BRIDGING SKILL AND EMPLOYMENT GAPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: IMPLEMENTATION OF NEP 2020 IN SOUTH SALMARA–MANKACHAR DISTRICT, ASSAM

A District-Level Analysis of Policy Implementation and Graduate Employability

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Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) wants to change India's higher education system so that it can focus more on getting jobs, developing skills, being flexible, and being relevant to the industry. The policy gives the country a complete framework, but it isn't always followed, especially in districts that are far away from each other and have low incomes. This study examines the attributes of skill and employment disparities among higher education graduates in the South Salmara–Mankachar district of Assam and evaluates the extent of NEP 2020's implementation at the institutional level. Using a mixed-methods research design, structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions were used to collect primary data from 200 students, 30 faculty members, and 10 local employers. The results show that NEP 2020 was only partially and unevenly put into action. This problem is caused by not enough exposure to vocational training, weak ties between schools and businesses, bad infrastructure, and not enough emphasis on building soft skills. Even though stakeholders know a lot about NEP 2020, it is hard to turn it into results that will help people find work because of problems with resources and structure. The study recommends localized, context-specific implementation strategies, including curriculum alignment with regional economic activities, faculty capacity enhancement, and strengthened institutional collaboration with local industries and government skill initiatives. The paper contributes to the discourse on policy by addressing the challenges and prospects associated with the implementation of NEP 2020 in underdeveloped regions.

Keywords: NEP 2020; Higher Education; Skill Gap; Employability; Vocational Education; Industry–Academia Collaboration; Assam; South Salmara–Mankachar

1. Introduction

The increasing disparity between higher education outcomes and labor market demands has become a significant issue in India's developmental dialogue. Even though enrollment has grown a lot, colleges and universities have been criticized for turning out graduates who don't have the skills, experience, or readiness to work. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) wants to change higher education by focusing on learning from many different fields, integrating vocational training, experiential teaching, and stronger ties with industry.

The achievement of these objectives, however, varies significantly across regions. Peripheral and underdeveloped districts encounter unique challenges arising from infrastructural deficiencies, insufficient industrial presence, digital disparities, and socio-economic limitations. The South Salmara–Mankachar district in Assam is an example of this. Higher education institutions there have limited resources, and graduates often have to move or work in jobs that don't use their skills.

This study examines the following research inquiries:

1. What kinds of job and skill gaps do graduates of higher education have in the South Salmara–Mankachar district?

2. How much have the parts of NEP 2020 that deal with skill development and employability been put into action in your area?

3. What institutional and socio-economic factors impede effective implementation?

4. What localized strategies can improve employment outcomes under NEP 2020?

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Skill Gaps and Job Opportunities for Graduates in India

A significant corpus of literature has persistently underscored the dissonance between higher education outcomes and labor market demands in India. Studies show that even though more people are going to college, many Indian graduates still don't have the basic skills they need to get a job, like being able to use technology, communicate well, think critically, solve problems, and work well with others (Unni, 2016). Because of these problems, many graduates are unemployed or underemployed, especially those who are the first in their family to go to college or who come from rural areas. Scholars contend that the prevalence of theory-driven curricula and examination-focused learning has constrained students' access to practical, industry-relevant skills, consequently undermining their transition from education to employment.

2.2 NEP 2020 and Skill-Oriented Higher Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a major policy shift aimed at addressing long-standing employability concerns within Indian higher education. The policy places a strong emphasis on credit transfer systems, flexible curricula, learning in various fields, vocational education, internships, and experiential learning at all educational levels. NEP 2020 advocates a move away from rote memorization towards outcome-based and learner-centric pedagogies that promote critical thinking, creativity, and life skills (Aithal & Aithal, 2020). The policy aims to bridge skill gaps and improve graduate employability in India by coordinating academic learning with practical applications.

2.3 Implementation Challenges

Even though NEP 2020 has progressive goals, many academics have pointed out big problems that will make it hard to put into action. Research indicates that higher education institutions, particularly those situated in rural and remote areas, encounter persistent challenges such as faculty shortages, inadequate digital and physical infrastructure, insufficient funding, and weak connections to industry and skill-development organizations (Chowdhury, 2023; Narkhede et al., 2025). Furthermore, uneven adoption of policy reforms has resulted from insufficient localized implementation strategies and inadequate capacity-building initiatives. These problems make it hard to believe that NEP 2020's goals can be met in a wide range of socioeconomic and geographic settings.

2.4 Regional Gaps in Research

Although the body of research on the implementation of NEP 2020 is continuously growing, the majority of empirical studies are focused on relatively developed areas and metropolitan areas. District-level analyses are still rare, especially in India's northeastern states. Research on border and peripheral districts such as South Salmara–Mankachar in Assam is noticeably lacking. The dearth of localized empirical evidence severely hinders our understanding of how national education policies function within region-specific constraints. To close this gap, the current study looks at how NEP 2020 is being implemented and how it affects graduate employability and skill development at the district level.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To fully comprehend the research problem, the study uses a mixed-methods research design. The study's combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allows it to document quantifiable trends in employability and skill development as well as contextual information about stakeholder perceptions and institutional practices. This method makes it possible to triangulate data, which improves the findings' depth and dependability.

3.2 Study Area

The study is carried out in Assam's South Salmara–Mankachar district, a border district distinguished by a lack of industry, reliance on agriculture for economic sustenance, and limitations in higher education infrastructure. Examining the difficulties of putting NEP 2020's skill-oriented education reforms into practice in remote and resource-constrained environments is pertinent given the district's socioeconomic and educational characteristics.

3.3 Sampling

A multi-stage sampling strategy was used to make sure that important stakeholders in graduate skill development and employment were represented.

A total of 200 final-year undergraduates and recent graduates were chosen using stratified random sampling to ensure that all fields and schools were represented.

Faculty: A purposive sampling method was used to choose thirty faculty members and academic administrators based on their roles in delivering the curriculum and making decisions for the institution.

Employers: Ten local employers from non-governmental organizations, small businesses, and government offices were chosen to get their views on how employable graduates are and what skills they need.

3.4 Data Collection Tools

The research used several different tools to collect a lot of different data.

Structured questionnaires were given to students to find out how well they learned skills, how they saw their chances of getting a job, and how much they had learned through hands-on experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty members and administrators to examine institutional readiness, curriculum reforms, and implementation challenges associated with NEP 2020.The research conducted interviews with employers and focus groups to learn about job market expectations, skill gaps, and the effectiveness of academic training in preparing people for jobs.

3.5 Data Analysis

To find trends and patterns in the quantitative data obtained from student questionnaires, the study employed cross-tabulation techniques and descriptive statistics. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurrent themes, issues, and viewpoints among stakeholder groups in the qualitative data collected from focus groups and interviews. A more thorough understanding of the results was made possible by combining quantitative and qualitative findings.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The research process strictly followed ethical standards. All participants gave their informed consent before the data was collected, and their privacy and anonymity were protected. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

4. Findings

4.1 Student-Level Findings

Seventy percent of students said they knew about NEP 2020, but only thirty percent had actually taken part in NEP-aligned programs like skill modules, internships, or vocational courses. Most people were sure about their subject knowledge, but only a small number (less than one-fourth) were sure about their communication, teamwork, and readiness for work. Limited access to internships and experiential learning became a significant issue.

4.2 Faculty-Level Findings

Faculty members recognized the significance of NEP 2020 but identified insufficient infrastructure, a deficiency in training for experiential pedagogy, and inflexible regulatory frameworks as primary obstacles. Changes to the curriculum were being made, but they were taking a long time to put into place because of a lack of resources and institutional freedom.

4.3 Employer-Level Findings:

Employers frequently noted that graduates lacked communication skills, digital skills, and practical experience. Nonetheless, the majority indicated that they would be open to working together through training courses, internships, and guest lectures if official institutional procedures were in place.

4.4 Structural Barriers

Financial constraints, a lack of faculty with vocational training, the digital divide, a weak industrial base, and a sociocultural preference for traditional academic degrees over vocational pathways are some of the major issues noted.

5. Discussion

The results show a significant discrepancy between the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's visionary goals and its actual grassroots implementation in the South Salmara–Mankachar district. Although educators, administrators, and other stakeholders are generally aware of the policy, this awareness is still very superficial and hasn't resulted in sufficient institutional readiness. The administrative adaptability, funding, and implementation frameworks needed to successfully implement NEP 2020's emphasis on skill-based, multidisciplinary, and outcome-oriented education are lacking in many educational institutions.

The lack of organized and ongoing cooperation between local businesses, industries, or skill-development organizations and higher education institutions is one of the primary issues the study found. Although NEP 2020 strongly supports experiential learning through field-based projects, internships, apprenticeships, and exposure to the industry, these opportunities are still scarce and inadequately organized in the district being studied. Students consequently have little opportunity to experience real-world work settings, technological applications, and the development of professional skills. Since students frequently graduate with strong theoretical knowledge but lack the practical competencies and workplace readiness required by the modern job market, this disconnect has a direct impact on graduate employability.

Systemic flaws like a lack of faculty with the necessary training and professional development, inadequate digital and physical infrastructure, and restricted access to ongoing professional development programs further hinder the successful

implementation of NEP reforms. Institutions are finding it difficult to adjust nationally framed reforms to local socioeconomic realities, which has resulted in an uneven adoption of NEP provisions due to the lack of localized and context-specific implementation strategies. Students from rural, marginalized, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who mainly depend on public educational institutions for upward mobility, suffer the most from these restrictions. As a result, the current implementation strategy runs the risk of widening already-existing socioeconomic and educational gaps rather than closing skill and employment gaps.

All things considered, the results highlight the necessity of implementing NEP 2020 with a more grounded and context-sensitive approach. At the district level, the transformative vision of NEP 2020 is likely to remain largely aspirational in the absence of targeted capacity-building initiatives, improved industry–academia partnerships, faculty training, and decentralized planning mechanisms catered to regional needs.

The study emphasizes how crucial it is to put NEP 2020 implementation in context. Employability strategies must be in line with local economic activities like small businesses, tourism, fishing, and agriculture in areas with little industrial presence. To convert policy intent into significant results, faculty development and institutional support are essential.

6. Recommendations:

1. Improving the infrastructure

We need to improve the digital and physical infrastructure, which includes modern skill-training centers, cutting-edge classrooms, well-equipped labs, and fast internet connections. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) play a crucial role in acquiring resources, purchasing equipment that adheres to industry standards, and ensuring the continuous improvement of infrastructure.

2. Improving the skills of faculty members:

To improve their knowledge of soft-skills instruction, vocational pedagogy, and experiential learning approaches, educators must be required to participate in ongoing professional development programs. Regular workshops, refresher courses, and industry engagement will help faculty stay up-to-date on evolving skill requirements and improve their pedagogical skills.

3. Adapting the curriculum to fit the needs of the community:

Skill-based modules should show the traditional jobs, industries, and job openings in each area. Students need to do hands-on learning and work on projects to use what they learn in class in the real world. As a result, they will become more relevant and more likely to obtain jobs.

4. Cooperation between businesses and schools:

We should establish advisory boards comprising professionals from the field to enhance cooperation between schools and businesses in the area. Structured internships, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training programs can help students acquire the skills they need for their jobs.

5. Awareness and Help:

Awareness campaigns, career counseling programs, and community involvement activities should all work together to improve vocational education. Counseling services in schools can help parents and students understand the pros and cons of different career paths and make smart decisions about their future careers.

6. Monitoring policies:

There need to be strong monitoring systems at the district level to regularly verify how well NEP projects are doing and what they are achieving. Systems for regular assessment, data collection, and feedback will ensure accountability, uncover issues, and support evidence-based policy changes.

7. Conclusion

NEP 2020 has the potential to play a transformative role in addressing the persistent gap between skills acquired in higher education and the demands of the job market. By emphasizing multidisciplinary learning, vocational education, internships, and skill-oriented courses, the policy can make graduates more employable and industry-ready.

However, in relatively underdeveloped and border districts like South Salmara–Mankachar, the successful realization of these objectives largely depends on the adoption of localized and context-specific strategies. Factors such as limited infrastructure, digital connectivity issues, lack of industry exposure, and socio-economic constraints of learners require tailored interventions rather than uniform implementation. Strengthening institutional capacity through teacher training, improved infrastructure, and curriculum adaptation is therefore essential.
Moreover, effective coordination among key stakeholders—educational institutions, local administration, industry partners, community organizations, and policymakers—is crucial for translating policy goals into practice. When implemented thoughtfully and inclusively, NEP 2020 can not only enhance graduate employability in such districts but also act as a catalyst for broader regional socio-economic development by creating a skilled workforce aligned with local needs and opportunities.

8. Limitations of the Study

The study is confined to a single district, which limits the geographical scope and reduces the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other regions with different socio-economic and institutional contexts. In addition, limited participation from employers constrained the diversity of perspectives represented, thereby restricting a comprehensive understanding of the broader labour market dynamics. Furthermore, a longitudinal assessment of graduate outcomes could not be undertaken due to time and resource constraints, which limits the ability to examine long-term employment trajectories and career progression of graduates.

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