holistic Education

One of the most significant aspects of NEP 2020 is its focus on multidisciplinary education and doing away with rigid barriers between streams, curricular and co-curricular, vocational and academic. One of the recommended policy mechanisms is that large multidisciplinary universities and colleges be established, where flexible, integrated programs are developed for students to undertake combinations of subjects (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). This kind of interdisciplinary work and the need to share ways of learning can lead directly to social and interactive competencies. Studies suggest that when students work across disciplines and learn within multidisciplinary spaces or structures, they develop cognitive flexibility, empathy, and decision-making skills based on the critiquing of various perspectives—all hallmarks of social competence (Lattuca et al., 2004). NEP 2020 presents an opportunity for inter-disciplinary learning between students of different streams by enabling students to study other subjects in addition to their core subjects, promoting communication skills, understanding of other cultures and ability to work together on problem-solving tasks.

Flexible Curricular Structures and Credit-Based Systems

NEP 2020 defines flexible curricular structure with exit and entry options for student to earn their undergraduate degrees in either three years or four years, along with the corresponding certificates (Ministry of Human Resource Department, 2020). This flexibility is supported by the Academic Bank of Credits, a virtual tool through which students can earn and transfer credits to achieve credit mobility locally in individual institutions as well as across public educational systems and fields of study. For social competency, these adaptable structures promote a student's sense of responsibility for one's own learning trajectory and, as a result, develop self-awareness, goal-setting/confidence to succeed/decision-making. The ability to try out various majors and professions before settling on one is critical in self-discovery, which is important for social identity formation (Sharma & Sharma, 2021). Furthermore, students have the opportunity of a variety of learning experiences between institutions (which offer different social environments and encourage adaptable and interpersonal flexibility).

Experiential Learning and Community Engagement

The NEP 2020 gives a huge emphasis on experiential learning such as hands-on learning, integrating arts with education and sports, along with community service. It is compulsory for all undergraduate courses to have an element of vocational training and internship so that there is a connection between theoretical

education in the classroom and its practical applications (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Social competence may be particularly enhanced through experiential learning because the learner is placed in a real-life social setting where they are required to negotiate complex interpersonal relationships, work with diverse groups of people and directly apply what they know to meet the needs of their community (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Shared service and learning experiences, through community engagement such as service-learning projects, necessitate that students learn how to react with empathy to those who are of a different culture as the student encounters diverse community members. The research shows that service-learning experiences make a major impact on students' civic responsibility, understanding of social issues, and desire to promote social justice (Celio et al., 2011).

Emphasis on Life Skills and Values Education

NEP 2020 lays special emphasis on life skills and value education, promoting the inclusion of ethics, human values, constitutional values and teaching about the environment under higher education curricula (Ministry of HRD, 2020). The focus is rooted in the belief that we should educate competent professionals who also have a strong commitment to ethical principles and social responsibility. Values education fills the gap in the traditional higher education where values, ethics and morality of professional life are often not taken into consideration. When integrated with considerations of ethics, morality and social responsibility, students develop moral reasoning skills, empathy, and the aspiration to use their knowledge and skill to serve the greater good (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). These features are core ingredients in social competence, given that they foster how people interact with others and make decisions impacting third parties.

Pedagogical Reforms and Assessment Changes

NEP 2020 recommends that a change be there from teacher centric to learner centric system, focusingon critical thinking, creativity and cooperative learning rather than rote memorisation. The policy recommends new teaching innovative practices like project-based learning, peer-learning and technology integrated to keep learners active in constructing knowledge (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). These pedagogical innovations offer many connections for social skills. Project-based learning, for example, usually asks students to collaborate, communicate well with their peers, resolve conflicts and organise themselves towards common goals-all important social skills (Kokotsaki et al, 2016). Through peer learning activities, students are encouraged to both give and receive constructive feedback, value different perspectives and learn from each other. Technology-mediated learning environments make it possible for learners to interact with peers across geographical distances, which contributes to developing some of the digital literacy and

virtual collaboration skills. Additionally, NEP 2020 suggests reforms in assessment which not only confines to the conventional examination but goes with the scope of formative assessments, competency-based evaluations and 360-degree multidimensional assessments for assessing students' progress through cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 20). By broadening the spectrum of evaluation to incorporate social and emotional competencies, NEP 2020 makes the point that these skills are indeed valued outcomes of higher education rather than collateral considerations.

Institutional Restructuring and Governance Reforms

NEP 2020 foresees a massive overhaul of the higher education system. This would mean forming large, multi-disciplinary universities, establishing one single regulatory authority (the Higher Education Commission of India), and introducing more institutional autonomy with accountability (Ministry of Human Resource Development 2020). The article also highlights risky issues, such as the culture of research and faculty development in technology. These institutional changes provide a "seedbed" for the development of social competence. University autonomy enables universities to define new programs and pedagogical approaches suitable for their academic and student population specifics. Faculty preparedness efforts targeted on learner-centric educating, valuation of social knowledge and comprehensive instructing methodologies are key to relocating policy intentions into classroom experiences (Mishra, 2022). The focus on research culture facilitates the development of teamwork, intellectual dialog and knowledge production in which students participate through collaborative group-research.

4. Mechanisms of Social Competency Development Under NEP 2020

The provisions of NEP 2020 create multiple mechanisms through which students can develop social competencies:

Cross-Cultural Interaction: Multidisciplinary educational and flexible curriculum models attract students from a variety of career fields, which enables cross-cultural exchange of ideas as well as the development of more "Theory of Mind." Exposure to different ideas can help students learn to question their assumptions, and develop cognitive and social flexibility.

Collaborative Learning Spaces: The move away from lecturing to project-based, peer-to-peer and other group-based activities requires students to work together, which helps them develop communication skills, manage conflict resolution, reach consensus and make decisions. In these collaborative exercises, students learn how to contribute their ideas to a group and therefore use the power of collective intelligence.

Authentic Problem Solving: Hands-on and immersive experiences (e.g., internship, community engagement or research) related to real-life contexts where students have the

opportunity to apply their knowledge in solving complex ill-structured problems. The gained experience in turn leads to the development of critical thinking, flexibility and navigating through ambiguity- all of which are components of social competence in modern society (Verma & Singh, 2021).

Reflexive Learning: The reliance on formative assessment and 360-degree feedback means that students are encouraged to reflect on their performance, identify opportunities for development and plan how they might improve in the future. This metacognitive awareness is the basis of self-regulation and good judgment.

Integration of Values: The incorporation of ethical, value, and constitutional principles in every subject area gives students a moral reference point from which to reason and make decisions. Through critical examination of ethical and social justice issues, students learn about the moral underpinnings essential for responsible citizenship and professional conduct.

5. Challenges in Implementing NEP 2020 for Social Competency Development

While NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for developing students' social competencies, its implementation faces several significant challenges:

Infrastructure and Resource Barriers: Several HEIs in India, especially in rural and semi-urban regions, do not have adequate physical infrastructure, available technology, or fiscal resources to realise the NEP 2020's ambitious changes (Pokhrel & Behera, 2021). Such multidisciplinary programs do not come cheap and experiential learning experiences, technology-rich pedagogies demand significant investment, which is something that lower budget institutions may not be able to afford.

Faculty Readiness and Mindset Transition: The efficacy of the pedagogical reforms envisaged under NEP 2020 is heavily contingent on the faculty's readiness and ability to embrace learner-centric pedagogies, facilitate collaborative learning, and assess social skills. However, many faculty members in Indian higher education were educated within traditional teacher-centred paradigms and may not possess pedagogic knowledge or skills to support the development of social competencies (Nanda & Deepika, 2021). Faculty development programs should be an extensive agenda, but implementation of such programs on a larger scale will take time and resources.

Challenges to Evaluation: The evaluation of social competencies is always more difficult than for factual knowledge or disciplinary skills. There is great expertise and investment required to construct valid, reliable and fair tests for social competencies. Additionally, there is the danger that measuring social competencies may encourage only surface compliance and not actual growth if assessment work is viewed as high-stakes (Goswami & Mitra, 2022).

Institutional Inertia and Change Resistance: Institutions of higher education are complex organizations with existing structures, cultures, and power relations that may oppose change.

A systemic overhaul on the scale envisaged in NEP 2020 is likely to run into opposition from those who have a vested interest in the status quo. Breaking through that inertia takes strong leadership, a vivid articulation of the benefits of reform, and decision-making processes that involve all stakeholders.

Equity and Access: NEP 2020 lays great onus on equity and inclusion; caution must be exercised to ensure that its progressive reforms do not accentuate the existing inequalities. Poorer students also may have limited access to multi-disciplinary programs, experiential learning experiences and technology-enabled learning when they are clustered in elite institutions or require supplementary financial investment (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Providing equitable opportunities for all youth to develop social competencies can only be achieved by providing targeted supports and resources to priority populations.

6. Opportunities and Future Directions

Despite these challenges, NEP 2020 offers significant opportunities to change the face of higher education and promote the holistic development of students:

Technology as a Catalyst: Digital technologies could support the realisation of this vision (NEP 2020) and bring the new reforms into practice by providing avenues for collaborative learning, resources from diverse sources, including multimedia and creative pedagogies. Social competency building programmes may be facilitated even with limited resources, using online learning communities, virtual collaboration tools and digital portfolios (Jena, 2020).

Public-Private Partnerships: The partnerships between universities, government agencies, and the business community can promote experiential learning, resource sharing for infrastructure build-up and knowledge transfer. Partnerships with industry can provide students with internships, mentorship and real-world projects to develop both technical skills and social capabilities.

Research and Evidence Building: As institutions start operationalising NEP 2020's changes, it will present an opportunity to have robust evidence on the impact of particular social competencies building approaches. Creating an evidence base for what works in India can also help shape policy and practice.

Community Engagement and Social Innovation: The focus on community engagement promoted by NEP 2020 provides a platform for students to solve real-world social problems along with skill development. Social innovation projects, service-learning practices and community-based research can help foster community development and student learning (Singh & Kumar, 2022).

Global Collaborations: International collaborations and student exchange programmes can bring Indian students in touch with different cultural settings, thereby increasing their cross-cultural competencies and global sensibility. This partnership can also

provide for the exchange of best practices in the development of social skills globally.

CONCLUSION

NEP 2020 of India is an ambitious and holistic vision of transforming higher education for the 21st Century. Its focus on multidisciplinary education, its flexible curricular formats and experiential learning styles, and its concern for holistic student development all provide a firm basis upon which students can build their social competencies—abilities now recognised as necessary for personal success in school and life, professional readiness for the workplace, and preparedness for civic participation. The channels through which NEP 2020 facilitates social skills development, peer-based learning, collaborative learning spaces, hands-on problem-solving, balanced with reflection and values integration, are hence backed by sound research in educational effectiveness. When they work well, these reforms can lead to graduates who have more than expertise in a discipline and the individual competencies that support it; they also have the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and ethical skills required for functioning in complex social environments and contributing to societal flourishing. But to make this potential a reality will take a sustained effort, significant investment and careful attention to implementation challenges. Challenges related to infrastructure, faculty readiness, complexity of assessment, institutional friction, and equity require strategic consultation and planning with appropriate funding support in order for ongoing review of these efforts. In the end, the fate of NEP 2020 will be decided as a result of collective efforts made possible by those involved in policy-making, people leading institutions, faculty and students themselves.

As India begins this transition, it will be important to maintain investment in research and documenting the experience of implementation as a basis for evidence-informed policy and practice development. Students' social competencies are not an add-on to higher education, but central to the very purpose of education: educating people to live satisfying lives and contribute actively to a democratic society that is both inclusive and sustainable.

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