

Reinventing Higher Education?

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The draft New Education Policy offers challenges disguised as opportunities and progressive thinking, especially in terms of autonomy, the deeply troubling role of the private sector HEI, regulatory bodies/norms and standardized parochialisms in the name of an emphasis on the local.

So the New Education Policy (NEP) proposes a National Research Framework (NRF), about which we have seen some opinions [here](#) and needs to be addressed separately. This is not a full-fledged response to the draft document, but more on the lines of ‘items flagged’.

The NEP draft emphasizes ‘holistic’ (the term occurs on 37 pages of the document) education and learning. It seeks to ‘break silos’ in terms of disciplines and ‘streams’ within the Higher Education Institution (HEI). It proposes that the multidisciplinary university is the way to go, and liberal arts education is crucial to the evolution of students and the young into responsible citizens. No quarrels with any of these.

It rejects the various categories of HEIs – affiliating, deemed, etc. and then proceeds to propose a categorization of its own:

It is the vision of this Policy that all HEIs evolve into one of these three types of institutions, which we will refer to as Types 1, 2, and 3: research universities, teaching universities, and colleges.

Type 1 These will focus equally on research and teaching: they will dedicate themselves to cutting-edge research for new knowledge creation while at the same time offering the highest quality teaching across undergraduate, masters, Ph.D., professional, and vocational programmes.

Type 2: Teaching universities. These will focus primarily on high quality teaching across disciplines and programmes, including undergraduate, masters and doctoral, professional, vocational, certificate and diploma programmes, while also significantly contributing to cutting-edge research.

Type 3: These will focus almost exclusively on the goal of high quality teaching. These institutions will largely run undergraduate programmes, in addition to diploma and certificate programmes, across disciplines and fields, including vocational and professional.

It remains unclear as to how exactly, besides the projected enrolment numbers that vary across the three, types I and II are distinct. Note that both are to offer the same set of programmes: undergraduate, masters, PhD, professional and vocational programmes, although type II are designated ‘teaching universities’. But there is a slippage here that one, used to working with language, is astounded by. Spot the difference, dear reader:

[Type I] offering the *highest quality teaching* across undergraduate, masters, Ph.D., professional, and vocational programmes.

[Type II] will focus primarily on *high quality teaching* across disciplines and programmes...

Is the projected difference in degrees (pun intended) between Type I and Type II teaching a Freudian slip or is it indicative of something more by way of evaluation of expectations, funding, ranking? Why bother classifying the HEIs when they (appear to) have the same ends, except in terms of the quality?

Then, again, the distinction between ‘teaching universities’ and ‘research universities’ implies one can have one without the other. Is it possible to be a good teaching university when its faculty do not upgrade their knowledge (and *not* via the 20th century doctors’ cure for insomnia – the ‘Refresher Course’ for teachers, which is mandatory for promotions) in their fields? The NEP insists on upgraded and updated knowledge throughout, and yet appears to be dismantling the link between research and teaching.

Teaching and research supervision in doctoral programmes which are not accompanied by continuous research by the teacher-supervisor are more than likely to be dated methodologically and relevance. The NEP insists, rightly, that we need to train students to become fuller and better citizens. One would assume that for an Indian student to become such a global citizen, she has to be in sync with the world and the *global* developments in the discipline she is pursuing. Is such a training to be provided by a faculty whose ‘last known whereabouts’ in the library or bibliography was in 1995? It is extremely detrimental to assume that one can presuppose teaching without research, but that is exactly what NEP implies.

A laudable objective stated in the NEP is the HEI’s ‘gradually move towards full autonomy - academic, administrative, and eventually financial’. The NEP also assures us ‘the autonomy of public institutions will be backed by adequate public financial support and stability’. Then it says something startling immediately afterwards:

Private institutions with public spirited commitment to high quality, equitable education will be encouraged and treated on par.

Does this propose, then, that a struggling state-owned university, which is the sole source of public education for the underprivileged, will be competing with a corporate university that charges an arm and a leg as annual fees? Why would public funding be earmarked for hugely endowed private institutions when state-funded HEIs have for decades been clamouring for at least optimal funding? The answer to the second question is a resounding ‘yes’ in the NEP:

Equal encouragement and empowerment for private higher education institutions: Private HEIs will be encouraged to develop into Type 1 and 2 institutions, and must develop to become Type 3 institutions. While the financial support for such development must be arranged by the private HEI, the government will treat them on par with public institutions, and empower them equally. *The private HEIs will have equal access to NRF funding for research support as public institutions.* (emphasis added)

Now for the NEP’s ideas for liberal education. It is right when it proposes that HEI should facilitate ‘cross-disciplinary capabilities; and develop both the creative and analytic sides of their brains’.

As part of this opening out, the NEP proposes:

Departments of languages (especially Indian languages), literature (especially Indian literature), music (including Carnatic, Hindustani, folk, and film), philosophy (especially Indian philosophy, including Buddhist and Jain philosophy), Indology and the study of India, art, dance, theatre, education, statistics, pure and applied sciences, sociology, economics, sports, and other such departments truly needed for a multidisciplinary and stimulating Indian education and environment will be established and strengthened at HEIs across the country.

This will enable

an understanding of India, our context, and our challenges (e.g. courses on India's history and diversity, or on the social realities of contemporary India);

A throw-away line about 'increas[ing] their [students'] cultural literacy of India and the world' is welcome but is inadequate in the context of the paragraphs cited earlier. There is absolutely no doubt that active and intensive encouragement of the Indian languages, history and arts is indispensable. There are a few anomalies here though.

In the school curriculum recommendations, it suggests making an effort at 'contextualising curriculum and incorporating tribal knowledge traditions will be an immediate and necessary action'. Oddly, there is no such component suggested in the HEI curriculum where, arguably, a more insightful *critique* of national identities, contemporary politics and polity, and the nature of 'belonging', read via such texts and knowledge formations from the underprivileged or marginalized, can be enunciated. Would not the HEI be the place to examine the 'social realities of contemporary India' via the various analytic prisms of social categories and ableisms?

Any knowledge of contemporary Indian realities must necessarily examine problematic dimensions such as globalization, climate racism and global financial tyrannies. The NEP's emphasis on the national must necessarily be matched by an equal emphasis on the global. It does say at the beginning:

Highest priority is accorded to the task of ensuring universal access to an education of high quality and breadth that would support India's continued ascent, progress, and leadership on the global stage - in terms of economic development, social justice and equality, environmental stewardship, scientific advancement and cultural preservation, and help develop and maximise our country's rich talents and resources for the good of the individual, the country, and the world.

To situate India within the global necessitates attention to its (regional, national) history in terms of its ancient and modern *global* roles. When the Nalanda and Takshashila universities are repeatedly mentioned (including two 'missions' named after them), it is essential to recognize, as Amartya Sen notes in *The Argumentative Indian*, that these were places of intense cosmopolitan debates, transnational linkages and cross-cultural exchanges, and not just sites for exploring the national culture. If we do not, in the 21st globalized century, position the University as a space where the global comes home (problematically, often) and intersects with, influences, the local, one runs the risk of treating and projecting the national cultures as pure, homogeneous and monolithic, at the cost of rejecting connections and contentious traditions within. To cosmopolitanise without sacrificing the national ought to be the goal.

Now, the question of autonomy. The NEP draft rejects the excessive value placed in our HEIs on seniority:

The system of selection, tenure, promotion, salary increases and other recognition and vertical mobility of faculty and institutional leaders is, at the current time, not based on merit but tends to be either seniority based or arbitrary. This has had the negative effect of severely disincentivising quality and innovation at all levels ...

career management is too often not based on merit, but rather on seniority, luck, or other arbitrary...

NEP asks for an overhaul here:

HEIs will set up effective and fair processes for career progression, promotion and compensation determination (including service conditions) of all its employees, including the faculty. These processes will be based on developing, recognising and rewarding performance and contribution; they will not be based on 'seniority'.

Not ageist, no. But opinion about having already been expressed in these [pages](#), we can let it go for now.

But in the process of speaking of HEI autonomy, in another domain, the document offers us a grey area. It says:

While each HEI will have complete autonomy in developing the curricula for its programmes, all curricula must respond to the standards of professional practice or learning outcomes or graduate attributes set up by the relevant standards-setting body in that field/discipline.

This is good. But then it says:

A National Higher Education Qualifications Framework (NHEQF) outlining the learning outcomes associated with degree/diploma/certification shall be the guiding document for curricula across all disciplines and fields, which do not have their individual PSSBs (see P18.3.1). This framework will be formulated by the General Education Council (GEC)(see P18.3.2). In the case of vocational subjects, correspondence between the National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) and the NHEQF shall be established to enable equivalences and mobility.

If there are so many frameworks and guideline, the 'national research foundation' and 'advisory' bodies, how is any HEI supposed to be autonomous? There will be, says the document, 'standards-setting bodies' to create benchmarks and, one assumes, to codify and suggest. This appears, at least in the language of the document, a contradiction within the promise of autonomy.

There is plenty more to be said about the NEP document. The draft poses interesting conundrums. But it offers challenges *disguised* as opportunities and progressive thinking, especially in terms of autonomy, the deeply troubling role of the private sector HEI, regulatory bodies/norms and standardized parochialisms in the name of an emphasis on the local. To be enthusiastic about it without having a clear resolution of the conundrums would be, at best, presumptuous.