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INDEX

Sr. No.	Paper No.	Paper Title	Authors Name	Page No.
1	W01	AI in Teaching, Learning and Research	Dr. Alpesh R. Prajapati	01-05
2	W02 & W03	From Policy to Practice: A Multidimensional Analysis of Implementation Challenges in India's National Education Policy 2020	Dr. Deepa C. Chandwani Dr. Pragnesh B. Dalwadi	06-11
3	W04	Role of NEP-2020 in Transforming Higher Education in India	Dr. Hardik Mehta	12-16
4	W06	NEP 2020: A Transformative Stage Toward Equity and Inclusion in Education	Dr. Manish M. Chudasama	17-22
5	W07 & W16	NEP 2020 and Its Implementation: Examining Challenges in the Indian Education Sector	Dr. Gargi P Patel Dr. Nirali Ketan Shah	23-28
6	W09	National Education Policy to Transform the Education System of 21st Century: Prospects and its Implementation	Dr. Shilpa Jayantilal Patel	29-34
7	W11	Assessing NEP-2020 Implementation in Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Faculty and Student Perspectives	Dr. Vrundani K. Patel	35-43
8	W14	Reimagining Education: A Sociological Analysis of NEP 2020's Challenges and Future Outcomes	Mr. Jitendra Dhebariya	44-50
9	W20	Bridging The Digital Divide in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges of Technology Integration under National Education Policy 2020	Dr. Avani Lalitkumar Saraiya	51-58
10	W24	Digital Education under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Challenges and Opportunities for Indian Higher Education	Dr. Jigarkumar Joshi	59-64
11	W25& W26	Digital Education and Technology Integration under NEP 2020	Dr. Ketan J Mehta Dr. Ravjibhai Kotval	65-69
12	W27	Teacher Capacity Building: Evaluating the Effectiveness of AI-Powered NotebookLM in Classroom Pedagogy	Dr. Krishna M. Lakhani	70-74
13	W28	Digital Education and Technology Integration in Higher Education: Students' Perspectives in the Context of NEP 2020	Dr. Rohan Shah	75-81
14	W29	Digital India and Educational Transformation: A Comprehensive Statistical Analysis using Multiple Regression Approach	Dr. Sanjay G Raval	82-87
15	W30& W31	Transforming India's Workforce: A Critical Study of Skill Development Initiatives under the NEP 2020	Dr. Vishal Gupta Dr. Ghanshyambhai M. Anjara	88-94

16	W32	Implementation of National Education Policy 2020 in Higher Education: Opportunities and Constraints	Mr. Bhaveshkumar R. Rathod	95-100
17	W35& P72	Digital Accounting Practices in MSMEs: An Empirical Study of Awareness and Usage Behaviour	Ms. Shivangi N. Patel Dr. Amina Nakhuda	101-104
18	W37	Integrating Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Higher Education: Revitalizing Cultural Roots and Enhancing Learning Outcomes	Dr. Ajitha Shambhu Nair	105-111
19	W40	Indian Knowledge System in New Education Policy	Dr. Rupalben Ashokkumar	112-115
20	W41& W42	Towards Holistic Learning: The Vision of NEP 2020 (An Empirical Analytical Study Based on Primary Data)	Dr. Shital Rathod Dr. Kandarp Chavda	116-120
21	W43	Integrating Ayurveda into Leadership: A Dosha-Centred Approach	Dr. Megha Bhatt	121-128
22	W44	Educating the Inner Self for a Young Nation: Leveraging the Bhagavad Gita and Indian Philosophy to Realize India's Demographic Dividend	Dr. Shweta Zala	129-135
23	W45 & P26	Physical Activity and Sports as Pedagogical Tools in School Education: A Critical Analysis of NEP 2020	Dr. Mukeshkumar B. Baraiya Dr. Yogendra J. Chauhan	136-141
24	W48	Comparative Evaluation of Traditional and Modern Teaching Approaches in Secondary Schools of Ahmedabad City	Dr. Navita Sharma	142-147
25	W49	Portuguese Colonial Legacy and Its Impact on Tourism Development in Diu	Mr. Hardik R. Rathod	148-152
26	W52	English as a Bridge to Higher Education: Women's Academic Inclusion in Post-NEP 2020 India — A Qualitative Secondary-Data Review	Dr. Payal Trivedi	153-156
27	W56& W57	Inclusivity under NEP 2020: A Critical Study of Adivasi (Bhil) Representation in Higher Education	Ms. Saba Syed Dr. Sagar Vyas	157-160
28	W58& W59 P71	Comparative Risk–Return Evaluation of Selected Investment Instruments in the Indian Financial Market	Dr. Khagesh Joshi Ms. Lekshmi Ezhava Dr. Vaibhav Gallani	161-169
29	W60 & 61	Performance Evaluation of Selected Public Sector Banks in India.	Ms. Heenaben Parmar Dr. Ronak Rana	170-177
30	W23	Technology-Driven Higher Education: Insights from Students and Educators	Dr. Janki Mahesh Kotecha	178-181
31	W33	Need And Issues of Digital Education	Mr. Hasmukh Ramanlal Panchal	182-188

W52: English as a Bridge to Higher Education: Women’s Academic Inclusion in Post-NEP 2020 India — A Qualitative Secondary-Data Review

Dr. Payal Trivedi

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Abstract: The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes inclusivity, multilingualism, and equitable access to education. In this context, English continues to function as a key medium for higher education, academic mobility, and employability in India. This paper examines the role of English in enhancing women’s participation in higher education in post-NEP 2020 India. The study adopts a qualitative narrative review approach based on secondary data from policy documents, AISHE reports, academic literature, and gender-focused educational studies. The study finds that English proficiency significantly improves women’s access to academic resources, digital learning, communication skills, and employment opportunities. However, rural–urban disparities, socio-cultural restrictions, unequal digital access, and limited exposure to English education continue to create barriers for many women learners. AISHE 2021–22 data show that women constitute nearly 48% of higher education enrolment, while the Gender Parity Index (GPI) reached 1.01, reflecting gradual progress in educational inclusion.

The paper argues that although NEP 2020 promotes multilingual education, English remains central to higher education and global engagement. The study recommends strengthening gender-sensitive language education, digital infrastructure, teacher training, and institutional support systems to ensure equitable academic inclusion for women across socio-economic backgrounds.

Keywords: English Proficiency, Women’s Higher Education, NEP 2020, Academic Inclusion, Gender Equity, Multilingualism, Employability, Digital Divide

Introduction

Higher education plays a transformative role in women’s empowerment, economic participation, and social mobility. In India, however, women’s access to higher education continues to be influenced by socio-economic inequality, gender norms, regional disparities, and language barriers. English occupies a significant position in India’s higher education system as a medium of instruction, research communication, and professional interaction. Most academic resources, entrance examinations, and digital learning platforms are largely English-oriented, making language proficiency an important factor in educational success.

NEP 2020 attempts to balance multilingualism with global competence by promoting regional languages in foundational education while recognizing the continued importance of English in higher education and employment sectors.

Existing studies on NEP 2020 mainly focus on multilingual education, policy reforms, or gender inclusion separately. Limited research specifically examines the intersection of English proficiency, gender, and women’s academic inclusion in post-NEP India. This paper addresses that gap by analysing how English functions both as an opportunity and a barrier for women’s higher education participation.

In this study, “post-NEP 2020” refers to the educational and policy developments following the implementation of the National Education Policy in 2020.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the role of English in women’s access to higher education.
- To analyse the impact of NEP 2020 on women’s academic inclusion.
- To explore the relationship between English proficiency, employability, and empowerment.
- To identify linguistic, socio-cultural, and digital barriers affecting women learners.

Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative narrative review approach based entirely on secondary data. The analysis is derived from NEP 2020 policy documents, AISHE reports and educational statistics, Peer-reviewed journal articles, Studies related to gender, language, and higher education.

The narrative review method enables an interdisciplinary understanding of language, gender, and educational access in post-NEP India.

However, the study has certain limitations. Since it relies on secondary data, it does not include field-based research or primary interviews. Regional variations, publication bias, and differences in institutional implementation may also influence the findings. Future research may focus on state-wise comparisons, discipline-specific analysis, and first-generation women learners.

NEP 2020, Language Policy, and Women’s Inclusion

NEP 2020 promotes multilingual education while acknowledging the importance of english for higher education and global engagement. It emphasizes communication-oriented language learning instead of rote memorization. Key policy mechanisms of language & gender inclusion include:

- Digital learning platforms such as DIKSHA and SWAYAM
- Teacher education and multilingual pedagogy reforms
- Gender Inclusion Fund
- Scholarships and financial assistance
- Flexible and multidisciplinary learning structures
- Institutional support for blended learning

Despite these reforms, English continues to dominate higher education, academic publishing, and professional employment sectors, creating challenges for women from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

English as a Bridge to Higher Education

Access to Knowledge and Academic Resources: English proficiency enables access to textbooks, research journals, online databases, and international academic content. It also helps women learners participate in digital and global learning networks.

Medium of Instruction and Academic Participation: English remains the dominant medium of instruction in universities, particularly in science, technology, medicine, and management education. Limited proficiency often affects classroom participation, comprehension, and academic confidence among women learners.

Communication Skills and Empowerment: English communication skills improve confidence, classroom engagement, public speaking, and leadership participation. Language proficiency therefore contributes directly to women’s educational empowerment and self-expression.

Employability and Economic Mobility

In India's globalized economy, English proficiency is closely linked with employability. Women with strong communication skills gain better access to professional opportunities, financial independence, and career advancement.

Digital and Global Connectivity

The expansion of online education after the pandemic has increased the importance of English in digital learning environments. English proficiency supports women's participation in online courses, virtual classrooms, and global academic communities.

Women's Participation in Higher Education

NEP 2020 emphasizes equity and inclusion for women and marginalized groups. AISHE 2021–22 data show that female enrolment in higher education reached approximately 2.07 crore, accounting for nearly 48% of total enrolment in India.

The Gender Parity Index (GPI) in higher education reached 1.01 in 2021–22, indicating gradual progress in women's participation. However, regional disparities, unequal English exposure, and digital inequality continue to affect educational access for women from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Challenges Faced by Women Learners

Linguistic Barriers: Women from regional-language backgrounds often struggle to adapt to English-medium higher education environments.

Socio-Cultural Constraints: Traditional gender norms and unequal educational priorities continue to limit women's academic participation in many communities.

Educational Inequality: Rural institutions frequently lack trained English teachers, digital infrastructure, and academic support systems compared to urban institutions.

Digital Divide: Unequal access to internet connectivity and digital devices restricts women's participation in online learning and language development.

Key Findings and Contributions

- English functions both as an educational opportunity and a structural barrier.
- NEP 2020 promotes multilingualism but English continues to dominate higher education.
- Women's enrolment in higher education has increased significantly in recent years.
- English proficiency improves communication skills, employability, and digital participation.
- Rural–urban disparities continue to shape unequal educational outcomes.
- Effective implementation of NEP 2020 requires stronger institutional and language support systems.

Discussion

The study highlights the dual role of English in post-NEP India. While English enables academic mobility, employability, and global participation, unequal access to English education can deepen educational exclusion for marginalized women learners.

NEP 2020 attempts to balance linguistic inclusivity with global competitiveness. However, challenges such as teacher shortages, uneven digital infrastructure, and institutional disparities may limit effective implementation.

The findings suggest that educational equity requires not only policy reforms but also structural support in language education, digital accessibility, and gender-sensitive institutional planning.

Conclusion

English continues to serve as a critical bridge to higher education and women's academic inclusion in post-NEP 2020 India. It supports access to knowledge, communication, employability, and digital participation. At the same time, unequal access to English education remains a significant barrier for many women learners.

To strengthen equitable educational participation, the study recommends:

- Improving English language teaching in rural and government institutions
- Expanding multilingual and communication-based teacher training
- Strengthening institutional language-support programmes
- Increasing women's access to digital infrastructure and online learning
- Promoting gender-sensitive educational policies and support mechanisms

Policy effectiveness may be assessed through measurable indicators such as female enrolment rates, language proficiency outcomes, retention rates, and digital access statistics.

Future studies should focus on empirical fieldwork, regional comparisons, and the experiences of first-generation women learners in English-medium higher education institutions.

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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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