The Idea of a Multidisciplinary University: Implementing NEP-2020 in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions a transformative restructuring of Indian higher education through the creation of multidisciplinary universities that dissolve rigid disciplinary boundaries. The policy promotes an ecosystem of learning in which the sciences, social sciences, arts and vocational streams coexist and complement one another. This paper explores the practical and policy dimensions of implementing this vision within India's complex higher education landscape. It examines the theoretical underpinnings of multidisciplinary education, the challenges of translating policy into practice and the role of institutional innovation in this context. The hypothesis guiding this paper is that the success of NEP-2020's multidisciplinary framework depends on the alignment of institutional autonomy, governance reform, and faculty capacity-building. Drawing on examples from emerging Indian universities, such as Ashoka and Azim Premji, as well as reforms at IIT Delhi and the University of Delhi, this study argues that genuine transformation requires not only policy endorsement but also a cultural shift in academic governance and pedagogical philosophy. Through a qualitative and policy-oriented analysis, the paper concludes that while NEP-2020 provides a visionary roadmap, its realization hinges on sustained investment, flexibility in curriculum design and the creation of a truly inclusive academic environment.

Keywords

NEP-2020, multidisciplinary education, higher education policy, institutional reform, India, holistic learning.

Introduction

The landscape of India, including the landscape of higher education in India, is entering a significant

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change, fuelled by the pressing necessity to align academic structures with the requirements of a rapidly changing global economy (Government of India, 2020). For centuries, the Indian system of higher education has been characterized by closed disciplinary silos, affiliation-based restrictions and limited institutional autonomy, all of which have resulted in disjointed learning and hindered academic creativity (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). As India seeks to establish itself as a key player in the knowledge economy, the need to introduce system reforms that foster flexibility, creativity and interdisciplinarity has become increasingly pronounced (Chakrabarti, 2021). The process of acquainting learners with a general intellectual framework, in addition to expertise in particular areas, is a priority in international models of higher education, especially those that focus on liberal arts, cross-competencies and the end-product approach to education (Chakrabarti, 2020). It is against this background that the reform discussions in India have intensified, aiming to transform universities into vibrant centres of inquiry, problem-solving and holistic development. One of the paradigms in these debates is multidisciplinary learning (Devi 2020). At a time when the world faces intricate problems that cannot be addressed using traditional subject-based approaches, such as solving complex climate change, embracing digital transformation, supporting public health, and tackling social inequality, universities need to produce graduates who can combine their skills across disciplines (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020).

Multidisciplinary education stimulates students to think flexibly, reason creatively and have the ability to apply different frameworks to real-life problems. In the case of India, where the population level is high and the innovation environment is developing, it is not only desirable but also necessary to develop such capabilities. Possibly due to the shift towards hybrid jobs in the industrial sector, which involve a combination of technology, interpersonal relationship comprehension and analytical ability, multidisciplinary learning is now a key focus of national competitiveness and progress as a community (Nirmal, 2024). It is against this context that the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a ground-breaking and ambitious vision. NEP-2020 proposes overhauling the entire higher education landscape into a multidisciplinary university system, offering alternative career paths through curricular options and fostering a student-focused learning environment (Pal 2023). The four-year undergraduate programme (FYUP), multiple exit and entry choices, the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and encouragement of major-minor combinations are key characteristics that characterize an unprecedented policy promise of busting through academic silos. The policy views institutions of higher learning as comprehensive and holistic entities, where sciences/social sciences, humanities, vocational studies, and other professional disciplines are complementary and coexist. It is a change not only in structure, but also in educational philosophy, one that emphasizes learning as broad-based, inquiry-driven, and conducive to innovation (Sharma & Sharma 2022).

The transition between policy aspiration and institutional practice, however, is a complex and uneven process. Although the NEP provides a vision and roadmap, the Indian higher education ecosystem is characterized by structural constraints, governance issues, resource imbalances and entrenched academic cultures that do not welcome change (Suman 2023). The research problem that arises fundamentally is, thus, the institutional discrepancy between policy ideals and institutional realities. What can universities do to operationalize multidisciplinary learning, considering the prevailing regulatory frameworks? Which structural and pedagogical changes are needed to change the entrenched academic practices? What actions can the faculty, administrators and policymakers take to recreate the institutional cultures in collaboration with the objectives of the NEP? These are important questions that should be addressed when measuring the viability and sustainability of the NEP-2020 reforms. The paper will explore these questions by analyzing the concept of the multidisciplinary university in Indian higher education within a particular socio-cultural and regulatory framework.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Concept of Multidisciplinary, Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Learning

Multidisciplinary has evolved as a historical response to the transformation of universities from narrowly specialized spaces into institutions oriented toward broad intellectual inquiry. In earlier phases of higher learning—particularly during the medieval and Renaissance periods—knowledge production was concentrated primarily within specific domains, such as philosophy, theology, or the natural sciences (Tirthali 2024). The sharp fragmentation of knowledge into increasingly specialized subfields emerged in the 19th and early 20th centuries, driven by industrialization, scientific advancement, and the rise of professional expertise. While such specialization allowed for depth and rigor, it also entrenched rigid disciplinary boundaries that often obscured the holistic understanding (University Grants Commission, 2022). By the mid-20th century, it became evident to educators and policymakers that complex social issues—such as environmental degradation, technological ethics, poverty, and public health—could not be adequately addressed within isolated disciplinary frameworks (Verma 2024). This recognition prompted a shift toward more integrative modes of inquiry, giving rise to a multidisciplinary approach that convenes diverse bodies of knowledge to pursue shared questions or problems. In this framework, disciplines interact side by side without abandoning their conceptual autonomy, enabling problems to be examined from multiple methodological standpoints. Such an approach acknowledges that each discipline contributes distinct assumptions, epistemic tools and analytic strategies and that meaningful inquiry often requires the interplay of these varied perspectives. Within higher education, this integrative orientation has been crucial for dismantling entrenched silos

and fostering academic structures that better align with contemporary societal and global knowledge demands (Chandramana 2020). Consequently, the terms *multidisciplinary*, *interdisciplinary,* and *transdisciplinary* have gained prominence as overlapping yet distinct modes of knowledge integration. Within this broader spectrum, multidisciplinary learning involves the concurrent use of multiple disciplines to explore a topic or solve a problem without merging theoretical frameworks or methodological orientations (Garg 2024). Each field maintains its identity, allowing learners to compare insights across domains—for example, when economists, biologists, political scientists, and engineers conduct parallel analysis of a shared issue.

Interdisciplinary learning represents a more synthetic model, one that explicitly integrates methods, theories, or conceptual structures to produce insights unattainable through a single disciplinary lens. Cognitive science, combining psychology, neuroscience, linguistics and computer science, exemplifies such fusion (Kurien 2020). Transdisciplinary learning extends this integration further by incorporating stakeholders beyond formal academic contexts—such as policymakers, industry practitioners, and community groups—to co-produce knowledge aimed at real-world problem-solving (Misra 2025). Urban planning, which demands collaboration among architects, sociologists, technologists, environmental scientists and local citizens, offers a prototypical example.

Together, these models constitute a continuum of knowledge integration: multidisciplinary learning emphasizes breadth, interdisciplinary learning emphasizes synthesis and transdisciplinary learning prioritizes collaborative, solution-oriented innovation. The cognitive and pedagogical value of these approaches is increasingly evident, as they promote critical thinking, creativity, and higher-order analysis by encouraging learners to navigate and synthesize diverse epistemologies (Narkhede 2025; Nayak 2022). In an interconnected global landscape, such multidimensional competence has become essential for both academic relevance and professional adaptability.

2.2 Global Pedagogical Frameworks

The current state of higher education models worldwide provides a rich understanding of how multidisciplinary learning can be institutionalized. Various areas have developed different traditions of pedagogy, the work of which integrates the dimensions of breadth, depth and flexibility, areas that greatly piqued the aspirations of NEP-2020 (Nayak 2022). By understanding these frameworks, Indian institutions can recognize the various ways in which multidisciplinary structures can be incorporated into curriculum design, administration, and academic culture. The American liberal arts tradition is one of the most influential models of multidisciplinary education globally. Its major attributes focus on the scope of learning, exposure to various areas of knowledge and acquisition of critical interrogation skills. Instead of stimulating early specialization, the liberal arts model motivates intellectual

exploration during the initial years of undergraduate education through a well-designed general education curriculum. Before students choose a major, they typically participate in general courses in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, mathematics, and the arts (Nirmal, 2024). One of the key characteristics of this system is the majors-minors system, which provides students with the flexibility to study a major and, simultaneously, explore related areas. For example, a student can major in economics and minor in philosophy, psychology, or environmental studies. This construction not only expands the academic vistas but also fosters interdisciplinary thinking and comprehensive comprehension. It is evident how the U.S. liberal arts model can be relevant to NEP-2020. NEP promotes liberal arts college-style, interdisciplinary exposures and student-focused learning, which is deeply ingrained in the American liberal arts schools. Having adopted aspects such as general degree programs and flexible credit systems, Indian universities can move towards establishing learning platforms that foster curiosity, creativity, and intellectual autonomy.

Developed in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century, the Humboldtian model is the philosophical foundation of contemporary European higher education (Shukla 2022). This model is based on the principle of unity of research and teaching, whereby universities do not passively receive existing knowledge but are actively engaged in developing new knowledge through scholarly inquiry. The faculty and students collaborate on research, creating an atmosphere where academic freedom and independent thinking flourish. One of the primary characteristics of the Humboldtian tradition is its excessive emphasis on the autonomy of universities as a means to preserve institutions as places of open inquiry, intellectual freedom, and holistic growth (Singh 2024). Instead of understanding education as job training, the Humboldtian model views education as a means to develop the whole person, not only intellectually but also ethically and culturally. This practice has had a significant impact on the higher education systems in Europe, characterized by modular, open electives and research-based teaching. In the case of India, the model emphasizes the need to empower universities with increased autonomy, which is one of the central demands for realizing the multidisciplinary vision of NEP-2020. Humboldtian in focus on research-cumulative learning will be specifically relevant in the case of Indian institutions that require reinforcing the research culture with flexible academic frameworks.

The case of Asian tertiary education, particularly in Singapore and Japan, exemplifies the success of hybrid forms in reconciling Western liberal arts with the region’s educational needs. These systems are strategic by integrating STEM with the humanities and social sciences because innovation has been known to result from the interplay of different disciplines. Universities in Singapore, such as NUS and Yale-NUS College (which has since merged into NUS), have adopted liberal arts models that

emphasize multidisciplinary foundations, inquiry, and cross-cultural understandings (Srivastava 2022). Their programmes are therefore structured in such a way that they produce versatile graduates who can absorb the world economic challenges but remain in touch with the national developmental policies in the same technological, business and research sectors. Japan has also made similar efforts to reorganize university education, aiming to make it more multidisciplinary and offer more comprehensive curricula.

2.3 Theoretical Basis for NEP-2020

Holistic education is a philosophical tradition that views human development as a multifaceted process, encompassing the cognitive, emotional, ethical, social, and physical dimensions of learners (Yenugu, 2022). Instead of focusing education on an academic process, holistic models focus on whole-person education- that is, not only does the student need to be an adequate intellectual, but he or she must also be capable of empathy, be able to think critically, be emotionally stable and develop moral judgment. The method combines several elements of learning, recognizing that knowledge acquisition is closely tied to individual values, well-being, and social interaction. Holistic education, therefore, facilitates learning systems that are expansive, valuable, and based on real-life situations. This tradition has a significant influence on NEP-2020 (Aithal, 2020a). The policy aims to produce balanced individuals who can effectively overcome complex 21st-century problems through multidisciplinary exploration, a flexible curriculum and by embracing the arts, sciences, and vocation. The focus on Indian knowledge systems, ethics and socio-cultural awareness also intensifies the holistic orientation of the envisioned policy. Within the setting of multidisciplinary education, the idea of holism ensures that a student gains well-rounded skills in various competence fields, as opposed to focusing on intense specialization.

Constructivism views learning as an experience, an activity, and a socially mediated process. This theory posits that learners construct knowledge through the interplay of ideas, experiences, and their surroundings, rather than passively receiving information. Constructivist pedagogy emphasizes hands-on, contemplative, experimental and collaborative approaches to inquiry (Bhatia, 2011). NEP-2020 is founded on the principles of constructivism because it focuses on inquiry-based, project-based, and experiential learning. As pedagogical methods, these strategies help initiate questions, facilitate problem analysis, engage students in real-world ventures, and foster the collaborative creation of knowledge. These learning processes emphasize memorizing content that is important to know and use. The multidisciplinary curricula are also based on constructivism. When learners study a problem using a variety of disciplinary approaches, they actively construct conceptual connections and gain knowledge in more sophisticated and interesting ways (Gupta, 2012). The social aspect of

constructivist learning is reflected in the collaborative nature of multidisciplinary work, where learners interact with diverse perspectives and ideas. Therefore, the project's dedication to the flexibility and multidisciplinary education frameworks offered by NEP-2020 has a solid foundation in constructivist ideas. Higher education systems are now adapting their expectations in response to the evolving needs of the global knowledge economy. The present-day society needs scholars who are not just knowledgeable in a specific field but also 21st-century-skilled graduates who value critical thinking skills, creativity, teamwork, communication, problem-solving, digital literacy, and flexibility. Outcome-Based Education (OBE) represents a significant shift from conventional content-centered instruction to competency-based learning. OBE focuses on clear learning outcomes, graduate qualities, and measurable skills that students should develop by the end of a programme (Mishra 2020).

NEP-2020: Vision and Structural Mandates

3.1 Policy Provisions on Multidisciplinary Education

NEP-2020 presents a set of structural changes aimed at transforming the Indian higher education system into a versatile, learner-focused, and interdisciplinary ecosystem. The reintroduction of the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) is one of the major provisions that will enable students to gain a wide and in-depth understanding of knowledge (Kaushik 2014). In comparison to the traditional three-year model, the FYUP has a more generalized base during the first year, with subsequent levels of specialization and optional research experience in subsequent years. This model reflects the global liberal arts framework and helps students explore various academic disciplines before making informed specialization decisions.

Besides the FYUP, NEP-2020 also provides academic flexibility by offering multiple entry- exit provisions. Students are at liberty to join and leave the programme at different levels as they get a certificate at the end of year one, a diploma at the end of the second year, a bachelor's degree at the end of the third year and finally a bachelor's degree with research at the end of the fourth year (Mahajan 2021). This design is based on the knowledge of the varying Indian socio-economic set-ups and demonstrates the studio's capability to interrupt and continue education without incurring academic penalties. The policy facilitates lifelong learning by enabling learners to pause and resume where they left off, thereby reducing the rate of dropouts. One of the greatest innovations that allows mobility and flexibility is the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC). The digital system allows students to obtain credits at various institutions and transfer them to a centralized system. These sales credits can be accumulated over time and later redeemed to finish the degrees or diplomas. The ABC establishes an academic ecosystem that is interconnected with students, enabling the integration of programs

across different universities to facilitate genuine multidisciplinary learning. It enables students to formulate various and customized learning configurations that transcend institutional boundaries. NEP-2020 also promotes the idea of multidisciplinary education by introducing major-minor combinations.

3.2 Institutional Restructuring Mandates

The NEP-2020 is developing a vision for restructuring the Indian higher education system to facilitate the provision of multidisciplinary education. The formation of an integrated higher education cluster can be listed among the most transformative recommendations, as institutions at a geographical location do not operate independently but work together (Okada, 2012). These centres, which include colleges, universities, and research institutions, are likely to share resources, faculty expertise, labs and online resources. The cluster model will help democratize access to high-quality education and minimize duplication of academic programs by dismantling institutional silos and strengthening the overall, more effective higher education ecosystem. Another related requirement is the creation of multidisciplinary universities and Higher Education Institution (HEI) networks. NEP-2020 suggests that all institutions of higher learning must be expanded to large, resource-rich multidisciplinary institutions with an array of programmes in arts, sciences, social sciences, vocational and professional fields. This change necessitates that related colleges either transition to autonomous degree-granting institutions or join larger university clusters. The ultimate purpose of such restructuring is to enhance academic autonomy, foster cross-departmental cooperation and ensure that students experience a variety of areas to study, aligning with the policy priorities based on holistic and flexible learning trajectories. Another pillar of the NEP-2020 institutional restructuring agenda is strengthening the research ecosystem. The policy acknowledges that India has conducted relatively little research compared to other countries worldwide and suggests several reforms to close this gap. These initiatives are the creation of the National Research Foundation (NRF) to finance high-quality research, promote interdisciplinary research centres in higher educational institutions and incorporate research opportunities into undergraduate programmes (Pilz 2021). Through the culture of questioning and invention, NEP-2020 aims to ensure that students do not perceive research as postgraduate research, but rather as an integral part of multidisciplinary study. Finally, NEP-2020 pays considerable attention to teacher training and professional development, as it is acknowledged that faculty members play a decisive role in the implementation of multidisciplinary curricula.

3.3 Policy Logic Behind Multidisciplinary Education

The policy rationale behind NEP-2020, which focuses on multidisciplinary education, can be explained by the fact that the Indian higher education system has become heavily fragmented over time

and therefore, there is an urgent need to address its numerous fundamental flaws. Universities and colleges have long been structured in a disciplinarily strict manner that inhibits student flow, curtails intellectual exploration, and hinders meaningful interaction among departments over the past few decades (Saini 2015). It is a form of disaggregation in that it confines knowledge to small compartments, as well as creates graduates who lack contextual knowledge on how to solve complex societal problems. NEP-2020 aims to break silos by encouraging multidisciplinary designs to move knowledge more interdisciplinarity, thereby establishing a more integrated and connected academic ecosystem where knowledge shifts freely and easily across disciplines and fields. Simultaneously, the multidisciplinary mandate of NEP-2020 is strongly linked to the aim of enhancing employability in the rapidly changing international workforce. The contemporary type knowledge economy is now more inclined to regard hybrid professionals as individuals with a technical background, analytical, social, and innovative capabilities. It is equally true in technology, healthcare, communications, as well as in the fields of public policy and business: employers now demand graduates capable of cross-disciplinary adaptation, teamwork and cross-disciplinary problem-solving. Additionally, the NEP-2020 considers multidisciplinary education to be a driving force for innovation and creative problem-solving. Lightning rarely emerges from disciplinary knowledge per se, but rather as a result of cross-disciplinary engagement, where different points of view converge to generate new ideas, approaches, and solutions to problems.

Indian Higher Education Before NEP-2020

The pre-NEP structure of Indian higher education was shaped by an expansive affiliation system in which thousands of colleges were linked to a limited number of central universities, a model initially intended to maintain uniform academic standards but which ultimately entrenched bureaucratic control and constrained institutional autonomy. This rigidity limited colleges' capacity to design curricula, introduce interdisciplinary offerings, or experiment with innovative pedagogies, leading academic programmes to become increasingly obsolete and disconnected from evolving societal and industry needs (Sheikh 2017). Compounding these limitations were rigid departmental silos within universities, where compartmentalized structures and minimal interdepartmental collaboration impeded the circulation of cross-disciplinary knowledge. Departments functioned as insulated units with their own rules and little incentive to engage in interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary teaching or research, thereby restricting the development of integrative academic practices (Shukla 2022). These structural barriers were reinforced by an exam-centric learning culture that dominated the pre-NEP landscape, privileging rote memorization and textbook reproduction over conceptual understanding, critical thinking and problem-solving. High-stakes assessment systems encouraged lecture-based pedagogies while discouraging inquiry-driven or experiential approaches, leaving students with limited

opportunities to cultivate multidisciplinary perspectives or higher-order cognitive abilities (Das 2021).

Until NEP-2020, Indian higher education was governed widely with its constituent bodies, including the University Grants Commission (UGC), the All-India Council of Technical Education (AICTE), as well as different State Higher Education Councils. Everybody had their own goals, regulations and permitted procedures. Although intended to provide quality and standardization in institutions of higher learning (HEIs), the result of this plethora of authorities was overlapping jurisdictions and administrative duplication. Universities often find themselves in a bureaucratic labyrinth when implementing new programs, changing the curriculum, or initiating interdisciplinary projects. This disjointed regulatory framework discouraged academic innovation, making it challenging to establish dynamic, multidisciplinary learning models within institutions (Kumar 2022).

A key issue before the NEP governance ecosystem was the autonomy conferred on most colleges and universities. Most HEIs, especially affiliated colleges, lacked control over their fundamental academic processes, including curriculum development, faculty hiring, evaluation requirements and financial decisions (Mahajan 2019). This absence of academic and administrative freedom meant that institutions failed to tailor their programs to local demands and experimented with new academic forms, such as majors, minors, open electives, or interdisciplinary degrees (Mehta 2021). Consequently, the institutions continued to rely on the main directions and failed to transform into multidisciplinary and dynamic environments that could stimulate innovation and holistic learning. The lack of independence also eroded institutional identity and strategic long-term planning.

Complex bureaucratic processes also influenced the Indian higher education governance structure, slowing down the decision-making process and limiting the dynamism of institutions. Systems of approvals were notorious for taking a long time and undergoing several levels of scrutiny by various regulatory bodies and government offices (NITI Aayog, 2024). The introduction of a new course, the amendment of a syllabus, or the establishment of a collaborative program required a significant amount of paperwork and queues, which was not conducive to experimentation and curriculum change. Centralization of power in decision-making also led to bureaucratic control, whereby faculty and institutions had minimal control over academic affairs. It was not very easy to follow learner-centered strategies, integrate technology, or implement multidisciplinary pathways, all of which are fundamental elements and part of the NEP-2020 vision. It meant that the pre-NEP governance and regulatory ecosystem was not adequate to support flexible, innovative, and globally competitive institutions of higher education.

Teacher Preparation and Academic Culture:

a) Limited Interdisciplinary Training: Inadequate interdisciplinary training of the faculty was one of the most significant deficits in Indian higher education prior to the introduction of NEP-2020. The vast majority of teachers had been trained in narrow operational disciplinary areas and frequently did postgraduate and doctoral training in very narrow subjects. Consequently, they were not exposed to other pedagogies, theories, and research methodologies beyond their own primary subject. It rendered it challenging for faculty to create or provide programs that integrated the arts, sciences, humanities, and social sciences. This disciplinary isolation was further exacerbated by the lack of systematic cross-disciplinary training, such as workshops, joint research teams, and interdisciplinary teaching fellows. As a result, the students were also denied the exposure to academic practices that linked knowledge across fields (Peters 2020).

b) Promotion Structures Favouring Narrow Specialization: The systems of academic promotion and career advancement in Indian higher education historically placed a strong focus on powerful disciplinary research output, frequently quantified in terms of publications in field-based journals or, in a more archaic method of quantifying, in terms of the number of publications. This emphasis did not encourage the faculty to seek interdisciplinary collaboration or experiment with pedagogical innovation, as current appraisal systems did not support such efforts. The teachers became interested in pursuing their special interests in the field to avoid the risks associated with interdisciplinary projects, curriculum restructuring, or new modes of teaching. Consequently, the institutional culture had a predisposition to lean towards specialization rather than integration, which posed a challenge to the realization of a multidisciplinary programme and a holistic model of education (Raj 2022).

Case Studies of Emerging Multidisciplinary Models in India

5.1 Ashoka University

Ashoka University in India stands as a leading example of a multidisciplinary higher education institution grounded in the liberal arts philosophy, offering an academic model that emphasizes broad intellectual foundations before students pursue specialized fields of study (Singh 2020). Its liberal arts framework exposes learners to diverse domains across the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and quantitative reasoning, thereby cultivating critical thinking, intercultural competence and advanced problem-solving skills. This pedagogical orientation closely aligns with the NEP-2020 emphasis on lifelong, multidimensional learning by encouraging exploration rather than early academic compartmentalization. A defining strength of Ashoka's model is its intentionally cross-disciplinary

curriculum design, which allows students to combine majors, minors and concentrations across multiple fields, fostering individualized and integrative academic trajectories (Subramanian 2021). Ashoka's experience offers several instructive lessons for NEP implementation: it illustrates that innovative and flexible curriculum design becomes possible through robust academic autonomy (Ashoka University 2024); it underscores the centrality of faculty development in equipping instructors to teach interdisciplinary courses with confidence; it demonstrates how writing-intensive, research-oriented and experiential pedagogies effectively cultivate NEP-compatible twenty-first-century skills; and it provides a working model of how the multidisciplinary aspirations of NEP-2020 can be operationalized through adaptive course structures, open electives and sustained cross-departmental integration (Tamrakar 2024).

5.2 Azim Premji University

Azim Premji University represents another compelling model of multidisciplinary education in India, particularly in its integration of the social sciences, public policy, and education studies (Patil 2021). Its academic structure is grounded in a mission-oriented commitment to social change, which naturally fosters a multidisciplinary approach and exposes students to fields such as development studies, economics, sustainability, public health, governance, education, and psychology. This structure equips learners to interpret complex social issues through multiple analytical lenses while synthesizing conceptual knowledge with practical engagement. By weaving together social sciences, policy and education, the university cultivates a holistic understanding of the interdependencies shaping real-world challenges—an ethos aligned with the NEP-2020 vision of socially relevant, whole-person education. A core strength of Azim Premji University lies in its investment in innovative pedagogical models (Srinivasan 2022), including a strong emphasis on experiential and field-based learning in which students apply classroom knowledge within rural communities, NGOs, and government institutions (Azim Premji University 2023). This commitment is reflected in pedagogical practices that incorporate case studies, reflective dialogue, collaborative and project-based learning and the use of faculty-led interdisciplinary research and field experience to create applied learning environments. The institution's focus on nurturing critical thinking, empathy, social responsibility, and problem-solving mirrors the intellectual and ethical capacities prioritized by NEP-2020 (Aithal 2020b).

5.3 IIT Delhi

In recent years, IIT Delhi has undergone a substantial transformation to respond to India's growing demand for multidisciplinary education, moving beyond its historically engineering-centric and conservative institutional structure by establishing new academic schools, expanding departmental

scopes, and creating flexible curricular pathways that allow students to explore fields outside their core discipline (Srinivasan 2022). These reforms have facilitated the emergence of a more inclusive academic ecosystem in which learners and faculty engage with the humanities, design, public policy, artificial intelligence and applied sciences in an integrated manner. Complementing these structural shifts, the institute has also developed robust interdisciplinary research clusters that promote collaboration across diverse domains to address complex national and global challenges such as sustainability, healthcare, digital transformation, and climate science. By drawing together expertise from engineering, the natural and social sciences and policy studies, these clusters exemplify institution-wide commitment to cross-disciplinary inquiry. IIT Delhi's transition toward flexible curricular structures, diversified academic programmes, strengthened humanities and social sciences offerings and newly established interdisciplinary schools and centres underscores the capacity of traditionally specialized institutions to effectively operationalize the NEP-2020 vision of research-driven, academically integrated, and multidimensional higher education.

5.4 Delhi University

Delhi University has been a central actor in India's higher education reform landscape, most notably through its implementation of the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUP) and the introduction of major curricular revisions designed to enhance flexibility, promote multidisciplinary learning, and align academic structures with international norms (Aithal 2020c). The FYUP framework expands students' academic choices by offering a wider array of foundational courses, open electives, and disciplinary pathways, thereby enabling learners to pursue multiple academic routes rather than remaining confined to a single specialization. While these reforms mark significant progress, Delhi University continues to grapple with the structural challenges posed by its vast scale, heterogeneous student population, and complex governance arrangements. With more than ninety affiliated colleges operating under divergent resource conditions and administrative capacities, achieving consistent implementation of multidisciplinary reforms across the system remains difficult. Variations in infrastructure, faculty strength, and institutional preparedness result in uneven adoption of NEP-aligned initiatives, while multi-layered bureaucratic processes further slow decision-making and hinder the effective rollout of innovative academic structures (Indian Institute of Technology Delhi 2023; Bhoi 2025). These institutional realities highlight both the potential and the constraints of transforming large public universities into fully multidisciplinary institutions in accordance with the ambitions of NEP-2020.

Opportunities and Implementation Pathways

6.1 Governance Reforms

Governance reforms proposed under NEP-2020 foreground the need for strengthened autonomy frameworks, revised accreditation and ranking structures and institutional restructuring through HEI clusters, all of which are essential for advancing a multidisciplinary higher education system. Greater academic and administrative autonomy enables universities to redesign curricula, introduce interdisciplinary courses, update programmes in response to social and technological shifts and innovate with assessment methods, co-teaching models, and flexible credit structures. Such autonomy also facilitates more responsive decision-making, allowing institutions to tailor academic strategies to context-specific needs rather than conforming strictly to uniform regulatory mandates. Complementing this, NEP-2020's shift toward accreditation frameworks that prioritise learning outcomes, research ecosystems, innovation, and student engagement—rather than infrastructure-based metrics—creates incentives for institutions to diversify their curricula through multidisciplinary programmes, skill-oriented modules, and experiential learning components. Institutions that effectively implement cross-disciplinary learning stand to benefit within these outcome-based systems, encouraging sector-wide alignment with NEP's multidisciplinary vision. Additionally, the restructuring of institutions into HEI clusters fosters collaborative academic ecologies in which neighbouring colleges and universities may share faculty, laboratories, libraries, research facilities, and elective courses. This model expands access to multidisciplinary teaching resources for smaller or under-resourced institutions, while enabling joint degrees, common core courses, and collaborative research initiatives, thereby reinforcing a more integrated and equitable higher education landscape.

6.2 Pedagogical and Curriculum Innovations

A common core curriculum that introduces all students to foundational knowledge in the humanities, sciences, social sciences, and communication skills establishes broad intellectual exposure and a shared academic base essential for pursuing high-level interdisciplinary education, whether within or beyond a chosen major. Such core structures cultivate key competencies—including analytical reasoning, writing proficiency, ethical reflection, and quantitative literacy—that underpin multidisciplinary engagement. Complementing this foundation, project-based and experiential learning models involving real-world projects, internships, fieldwork, and community participation strengthen the connection between theory and practice while reinforcing critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and teamwork, all of which align with the twenty-first-century skill agenda of NEP-2020. These experiential formats immerse students in multidisciplinary environments where they must integrate knowledge from multiple domains to address practical challenges. Credit-transfer mobility,

enabled through mechanisms such as the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), further expands interdisciplinary possibilities by allowing students to earn credits across institutions and disciplines, pursue joint programmes, move across HEI clusters, and construct customized, multi-domain academic pathways. Collaborative teaching models also play a pivotal role, as co-teaching across fields enriches classroom dialogue, exposes students to diverse disciplinary perspectives, and breaks down departmental silos; interdisciplinary teaching teams are particularly effective in designing integrated courses in areas such as science–policy, technology–ethics and environment–economics, thereby enhancing the coherence and depth of multidisciplinary learning.

Conclusion

The implementation of NEP-2020 is one of the most crucial events in the history of Indian higher education, presenting a radical vision for how knowledge is created, organized, and taught. The demand for multidisciplinary universities in policy is not only about structural change but also about philosophical change, involving a shift towards more holistic, flexible, and integrative learning. As demonstrated in this paper, on the one hand, the conceptual basis of multidisciplinary education is already present, grounded in the worldwide liberal arts tradition, constructivist pedagogy, 21st-century skills models, and outcome-based educational models. However, on the other hand, there is a challenge in translating these ideas into the reality of the Indian institutional environment, which is characterized by a diverse and often inflexible institutional culture. The case studies analyzed, including those of Ashoka University, Azim Premji University, IIT Delhi and the University of Delhi, indicate that significant change is possible and is currently in the implementation process. These institutions demonstrate how flexible curricula, cross-disciplinary partnerships, innovative teaching models, and research-based practices can foster vibrant academic ecosystems that align with the objectives of NEP-2020. Simultaneously, they also expose the structural barriers that still underpin change, such as a lack of institutional autonomy, divided rule, hard-bopped departmental divisions, and unequal faculty ability to practice interdisciplinary teaching. The analysis reveals that institutional commitment and profound cultural change are the key factors that will ultimately make NEP-2020's multidisciplinary vision successful.

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