

Education Sector Hotline

August 10, 2020

NEXT STEPS FOR HIGHER-ED IN INDIA

The recently announced National Education Policy 2020 (“NEP”) has created a positive buzz for the Higher Education sector in India, at a global level. It is a forward-looking policy which is rightly focused on promoting India as a global study destination – one which provides premium education at affordable rates.

While advocating so, the NEP has proposed several pragmatic measures, such as a single regulator for Higher Education (except law and medicine), *light but tight* regulation, autonomy to institutes, credit based learning, innovative course structures, change in the format of programs with flexibility of several exit options, focus on research and out-come based leaning amongst others. The NEP, while continuing to focus on a traditional learning model, pushes for online, open and distance learning as well.

The policy will find teeth once laws and regulations for implementation are enacted. Here are some immediate and urgent next steps.

The first immediate step is to continue focus on online learning. This is because the pandemic has brought a change in the dynamics of education. Higher Education, once synonymous with vibrant campus-life, cultural groups, social activities, and dependent on constant interaction between teachers, students and peers, for research, study groups, practical and thesis, moved online overnight

Early days of the lockdown saw Indian regulators adopting a practical approach for continuity of education by urging colleges to offer online programs as well as making available learning material through SWAYAM platforms, amongst other initiatives. Even unthought of steps such as internships for engineering courses and conduct of exams online were taken for the benefit of students.

The government took further reformative steps such as allowing top 100 Indian universities to offer degree courses online in India. The recently released National Education Policy adds further impetus to online, vocational, skill based and continuous learning.

Each one of these are positive steps towards reforming education and supporting it in time of crisis. They also lend support to the government’s mission of ‘*Digital India*’ and the growing lobby for more flexibility in modes of delivery of education worldwide.

The pandemic has also given us an opportunity to examine if online *only* education is a suitable for a country like India. There is an urgent need to make available universal high speed internet access across India for online learning to work as a model. Till such time this can be achieved, use of mediums such as radio, satellite, recorded videos, etc. should continue to be encouraged for accessibility to quality education.

We all know that online education has its own limitations. It is not as engaging as being on campus. At times, quality or style of teaching can also be an issue in effective learning as teaching online is very different from classroom teaching. Further, courses that require practical work or experiments are very difficult to conduct or take online. The K12 sector in India is already witnessing a growing anguish towards online school education, with several petitions in Indian courts being filed to stop online classes for younger kids due to such issues.

In our view, the following approach should be adopted:

1. A balanced approach between online and offline, in the form of blended learning should be encouraged. Students should be given the option to complete some percentage of their course online from wherever they are if it helps them in cost saving (due to accommodation, living expense etc) or manage their education with part time jobs. This flexibility will lead to increase in enrolments.
2. To achieve the above, learning centres, access to libraries, study groups, etc should be provided across cities by the higher education institution itself and through partnerships with service providers. This will make learning more accessible.
3. Higher Education should see more academia – industry collaborations for teaching and training both. Role of industry should not be limited to internships or jobs opportunities alone. Corporate India separately should focus on more training programs to keep employees relevant to their job requirements and reduce unemployment. These courses could also be offered online with flexi-timings.
4. It is well known that foreign universities see a large influx from Indian students every year. Due to travel restrictions and change in visa policies, students are not in position to travel to campuses abroad. To give teeth to the latest proposal of the government to prevent outflow of Indian students to universities abroad, the National Education Policy moots welcoming top 100 universities in the world. *Firstly*, India needs to do this quickly. *Secondly*, the proposal to allow foreign universities to have a campus in India has been on the cards for the longest time. Limiting this permission to top 100 universities may not be very helpful because (a) most top 100

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- universities may not want to have a campus in India/outside their country (b) universities should be judged by specializations and courses they offer (c) specialized universities may not be in top 100 world ranking. Law needs to be futuristic and enabling to accommodate these concerns.
5. The National Education Policy also recommends that credits acquired from foreign universities will be permitted, where appropriate as per the requirements of each higher education institution, to be counted for the award of a degree. This is one more reason for the government to open the doors to foreign universities in India.
 6. To achieve the objective of internalization of education, the focus should not be limited to Indian institutes alone. Collaboration between Indian and foreign universities should also be encouraged as the exchange of curriculum, teaching, quality standards etc will help the students, and the economy in the long run. Further, since the National Education Policy proposes that high performing Indian universities will be encouraged to set up campuses in other countries, tie-ups with foreign universities can play a pivotal role of popularizing Indian universities in foreign jurisdictions.
 7. Currently, India does not recognise degrees from foreign universities obtained via online medium. This should change immediately. At least the foreign universities from which degrees are recognized in an on-campus program should be recognized for equivalence purposes for online degrees as well.

All these measures will go a long way in achieving the mission of turning India into a global knowledge superpower as envisioned in the NEP.

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You can direct your queries or comments to the authors

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