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W24 : Digital Education under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Challenges and Opportunities for Indian Higher Education

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Abstract: The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a pivotal shift in India's pedagogical landscape, positioning digital education as a primary driver for achieving a 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by 2035. This paper examines the strategic integration of technology in Indian higher education, focusing on institutional frameworks such as the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF), the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), and the emergence of digital universities. While the policy offers transformative opportunities—including enhanced credit mobility, pedagogical innovation through AI and VR, and increased scalability—it faces significant structural headwinds. The analysis identifies critical challenges such as the persistent rural-urban digital divide, socio-economic disparities in device accessibility, and the urgent need for faculty capacity building. Furthermore, it explores the regulatory transition toward the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) and the ethical governance required to manage data privacy and algorithmic bias. The paper concludes that while digital education can democratize learning, its success is contingent upon a holistic implementation strategy that balances technological innovation with equitable access and robust quality assurance.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Digital Education, Higher Education in India, Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), Digital Divide, HECI, Educational Technology, Blended Learning, Equity and Access, Quality Assurance

Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, approved by India's Union Cabinet on July 29, 2020, marked the first major restructuring of the country's education system in more than three decades (Kumar and Sharma). Replacing the 1986 policy, it aims to improve access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability across education. At the center of this shift lies a strong emphasis on digital learning. Rather than treating technology as a supplementary tool, NEP 2020 positions it as a means to widen educational access and reshape higher education itself. That goal became especially urgent after the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid move to online learning revealed two realities at once: digital platforms can expand learning opportunities, but access remains uneven. While some institutions adapted quickly, many struggled with weak infrastructure and persistent socio-economic barriers.

NEP 2020 envisions technology making higher education more flexible, accessible, and scalable, including support for an ambitious Gross Enrolment Ratio target of 50% by 2035 (Ministry of Education). Yet technology alone cannot deliver that change. Progress depends on whether digital expansion is paired with practical implementation, stronger institutions, and policies that ensure inclusion rather than deepen existing inequalities.

Foundations of the Digital Shift

The policy rests on a broader educational vision: developing well-rounded individuals equipped with critical thinking, creativity, and skills suited to a rapidly changing world (Ministry of Education). Recognizing that traditional systems often struggle to keep pace with technological and economic shifts, NEP 2020 proposes new institutional structures to guide digital integration. One such initiative is the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF), designed as an independent platform for sharing research, ideas, and best practices on educational technology (National Educational Technology Forum). Its role extends beyond administration; it aims to ensure that technology serves learning goals rather than commercial or bureaucratic priorities.

Alongside this, the National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR) seeks to connect fragmented educational systems through a unified digital framework (National Educational Technology Forum). By bringing institutional data into a common structure, it aims to improve transparency, support evidence-based decisions, and strengthen accountability.

Still, strong frameworks do not automatically translate into meaningful outcomes. Their impact depends on digital literacy, institutional preparedness, and equal access. The broader vision of NEP 2020 will succeed only if its technological ambitions are matched by policies capable of reaching students across every social and economic context.

Platform/ Initiative	Primary Function	Scale of Impact (2025-2026)
NETF	Autonomous advisory on technology integration (National Educational Technology Forum)	National policy and research enabler
NDEAR	Architectural framework for digital interoperability (National Educational Technology Forum)	Ecosystem-wide infrastructure backbone
DIKSHA	Content repository for schools and teacher training (Press Information Bureau)	182.3 million enrollments; 19,698+ courses
SWAYAM	Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for higher education (Press Information Bureau)	18,500+ courses; 6.1 crore enrollments
Anuvadini	AI-driven text and voice translation for regional languages (National Educational Technology Forum)	Multi-language translation for textbooks

Opportunities of Digital Education under NEP 2020

Digital education under NEP 2020 creates several transformative opportunities for Indian higher education.

1. Expansion of Access and Inclusion: Digital platforms can overcome geographical barriers, enabling students from remote and underserved regions to access quality education. This is critical for achieving GER targets.

2. Flexibility and Lifelong Learning: The introduction of modular learning through the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) allows students to move in and out of the system, promoting lifelong learning and adaptability.

3. Innovation in Pedagogy: Technologies such as AI and VR enable personalized and experiential learning, moving beyond traditional lecture-based models.

4. Cost Efficiency and Scalability: Online education reduces dependence on physical infrastructure, making expansion more feasible and cost-effective.

5. Global Integration: Digital platforms enable collaboration with international institutions, positioning Indian higher education within a global knowledge network.

Structural Reforms: Flexibility and Credit Mobility

One of NEP 2020's most significant changes is its move toward a more flexible undergraduate system. Through the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), students can earn, store, and transfer credits across recognized institutions, with multiple exit pathways leading to certificates, diplomas, or degrees (Dalal). By late 2025, more than 2,400 higher education institutions had joined the platform, signaling broad participation in this shift (Kumar and Rani).

The idea is simple but far-reaching: students should have greater control over their educational paths. Learners can pause their studies, return later, and continue without starting over. That flexibility reflects wider global trends that favor mobility and lifelong learning.

Still, questions remain. Many institutions are cautious about accepting external credits, arguing that academic standards and disciplinary rigor could suffer (Verma). There is also concern that easier exit routes may encourage students to leave early for short-term opportunities rather than pursue deeper academic engagement. The success of ABC will depend not only on technology but on consistent regulation and cooperation across institutions.

The Digital University and New Regulations

To expand access to higher education, the University Grants Commission broadened support for online degree programs in 2025, approving over a hundred universities to offer fully online courses ("India's New Digital University 2025"). This marked a clear shift: digital education was no longer treated as an alternative but as a core part of higher education itself.

Alongside this expansion came tighter oversight. Students are now required to create a DEB-ID linked to the Academic Bank of Credits ("India's New Digital University 2025"), while universities are prohibited from outsourcing online programs to commercial agencies ("From Classrooms to Cloudrooms"). These measures aim to preserve credibility and reduce the risk of turning education into a purely commercial enterprise. Yet scaling online learning brings its own challenges, especially in maintaining academic quality and adapting practical disciplines to digital environments.

Emerging Technologies and Ethical Governance

NEP 2020 also places considerable emphasis on technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality (National Educational Technology Forum). AI can tailor learning experiences, identify gaps in student performance, and support individualized instruction, while VR offers immersive learning environments that can recreate experiences beyond the traditional classroom.

But innovation brings difficult questions. Systems built on biased data can reinforce social inequalities, and the growing collection of student information raises serious concerns about privacy and surveillance (Amballoor). Technology can improve education, but only if clear ethical standards and strong oversight evolve alongside it.

The Digital Divide and Infrastructural Gaps

NEP 2020 places digital education at the center of higher education reform, but access remains uneven. India has expanded its digital infrastructure significantly, connecting more than 2.15 lakh Gram Panchayats through optical fiber networks (Press Information Bureau). Even so, infrastructure alone does not guarantee meaningful access. Many remote regions continue to struggle with weak connectivity, unreliable services, and affordability barriers.

The deeper problem lies in inequality. Internet access remains closely tied to income, geography, and gender ("Digital Divide"). Urban households are far more connected than rural ones, and digital literacy gaps continue to limit participation, particularly for women and economically disadvantaged communities. A connection on paper means little if students lack the skills, devices, or resources to use it effectively.

This creates a difficult reality: digital education can expand opportunities, but it can also deepen existing divides. Unless investments in infrastructure are matched by affordable access and stronger digital literacy initiatives, the promise of inclusion may remain out of reach.

Regulatory Consolidation: Transition to HECI

Alongside digital reforms, the government has proposed the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to replace multiple regulatory bodies with a single framework ("What Is HECI?"). The goal is straightforward—reduce administrative overlap and create a more coherent system for regulation, funding, accreditation, and academic standards.

The shift carries clear advantages, especially for digital education. A unified structure could improve oversight, support common standards, and better align higher education policies with NEP 2020's broader goals. Still, centralization brings its own concerns. India's higher education system is vast and diverse, and institutions may resist reforms that appear to limit autonomy or impose rigid structures.

At its core, NEP 2020 rests on a difficult balancing act. Digital education promises wider access and greater flexibility, yet structural inequalities and regulatory challenges continue to shape its limits. Its long-term success will depend not simply on technological expansion, but on whether growth is matched by fairness, quality, and meaningful access for all.

Recommendations

- For digital education under NEP 2020 to succeed, technology alone will not be enough. Lasting reform depends on whether infrastructure, policy, and institutional support evolve together. Several priorities stand out.
- First, the digital divide requires urgent attention. Expanding broadband access remains essential, particularly in rural and underserved areas where weak connectivity continues to limit participation. Access also depends on affordability. Subsidized devices, community digital

centers, and shared learning spaces can help ensure that digital education does not remain available only to those with resources.

- At the same time, educators need stronger support. Effective online teaching demands more than technical familiarity; it requires new approaches to instruction, assessment, and student engagement. Continuous training and professional development can help faculty adapt to changing learning environments and improve educational outcomes.
- Quality matters just as much as access. As online programs expand, regulatory systems must establish clear standards for course design, assessment, and academic integrity. Public confidence in digital education will depend on whether institutions can maintain credibility alongside scale.
- There is also a growing need for ethical oversight. Technologies such as Artificial Intelligence rely heavily on student data, raising questions about privacy, transparency, and fairness. Strong safeguards and regular review mechanisms are necessary to prevent technology from reinforcing existing inequalities.
- Partnerships with private technology providers may accelerate innovation, but educational institutions must retain control over curriculum and standards. Alongside these efforts, digital literacy programs and student support systems can help ensure that learners are not simply connected but genuinely prepared to participate.
- Ultimately, the promise of NEP 2020 rests on balance. Digital expansion can reshape higher education, but its impact will depend on whether innovation is matched by inclusion, accountability, and sustained institutional commitment.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative shift in Indian higher education, placing digital education at the center of its reform agenda. It offers significant opportunities to expand access, enhance flexibility, and modernize teaching and learning practices through initiatives such as online programs, the Academic Bank of Credits, and emerging technologies.

However, these opportunities are accompanied by critical challenges, including the digital divide, infrastructural gaps, faculty readiness, and concerns related to quality and ethical governance. Technology alone cannot drive meaningful transformation without inclusive implementation and strong institutional support.

Ultimately, the success of digital education under NEP 2020 depends on balancing innovation with equity, and scalability with quality. If implemented effectively, it has the potential to reshape Indian higher education; if not, it risks reinforcing existing disparities.

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About SLU College

Shree Lalshankar Umiyashankar Arts and Harivadan & Padmaben Thakore Commerce College for Women, which was established in 1920 as an endeavour of Gujarat Stree Kelvani Mandal, has the proud privilege of being the first women's college in Ahmedabad. The college is recognised under Section 2 (f) and 12 (b) of UGC Act 17th June, 1972. The college runs various programmes in affiliation with Gujarat University such as - B.A., B.Com., and M.Com. The BS-BBA programme was added from the academic year 2025-2026. The college also runs several add-on programmes like Fashion Design and Computer Courses at the ICTC centre located at the SLU Campus.

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