

Importance of Multidisciplinary Studies in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

By 2030, one large multidisciplinary college in every district-this was a headline that one could not miss when the National Education Policy 2020 was announced. The headline encapsulates the bold reforms that will be implemented in the Indian education and higher education system. The focus on making education multidisciplinary is a significant step that will benefit the students, and one that will have far reaching effects. The Government of India has done a tremendous job in creating an enabling ecosystem for offering multidisciplinary education to flourish and making a difference to students, who in turn will make an impact on the future of our country. The flexibility to choose subjects from sciences and humanities with the ability to also learn fine arts and sports will give students a wide range of subjects to choose without the restrictions they faced earlier. With creative combination of subjects, cutting edge curriculum, flexible options, and multiple entry and exit options during the undergraduate course, students can explore their areas of interest and also choose careers of their choice. In addition, this kind of approach will foster intellectual curiosity, a critical thought process, self-reflection, leadership and teamwork skills, a sense of commitment, professionalism and a heightened sensitivity to one's socio-cultural environment. Introducing multidisciplinary approaches in the field of humanities, the students would be empowered, augmenting the potentiality of human resources and this paves the way for accelerating the process of social, economic and environmental development and sustainability.

Keywords: Approaches; Interdisciplinary; Multidisciplinary; Societal needs; Strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

This profound concept from the Rigveda illustrates the recognition of limitless learning in the Vedic Period. India has a rich tradition of the multidisciplinary approach since ages, as exemplified by the ancient institutions such as Nalanda and Takshashila. These higher learning centres of ancient India were known for teaching every branch of knowledge, such as singing, painting, chemistry, mathematics; vocational fields

such as carpentry, clothes making; professional fields such as medicine and engineering; and soft skills such as communication, discussion and debate. Over the centuries the broader learning opportunities got narrowed and gradually in recent years the focus moved to specialization in particular subjects resulting in the growth of single stream institutions. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), suggests several policy directions for offering multidisciplinary education.

The steps being taken to train the teachers and faculty through a focused process and planned manner is one of the highlights of the NEP 2020. We have an immediate need to train the teachers and upgrade their skills and knowledge. They need to be in the know how of cutting edge pedagogy and ways of delivering high quality content. This kind of interest and investment by the Government will go a long way in enhancing the standards of teaching and also attract more number of quality aspirants back into academia. The removal of M.Phil. and allowing academic aspirants to apply for a Ph.D. with a Master's degree or a four year undergraduate degree is another innovative measure that will make a positive impact on attracting more interested aspirants to choose academia as a career. I am hopeful of seeing a visible improvement in reduction of the gap of good quality faculty in the higher education system in India through these measures.

The NEP also has announced an extremely pragmatic step in allowing the top 100 foreign colleges to set up campuses in India. This will propel our education institutions and the higher education system in India to gear themselves to become truly global. With increased competition, this will raise the bar for higher education in India. I however, see this as an opportunity for higher education institutions to collaborate and co-opt with each other. Whichever option of the above works, the biggest beneficiaries will be the students. The industry will be the next section that will also reap the advantages of having a multidisciplinary education in India. Students entering the industry will no longer be narrow specialists but generalists with relevant depth of their chosen discipline.¹

OBJECTIVES

- Transform single stream institutions into large multidisciplinary universities and autonomous degree awarding HEIs.
- Strengthen institutional infrastructure necessary for multidisciplinary education

and research.

- Approaches Towards the Setting Up of Multidisciplinary HEIs.
- Academic collaboration between institutions, through HEI clusters, leading to multidisciplinary education and research in different modes.
- Merger of single stream institutions with other multidisciplinary institutions under the same management or different managements.
- Strengthening of institutions by adding departments in subjects such as: Languages,

Literature, Music, Philosophy, Indology, Art, Dance, Theatre, Education, Mathematics, Statistics, Pure and Applied Sciences, Sociology, Economics, Sports, Translation and Interpretation and other subjects as needed for a multidisciplinary institution.²

SWAYAM PORTAL CAN PROVIDE AN IDEAL PLATFORM TO ENABLE MULTIDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION

General Conditions

- The standards prescribed by the UGC or by the concerned Statutory or Regulatory bodies, such as: All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), National Medical Commission (NMC), Dental Council of India (DCI), National Council for Teachers Education (NCTE), Bar Council of India (BCI) and Indian Nursing Council (INC), etc. in terms of academic and physical infrastructure, qualification of teachers, duration of a programme, intake, eligibility, admission procedures, fees, curriculum and programme implementation, assessment and evaluation, among other conditions are applicable.
- The degrees to be offered as a result of collaboration between institutions must conform to the nomenclature and duration of the degrees as specified in section 22 (3) of the UGC Act, 1956 and shall also conform to the minimum eligibility and other norms and standards to offer such degree programmes. Multidisciplinary degree programmes punctuated with internship, community service and engagement and skill courses need substantial orientation for teachers. Capacity building for faculty to teach, train and to do research in multidisciplinary academic programmes need adequate focus. Initiatives like Annual Refresher Programme

in Teaching (ARPIT) need to be utilized for additional capacity building.

- Institutional structures have to be expanded to strengthen capacity of faculty to use effective pedagogical approaches and design learning assessment methods and tools.
- The academic requirements and other details of the programme(s) of study to be offered under collaborative arrangements shall be displayed prominently on the collaborating institutions' website before the commencement of programmes.
- An appropriate mechanism has to be put in place to make available counselling services in all HEIs. Each HEI will encourage students through placement assistance and career guidance to help them decide their occupational choices, facilitate processes to identify employment opportunities and set up interactions with potential employers. An efficient mechanism for grievance handling and or redressal will have to be created or upgraded.
- HEIs shall need appropriate educational infrastructure in terms of books, journals, study materials, audio visual facilities, e-resources, virtual classrooms and studios and specifically, high bandwidth internet connectivity to deliver courses through various modes such as Open & Distance Learning (ODL), Online education and face to face.³

Academic Collaboration between Institutions Leading to Multidisciplinary Education and Research

Colleges which are the bedrock of the Indian Higher Education System are connected with universities through an "Affiliating System", where universities design the syllabi, conduct examination and award degrees, while teaching is done in colleges. The structure of this affiliating system has changed very little over the years thereby having a limiting effect on the evolution of research and innovation at both the university and college levels. UGC's attempt to blur the traditional divide between universities and colleges was the scheme of "Autonomous Colleges". However, the effort to bring more colleges into the fold of academic autonomy was only partly successful. With NEP 2020 recommending transformation of all HEIs into large multidisciplinary degree awarding autonomous institutions, the challenge lies in bringing the affiliated colleges on to the

track of progressive autonomy leading to a degree awarding institution and finally into a university as envisioned in the NEP 2020. Consolidation of existing HEIs into multidisciplinary degree granting autonomous colleges through cooperation and collaboration among institutions is outlined in these guidelines.

Many industries now look for graduates with sound knowledge of different disciplines. In sync with the market demand, majority of students aspire to acquire multiple skills. Although there are many single stream institutions in subjects such as Education, Engineering, Management and Law exist in close proximity, rigid disciplinary boundaries and lack of collaboration between institutions deprive students the opportunities of multidisciplinary learning. It is, therefore, essential to capitalize on the proximity of HEIs in offering multidisciplinary programmes. Collaboration and cooperation in offering degree programmes in innovative ways is in the larger interests of aspiring students, parents, industry, government and the nation.⁴

Institutional collaboration leading to the award of dual major degrees

(a) Eligibility criteria

Under the collaborative arrangement, single stream institutions can integrate their programmes with those of nearby multidisciplinary institutions to enhance their programmes. The multidisciplinary HEIs may also seek collaboration in case they are willing to expand further by adding more programmes. Such a new and novel educational architecture will help and strengthen the structure of multidisciplinary education and achieve what has been envisioned in the NEP 2020. As an example, a B.Ed. programme with a B.A leads to the award of dual major degree B.A. B.Ed. (Integrated Teacher Education Programme, ITEP).

(b) Approval process

The approval process and degree awarding will be under the purview of the affiliating universities. The colleges and universities must get the concerned Professional Council (s) to start the degree programmes, either in discipline specific degree or dual major degree programmes.

HEIs should submit proposals to offer a four year dual major bachelor's programme to the regulatory body concerned for recognition. Following the selection procedure, the concerned regulatory bodies will recognize institutions to offer the integrated dual major programmes.

(c) Operational Requirements

The physical proximity of the institutions should be such that they can share physical and human resources and ensure easier student and faculty mobility. Collaborative dual major degree programmes, wherever possible and required, should be offered with the idea of bringing flexibility and interdisciplinarity for the students. The collaborative dual major degree programme should be naturally feasible and should open new career and employment opportunities for the students. The institution will have to enter into a written Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with its partner institution(s) for collaboration. The MoU must include the purposes and related provisions of collaboration, nature and extent of partnership among partnering institutions and the modalities for the functioning of the institutions in offering dual major programmes. The partnership plan for awarding dual major degree and/or collaborative programmes must include planning the expansion in the infrastructure, number of students, departments involved, administration, academic functions and research activities. The student's tuition fee may be charged only for the residential period in the concerned HEIs. The universities will issue the degrees with the transcript or degree indicating the courses the student has taken at the partner institution.⁵

Collaboration between two institutions for the award of dual degree

Collaboration between two institutions for the award of dual degree facilitates students enrolled in an HEI to take up the first degree at the host institution and the second degree at the partnering institution.

An MoU may be signed between the partnering institutions to offer the dual degree with the approval of the university, the State government and/ or the regulatory bodies, covering all aspects such as the number of seats, modalities of transition from one institution to

University Grants Commission

Another and awarding the degree. In accordance to the norms of regulatory bodies, the Central and/ or State governments, should manage and regulate the joint seat allocation for dual degree programmes. Eligibility to the dual degree programme will be as per the eligibility criteria in terms of qualifying examinations, minimum marks and any other factors as set for the programme by the partnering institutions. Once admitted, the

students will be able to complete the first degree at the host institution and the second degree at the partnering institution, without going through the admission process again. Fees will be applicable as per the host institute for the first degree; and for the second degree the fee structure of the partnering institution will be applicable. Partnering institutions will provide hostel facilities, wherever possible, for students while they are pursuing degrees in the particular institution. Students who complete the programme successfully will be awarded the dual degree jointly by the partnering HEIs in the case of universities. In case of collaboration between two colleges of the same university, the affiliating university will award the degree. The students of the dual degree programmes will take up courses as approved by the Academic Council of the HEIs. A certain percentage of seats may be earmarked by the partnering institutions for the dual degree programme. Admission over and above the sanctioned intake is feasible only with the prior approval of the university, the State government and/or the regulatory bodies concerned.

Capacity building in Multidisciplinary Research

The four-year undergraduate programme with the research component and different designs of the Master's programme, are likely to increase research activities, which calls for enhancing the research capacity in HEIs. Students and faculty should be encouraged to do research in areas that are locally, regionally and nationally relevant. To encourage high quality research in multidisciplinary areas in HEIs a research ecosystem is needed where ample opportunity on how to design research proposals, write research articles, publish and patent findings, are available for young scholars and faculty. These opportunities are likely to be high in HEI clusters with the availability of faculty with different disciplinary backgrounds, collective resources and a greater number of students engaging in research.

Constituent Colleges in Universities

NEP 2020 suggests a stage wise mechanism for granting graded autonomy to colleges, through a transparent system of graded accreditation. Colleges will be encouraged, mentored, supported and incentivized to gradually attain the minimum benchmarks required for each level of accreditation. Over a period of time, it is envisaged that every college will either develop into an autonomous degree granting college or become a constituent college of a university. In the latter case, it would be a part of the university in its entirety.⁶

Colleges willing to become part of a university as a constituent college should submit a proposal to the concerned university giving reasons for joining. The necessary terms and conditions shall be decided mutually by both institutions in accordance with the provisions of the Act and or regulations governing the State university or Central University, or deemed to be university, or private university.⁷

MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN HEI CLUSTERS

Over the past decades there has been increased growth in Multidisciplinary Research in Higher Education. The high level of diversity, such as different disciplinary experts and the rapid sharing of information and resources involved in Multidisciplinary Research enables the synthesis of new knowledge, increased production of original, creative work, innovations and patents. Multidisciplinary Research, therefore, plays a crucial role in finding solutions to the challenges currently facing society.⁹ As the trend towards multidisciplinary based research collaboration grows, it is imperative to train a new generation of teacher researchers in the Multidisciplinary Research areas. Multidisciplinary Research also wrestles with several challenges due to the organizational, logistical and location diversity involved. For Multidisciplinary Research to thrive in HEI clusters, a Multidisciplinary Research Committee comprising members from collaborating institutions may be formed to: (a) share the scarce resource in an optimum way among collaborating institutions and (b) identify core learning and research activities in the collaborating HEIs and the development of multidisciplinary thinking approach.¹⁰

The Multidisciplinary study allows for the synthesis of ideas and the synthesis of characteristics from many disciplines. At the same time, it addresses students' individual differences and helps to develop important, transferable skills. These skills, such as critical thinking, communication, and analysis are important and continually developing at all stages of life. Educational systems are serving students best if they enable and encourage students to build their own multidisciplinary pathway. This approach is sure to foster a love of learning, ignite a spark of enthusiasm and address learning differences for students. However, at the end, the multidisciplinary approach inhibits many favored skills that are sought out by future academicians

and employers. Students and their teachers will advance in critical thinking, communication, creativity, pedagogy, and essential academia with the use of interdisciplinary techniques.⁸

New roles are being carved out with the changing times and in an era of exponential change and development, an undiscovered future awaits young India. Even recruits are on the lookout for hiring multidisciplinary talent. Narrow training is giving way to transferrable and dynamic skills. Through a multidisciplinary approach, a student gains an arsenal of skills problem solving, critical thinking, time management, self-management, communication and writing, analysis and research methodologies, team work, and much more that are easily transferable across work environments. Youngsters can now find very interesting careers in new and emerging fields as a result of a vibrant multidisciplinary background. It gives them the exposure, education and experience to branch out into different directions and expands their avenues.¹¹

CONCLUSION

The NEP 2020 is the first education policy of the 21st century and replaces the thirty four year old National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986. Built on the foundational pillars of Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability and Accountability, this policy is aligned to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and aims to transform India into a vibrant knowledge society and global knowledge superpower by making both school and college education more holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary, that is suited to 21st century's needs and aimed at bringing out the unique capabilities of each student. Even though the idea of interdisciplinary in higher education is lucrative and beneficial, but in reality it is difficult to implement. It is time consuming and needs collaborative team work for its existence, which seem to be hard and exhausting disadvantage. However, at the end, the interdisciplinary approach inhibits many favoured skills that are sought out by future academicians and employers. Students and their teachers will advance in critical thinking, communication, creativity, pedagogy, and essential academia with the use of interdisciplinary techniques.

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