

MY VIEW | VOX HETERO DOX

National education policy 2020: The devil lies in implementation

The proposed undergrad changes could make designing curricula difficult while stifling student mobility across universities



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The recently announced new National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) sets out a vision for 2040 with a plan for transforming school and higher education across India. This was not presented in or approved by Parliament. And its implementation will depend largely on state governments, since education is a concurrent subject under the Constitution. The experience of earlier national education policies (1968 and 1986) suggests that in a federal system, implementation and coordination form a complex process, which can take as long as two decades.

More than 70 years after Independence, India's crisis in education runs deep. It has grown with the passage of time and stares us in the face. The NEP recognizes the symptoms of the malaise and jumps to definitive prescriptions, without any analysis of why things went wrong or any diagnosis of what ails education in India. This failing is attributable to its focus on education, which abstracts from or ignores the economic, social and political contexts that have shaped outcomes.

The other limitation is just as important. The NEP is clear on the destination but silent about the journey. It does not address the question of how we would get there. The expected transformation cannot materialize unless we can create more equal socio-economic opportunities in terms of access to education, change the culture of institutions in education, regulators and governments, and end the political intrusions that are so common in every sphere of education. This is a distant dream.

In most government schools, a significant proportion of teachers are absent, while an even higher proportion among those present do not teach, but receive salaries because they are not accountable and matter as constituencies in electoral politics. It raises dropout rates among students. Learning outcomes are notoriously poor. Consequently, almost 50% of students, whose parents can barely afford the fees, are enrolled in private schools where the quality of teaching-learning is also mostly sub-standard. Good private schools are simply unaffordable for ordinary people. Class 12 board exams have witnessed phenomenal grade inflation at the top. Thus, a tiny slip in performance closes the door on a large number of students, sealing their fates.

The NEP's emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy is laudable. So is its object of creating a milieu conducive to learning and curbing the tyranny of exams by using standardized assessment in Classes 3, 5 and 8 combined with less demanding board exams for Classes 10 and 12. This will need revolutionary changes in mindsets and political realities. The proposed national aptitude test will become the new last-chance for school-leavers. Markets and competition will ensure that

the coaching-syndrome and exam-tyranny return in a new incarnation. The public provision of quality school education, a failure so far, is essential. Good government schools will also improve the quality of private schools.

In higher education, opportunities for school-leavers who make the grades are simply not enough and what exists is not good enough. The pockets of excellence in Indian Institutes of Technology or Indian Institutes of Management are outcomes of the enormous reservoir of talent and Darwinian selection processes. But these are no consolation because it is universities providing educational opportunities for people at large that are the lifeblood of higher education. Most public universities have witnessed a steady decline in standards over the past three decades. Private universities are few and those that are good are even fewer.

Higher education is caught in a pincer movement. For one, there is a belief that markets can solve the problem through private players, which is leading to education as business, shutting the doors on those who cannot finance themselves, without regulation that would ensure quality. For another, governments—

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education institutions autonomous through an empowered Board of Governors by 2035, but there could be many a slip in the interim. Thus, autonomy for public universities in India might remain an elusive quest even 88 years after Independence.

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