

Making NEP work

Implementing the national education policy requires framing of new organisational structures, more financial resources and mechanisms of accountability



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ON JULY 29 last year, the Government of India (GoI) announced the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 as a pathbreaking initiative to reimagine the future of education. It "proposed the revision and revamping of all aspects of the education structure, including its regulation and governance, to create a new system that is aligned with the aspirational goals of 21st century education." The potential of the NEP is writ large in the document, but, more importantly, it spoke to the aspirations of the students who will be the focus of it.

The year since the announcement of the NEP has focussed on laying the foundation for its implementation. But, before we work towards implementation, there is a strong need to understand why policies fail and what we need to do to ensure their success. In a compelling article 'Why public policies fail: Policymaking under complexity', Bernardo Mueller argued, "...the interest is to understand the implication of the fact that public policies are embedded in complex systems. A complex system is one in which diverse agents linked in networks interact selectively following simple rules ... without centralised control, and from which emerge (often unpredictable) patterns, structures, uses and functionalities ..."

This is exactly how the Indian education system is positioned. We need to implement the NEP within this complexity. How can we reduce the risk of policy failure? What can we do to successfully implement the NEP? Mueller listed five aspects of complex public policies that impact any standard approach to implementing them.

Public policies are non-linear and emergent: This recognition is critical as most efforts in public policy-making assume linearity and rarely take into account the emergent nature of policy. NEP implementation efforts need to be mindful of this challenge.

Public policies do not settle in equilibria and are hard to predict: The history of evolution of failed public policies is filled with predictions that went wrong.

Public policies evolve and coevolve: The evolutionary nature of public policy needs to be recognised and accepted while attempts are being made to implement NEP.

Public policies are subject to cognitive biases: The dominant thinking while designing public policy is rational choice theory, which assumes decision-making as a part of rational human behaviour. But it is time that we recognise that there are pre-existing biases, prejudices and opinions — all of which may influence people's behaviour.

Public policies are subject to reactivity and the Lucas critique: The reaction to policy and how it impacts the implementation of public policy is always an empirical question. But at the same time, it suffers from policy-altering behaviour, which was not taken into account while implementing the policy. Economists have long recognised this problem. It is named after Robert Lucas's work on

macroeconomic policymaking which argues about the limitations of predicting the effects of change in economic policy through historical data.

It is important that we address the above challenges for implementing the NEP. Having recognised the complexity, it is necessary to work towards a model that will help reduce the risks of failure and increase the possibility of success. The fact that the Prime Minister, Education Minister and the entire leadership of major regulatory bodies have spent the last one year addressing different dimensions of the implementation process is a welcome development.

I believe the implementation of NEP should be based on the following five initiatives. One, given the nature of the complexity of the Indian education sector, there is an urgent need to establish a new organisational structure, the National Education Policy Commission, whose sole mandate is to work towards implementing the NEP.

Two, accountability of public officials in implementing policy is rarely established in our polity. This is an occasion for us to do so. We need institutional checks and balances that will ensure that the responsibility to implement the NEP goes along with the powers and functions of the individuals and institutions entrusted with the tasks.

Three, establishing institutional mechanisms and empowered steering committees, within the existing mandate of the Ministry of Education, the UGC and other such state and central level regulatory bodies, to continuously monitor the implementation.

Four, providing the financial resources that are necessary for implementing the NEP: The NEP has envisaged substantial increase in the public funding for education. There is a need for ensuring the necessary financial resources are made available without complex and labyrinthine procedures and processes. A special purpose vehicle (SPV) needs to be created to ensure that the funds for NEP are available and that the implementation process is not delayed. Most policies are not effectively implemented due to non-availability of financial resources in a timely manner. We also need to promote private philanthropy for funding both public and private higher education institutions and new and additional forms of tax incentives and other forms of incentives need to be evolved.

Five, empowering institutions of eminence and other institutions who have been granted greater autonomy to function independently. One of the landmark and transformative ideas in higher education policy that the GoI has promoted in recent times is the policy on selecting and empowering "institutions of eminence" in India with a view to propelling them to become world-class institutions. While the intent is truly inspiring, there is a lot that needs to be done for fulfilling the vision of the NEP.

Posterity will celebrate this time in India's history as far as educational transformation is concerned, if we are able to make efforts to implement the National Education Policy 2020. We have all that it takes to do this, but do we have the intent to walk the talk?

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