

Three ideas for us to achieve our higher education goals

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In terms of its stated vision and aspiration for higher education, in particular, the new National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) ranks among the best policy documents ever written in India. It correctly identifies many of the shortcomings of the current higher education system relating to its regulation, governance and the affiliating university system. It proposes "a complete overhaul" in order to create a new system that can offer quality higher education at a gross enrolment ratio (GER) of 50%, almost double what it is now.

While few would disagree with the NEP's bold vision, there are important questions—both quantitative and qualitative—about how to achieve it. Simple arithmetic tells us that doubling the GER in higher education, for example, requires the setting up of at least one new higher education institution (HEI) each week for the next 20 years. Having played a key role in the evolution of two HEIs—Indian Institute of Management,

Indore, and Krea University—I can vouch for the fact that this is indeed a gargantuan effort. Qualitatively speaking, the NEP necessitates a cultural shift among faculty, students and parents, away from a herd mentality, to quote Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to embrace critical thinking and holistic learning.

Faced with this formidable execution challenge, we focus here on three ideas that could help us move in the right direction.

The first is collaboration among existing HEIs to quickly create multi-disciplinary learning experiences. Many cities in India have multiple high-quality disciplinary HEIs. For example, Bengaluru has three top-ranked institutions in different categories of the national institutional ranking framework—Indian Institute of Science, Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, and National Law School of India University. Even in younger cities like Sri City in Andhra Pradesh, we have an Indian Institute of Technology, an Indian Institute of Science Education and Research and Krea University within commuting distance of each other. One way of creating genuine multi-disciplinary experiences for students is to encourage collaborative programmes between institutions in the same city or

region. Regular classes could be online to save travel time, but periodic physical interaction can be arranged to facilitate mutual learning (post-Covid, of course).

Two things would help make such collaboration possible—the use of technology and a standard credit system. While the NEP acknowledges the importance of technology, it hesitates to embrace it fully because of concerns around effectiveness and access. To address this, there is a need for much higher investment in the science of education itself. Such an inquiry interweaves insights from neuroscience, social behaviour and digital technology to understand how students learn in different contexts. Research in the field of higher education thus needs to take an interdisciplinary perspective to define the cutting-edge of learning and pedagogy.

The NEP envisages the creation of a national education technology forum (NETF) of experts to advise on technology adoption. However, given the pace of

change in technology, the process has to be much more dynamic. HEIs must be encouraged to experiment with technology (in the spirit of autonomy and discovery that the NEP advocates) and forums must be created to share outcomes and best practices. The results should feed directly into the deliberations of broader policy.

Having a uniform definition of credits (or at least an easily translatable set of alternate systems) would allow collaboration and facilitate giving students multi-disciplinary exposure and experience across institutions. Perhaps this should be a priority in the implementation process.

Second, to address the sizeable need for new faculty and their development, we suggest doubling the

number of PhD fellowships in our best institutions, particularly for the humanities and social sciences; well-designed faculty development programmes to enhance the skill-sets of existing faculty; and a structured programme to attract Indian scholars teaching overseas. This should be a mission by itself.

Third, a good information technology backbone is needed for effective administration and governance of the large multi-disciplinary universities envisaged by the NEP. Current enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems are expensive, and do not provide adequate support for the student life-cycle, which is at the heart of any university. There is an urgent need for a reasonably-priced ERP system tailored to meet the needs of Indian higher education. The government may like to use its good offices under the umbrella of the Atmanirbhar Bharat programme to catalyse its development by leveraging the capabilities of our companies.

Ultimately, the big challenge in making the NEP work would be the resources required. While the US has the world's best recognized system of higher education, its costs have been increasing at a rate much higher than inflation. As we rationalize teaching hours and expect faculty to do more research, we may face a similar cost spiral. Philanthropy and government funding alone may not be adequate to meet such rising costs. We need to think out of the box, so that 20 years from now, we can confidently say that we have executed the NEP as brilliantly as we designed it.

These are the author's personal views

We could count on collaboration among various institutes, a faculty training mission, and better software