

## **Multidisciplinary And Holistic Education: Bridging The Gap Between Policy And Practice**

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### **Abstract**

The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** heralds a fundamental reorientation of Indian higher education towards **multidisciplinary and holistic learning**. It envisions the dismantling of rigid disciplinary silos and the creation of flexible, inclusive curricula that integrate sciences, social sciences, arts, vocational skills, and Indian knowledge systems. However, translating this ambitious vision into reality presents substantial challenges at institutional, pedagogical, and cultural levels. This paper critically examines the **policy-practice gap** in implementing multidisciplinary and holistic education in India. It situates the NEP within global discourses on liberal education, explores its alignment with India's historical knowledge traditions, and identifies barriers such as entrenched disciplinary hierarchies, inadequate teacher preparedness, resource limitations, and resistance to change. Drawing upon examples from universities, government reports, and international models, the paper argues that the success of multidisciplinary reforms depends not only on curricular redesign but also on systemic restructuring, faculty development, and cultural transformation. The study concludes with policy recommendations for building an enabling ecosystem to make holistic education a lived reality rather than a rhetorical aspiration.

**Keywords: Multidisciplinary, Learning**

### **Introduction**

The Indian higher education system has long been criticized for its **fragmented, siloed, and exam-centric nature**. Students are often forced to choose between rigid disciplinary streams (arts, science, commerce) at an early stage, with little flexibility to explore across domains. This compartmentalization has produced graduates proficient in narrow specializations but often lacking **critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability**—skills essential for the 21st-century knowledge economy. The **National Education Policy 2020** seeks to remedy this by **integrating multidisciplinary and holistic approaches** into all levels of higher education. Undergraduate programmes are envisioned as **four-year flexible courses**, allowing students to pursue **majors, minors, electives, and vocational training** across disciplines. Research

universities and teaching universities are expected to foster **knowledge integration** through interdisciplinary centres, project-based learning, and credit mobility. This vision resonates with global trends in **liberal education** and also echoes India's own historical traditions of **holistic knowledge**—exemplified by institutions like **Nalanda and Takshashila**, where philosophy, medicine, mathematics, and arts coexisted. Yet, despite this rich heritage, the actual practice of multidisciplinary education in contemporary India faces formidable obstacles. This paper explores the **policy-practice gap** in implementing NEP's vision of holistic education. It addresses three core questions:

1. What is the conceptual foundation of multidisciplinary and holistic education in NEP 2020?
2. What are the key challenges in operationalizing this vision in Indian higher education institutions?
3. How can the gap between policy intent and institutional practice be bridged?

### **Literature Review**

The idea of holistic education is not new. Scholars like **Martha Nussbaum (2010)** emphasize the role of liberal arts in cultivating democratic citizenship and humanistic values. **Clark Kerr (2001)** describes the modern university as a "multiversity," combining diverse disciplines and functions. In the Indian context, **Srinivas (1966)** and **Karve (1961)** have highlighted the coexistence of tradition and modernity in education, advocating for knowledge systems that balance technical competence with cultural depth. Post-NEP scholarship (Kapur, 2021; Jha, 2022) has recognized the transformative potential of multidisciplinary reforms but warns of **structural and cultural resistances**. International experiences, such as the **Bologna Process in Europe** and the **American liberal arts model**, demonstrate both the opportunities and difficulties of curricular flexibility. This body of literature suggests that while multidisciplinary education is celebrated in theory, its **implementation is fraught with institutional inertia, cultural resistance, and policy ambiguities**—a theme this paper explores in the Indian NEP context.

### **1. Conceptual Foundations of Multidisciplinary And Holistic Education In NEP**

The NEP defines **holistic education** as an approach that nurtures cognitive, emotional, ethical, and vocational dimensions of learners. Its core features include:

- **Flexibility in curriculum:** Choice-based credit systems, major-minor structures, and exit-entry options.
- **Integration of disciplines:** For example, a physics major may take minors in philosophy and economics.

- **Inclusion of vocational and life skills:** Emphasis on employability and entrepreneurship.
- **Promotion of Indian knowledge systems (IKS):** Courses on yoga, Ayurveda, Sanskrit, and local traditions alongside modern science.
- **Research orientation:** Encouraging inquiry-based, experiential learning rather than rote memorization.

Conceptually, the NEP aligns with both **liberal education models** and **India's civilizational ethos** of interconnected knowledge

## 2. Historical Parallels: From Gurukuls To Modern Universities

The NEP's multidisciplinary vision is not entirely novel but draws from India's past. Ancient universities like **Nalanda** combined **grammar, logic, Buddhist philosophy, astronomy, medicine, and arts**. Similarly, the **Gurukul system** emphasized not only textual knowledge but also ethical conduct, physical training, and vocational skills.

Colonial education policies, however, prioritized **specialization and bureaucratic efficiency** (Macaulay's Minute, 1835), which institutionalized rigid divisions between science, commerce, and humanities. The NEP thus attempts to **reclaim India's holistic traditions** while aligning with global knowledge economies.

## 3. Policy–Practice Gap: Challenges In Implementation

### a. Institutional Inertia

Most Indian universities are **affiliating bodies** overseeing hundreds of colleges with rigid curricula. Introducing flexibility requires **curricular redesign, credit transfer systems, and interdisciplinary centres**—changes resisted by bureaucratic inertia.

### b. Faculty Preparedness

Teachers trained in single disciplines may resist or feel ill-equipped for multidisciplinary teaching. For example, a commerce faculty may lack familiarity with psychology or data science, yet be expected to engage with such intersections.

### c. Resource Limitations

Multidisciplinary courses require **libraries, laboratories, digital platforms, and collaborative spaces**. Many colleges, especially government-aided and rural ones, lack these facilities.

### d. Cultural Resistance

Students and parents often prioritize "safe" career-oriented streams (engineering, medicine, law). The idea of pursuing philosophy or music alongside computer science is still seen as risky.

#### **e. Regulatory Complexity**

NEP envisions **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)** and credit mobility, but its implementation requires coordination across **UGC, AICTE, NAAC, and state councils**. The lack of clarity on accreditation, funding, and autonomy hampers execution.

#### **4. Case Studies And Examples**

- **Ashoka University (Haryana):** A private liberal arts university offering flexible majors and interdisciplinary exposure. Its success shows possibilities but also highlights elitism—fees remain unaffordable for most.
- **IITs introducing Humanities electives:** IIT Bombay and IIT Madras have begun integrating humanities and social sciences, but the initiatives remain peripheral.
- **Delhi University's FYUP (2013 & 2022):** The controversial rollback of the 2013 FYUP highlights the challenges of political opposition, teacher resistance, and student confusion in curricular reforms.
- **Global models:** The **American liberal arts system** (e.g., Harvard, Amherst) emphasizes breadth before specialization, while Europe's **Bologna Process** promotes mobility and comparability. India's NEP echoes both but faces contextual constraints.

#### **5. Benefits Of Multidisciplinary And Holistic Education**

1. **Cognitive benefits:** Fosters creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking.
2. **Employability:** Prepares students for dynamic job markets requiring adaptability.
3. **Cultural enrichment:** Integrates arts, ethics, and Indian traditions with modern science.
4. **Democratization of knowledge:** Allows students from marginalized groups to access diverse disciplines, breaking elitist silos.

#### **6. Critiques And Risks**

- **Superficial interdisciplinarity:** Risk of offering token electives without genuine integration.
- **Faculty overload:** Expecting teachers to adapt rapidly without support may lead to burnout.
- **Inequality:** Elite institutions may implement holistic curricula, while resource-poor colleges remain stuck with traditional models, widening disparities.

- **Employability paradox:** Parents fear multidisciplinary education may dilute job readiness in core sectors like engineering or medicine.

## 7. Bridging The Gap: Recommendations

1. **Phased Implementation:** Begin with pilot projects in select colleges before scaling nationwide.
2. **Faculty Development:** Massive investment in teacher training on interdisciplinary pedagogy and digital learning tools.
3. **Resource Allocation:** Government must prioritize funding for libraries, labs, and ICT infrastructure in public institutions.
4. **Curriculum Design:** Move beyond token electives; create integrated courses (e.g., "Data Science and Ethics," "Economics of Climate Change").
5. **Student Support:** Academic counseling to help students navigate choices in majors and minors.
6. **Policy Clarity:** Streamlined guidelines on credit transfer, evaluation, and accreditation under NEP.
7. **Equity Lens:** Ensure that rural and government colleges are not left behind by creating subsidized access to multidisciplinary courses.

## Conclusion

The NEP 2020 has set a visionary agenda for **multidisciplinary and holistic education** in India. It attempts to balance global models of liberal education with India's own traditions of knowledge plurality. However, the gap between **policy rhetoric and institutional practice** remains wide. Without adequate faculty training, infrastructural investment, cultural acceptance, and regulatory clarity, multidisciplinary reforms risk becoming superficial. The ultimate success of NEP depends on **systemic reforms and cultural transformation**—redefining how India conceives of education, not merely what it teaches. A truly holistic system must recognize that knowledge is not fragmented but interconnected; that education is not only for jobs but for **citizenship, ethics, and human flourishing**. Bridging the gap between policy and practice is not a technical challenge alone, but a philosophical one—requiring Indian higher education to rethink its very purpose.

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