

NEP, one year later: Promises to keep and miles to go

There is a national consciousness that has developed in the last year around the NEP

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Representative image. Credit: PTI photo

A year ago, the government of India announced one of its most transformative public policy initiatives— The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, whose vision states: “This policy envisions a complete overhaul and re-energising of the higher education system to overcome these challenges and thereby deliver high-quality higher education, with equity and inclusion... The main thrust of this policy regarding higher education is to end the fragmentation of higher education by transforming higher education institutions (HEI) into large multidisciplinary universities, colleges and HEI clusters/Knowledge Hubs...”

The first year of the NEP focussed on three efforts that were needed to effectively implement the policy in the context of HEIs:

1. Galvanisation of intellectual consciousness among the stakeholders regarding the vision and objectives of the NEP: This was essential and the effort was led by the prime minister and the education minister, reflecting the seriousness of the government’s intent to implement the policy.
2. Developing internal capacities within the ministry and other regulatory bodies: This is a sine qua non for effective implementation of the NEP since it would not be possible to have the same organizational structure with the same set of individuals having the responsibilities to implement the NEP.

3. Important reform initiatives as a prelude to the implementation: While the Covid-19 crisis created the necessary impetus for the education sector to innovate, the Education Ministry and other regulatory bodies such as the UGC announced new and progressive regulations to promote online education including empowering select universities to offer 100% online degrees. The “Institutions of Eminence” were also empowered to have more flexibility in online education, but more needs to be done in this regard. The Academic Bank of Credit has created a foundation to bring much the needed flexibility in study programmes for the benefit of the students.

The first year of the NEP was challenging given that schools, colleges and universities switched to online mode of education, which was the only option available. The scenario created huge challenges to access education due the digital divide that is widely prevalent in India.

Implementation challenges

The implementation of any policy requires enormous political will and leadership, bureaucratic support and coordination along with a sense of acceptability that promotes participation among stakeholders. While the last year helped advance efforts, there are a few specific challenges that need to be addressed:

1. Creation of new institutions: It is absolutely critical to create new institutional mechanisms at the national level that are vested with the responsibility of implementing the NEP. These could be in the form of committees, working groups and even advisory bodies that will be responsible to implement different aspects of the NEP. It will be a mistake to assume that existing institutional capacities that are available within the ministry and in the other regulatory bodies can fulfil the task of implementing the NEP.
2. Significant legislative and statutory reform initiatives: One of the major challenges of implementing any policy is the absence of legislative backing and statutory support. If this aspect of the NEP is not dealt with immediately, it runs the risk of being challenged in a court of law, leading to inordinate delay and undermining its implementation in an expedited manner. The Higher Education Commission that has been envisaged in the NEP needs a legislative framework, while many other proposals may require other forms of statutory backing.
3. Stronger recognition of the role of state governments and private HEIs: A large number of HEIs are under the state governments. Nearly 70% of HEIs in India are in the private sector when we include universities and colleges. Over 70% of students in India are studying in private HEIs. The entire government machinery, including the Education Ministry and all other regulatory bodies, need to recognise the substantive and significant role of state governments and private HEIs for the successful implementation of the NEP.

Plan of action

There is a national consciousness that has developed in the last year around the NEP. While there will be disagreements on certain aspects of NEP among stakeholders, a majority of the

recommendations have been welcomed. The following should become the plan of action for NEP implementation in the near future:

1. The HEIs should be empowered to take complete ownership and assume leadership in the implementation of the NEP. This is absolutely essential. The nature of policy implementation requires empowerment at the ground level and the NEP is no different.

2. Strong institutional incentives should be developed to promote the implementation of the NEP. Incentives could be financial, but need not be limited only to that. The concept of “Graded Autonomy” that was promoted by the government of India could be linked to the effective implementation of the NEP.

3. While empowerment of the HEIs and provision of incentives will form the core of the plan of action, these efforts need to be continuously monitored and assessed. But the monitoring and feedback mechanisms involving quasi-governmental organisations such as the Association of Indian Universities.

As a nation and society, we need to take the NEP more seriously. Every effort ought to be taken to ensure that the NEP is implemented in letter and spirit and in an expedited manner.

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