



A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR RESTRUCTURING HIGHER EDUCATION IN RURAL INDIA COMPLIANT WITH NEP 2020

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ABSTRACT:

Restructuring higher education in rural India is central to the objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which prioritizes equity, access, versatility, interdisciplinary learning, and local relevance. Despite increased enrolment, rural institutions continue to face structural challenges including inadequate infrastructure, faculty shortages, rigid curricula, limited research capacity, and weak industry and community connections. This policy-oriented conceptual paper presents a policy-focused framework for implementing NEP 2020 to strengthen rural higher education ecosystems. The framework promotes technology-enabled blended learning, decentralized governance, curriculum revision in line with regional and national development priorities, and ongoing faculty development. By reimagining rural higher education as a catalyst of local development and social advancement, the paper advances a coherent policy vision aligned with NEP 2020 priorities across rural India.

Keywords: *NEP 2020, Rural Higher Education, Educational Equity, Blended Learning, Curriculum Reform.*

INTRODUCTION :

Higher education promotes human capital and social mobility, yet substantial rural-urban inequalities in participation and attainment persist in India (Agrawal, 2014; Tilak, 2015). Despite expansion to a gross enrolment ratio of 30.0% in 2023–24 (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2026), equitable participation remains a challenge (Naik et al., 2024). Rural institutions face constraints in digital infrastructure and connectivity (Samy, 2026), while curriculum relevance and employability remain important concerns in rural higher education (Sidhu, 2017).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to address these disparities through institutional autonomy, equitable access, curricular flexibility, and digital learning (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020). Effective rural implementation, however, must respond to local institutional and community needs, consistent with University

Grants Commission (UGC, 2022) guidelines linking higher education with community engagement and rural development. An integrated framework is therefore needed to translate NEP 2020 priorities into rural contexts.

This policy-oriented conceptual paper proposes a framework for strengthening rural higher education through five connected reform areas: institutional governance, curriculum relevance and employability, digital access, faculty capacity, and community engagement. These priorities reflect recent evidence on infrastructural gaps, faculty readiness, regional disparities, and funding constraints in NEP implementation (Sivaraman et al., 2026). The framework integrates institutional autonomy, locally relevant curricula, technology-enabled learning, sustained faculty development, and community partnerships to advance a more

equitable and responsive rural higher education system.

Policy Context: NEP 2020 and Rural Higher Education

For rural higher education institutions (HEIs), the main challenge is putting NEP 2020 priorities into practice. The policy aims to establish large multidisciplinary HEIs in or near every district, which could improve access to higher education in underserved areas (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020). However, gaps in infrastructure, funding, faculty readiness, and digital access can make implementation difficult in rural areas (Sivaraman et al., 2026).

The application of NEP 2020 in rural HEIs can help institutions better meet local needs. Greater autonomy can support locally relevant programs, while multidisciplinary education and flexible credit options can give students more choices. Digital learning can improve access, and equity measures can support students from underserved communities. Table 1 summarizes these provisions and their potential applications in rural HEIs.

Note. NEP 2020 provisions are based on Government of India, Ministry of Education (2020); potential rural applications are informed by the implementation challenges identified by Sivaraman et al. (2026).

Structural Challenges in Rural Higher Education

While NEP 2020 offers important opportunities for rural higher education, its application depends on the capacity of institutions to put these reforms into practice. Rural higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to face interconnected challenges in infrastructure, faculty capacity, curriculum relevance, governance, funding, and student support. These constraints can limit effective implementation of the policy.

Infrastructure and Digital Divide

Infrastructure constraints and unreliable connectivity can restrict the blended and online learning models envisioned under NEP 2020 (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020). Evidence from rural higher education settings also shows uneven access to computers, smart classrooms, and reliable connectivity (Samy, 2026). Although public investment made 218,347 Gram Panchayats service-ready under BharatNet by March 2025 (Government of India, Ministry of Communications, 2025), regional differences remain. Rural higher education institutions therefore require targeted investment and differentiated digital support for effective policy implementation.

Faculty Availability and Development

Faculty capacity is another challenge for rural HEIs. Limited faculty availability and professional development can affect teaching quality, research, mentoring, and the introduction of multidisciplinary programs. Recent evidence on NEP 2020 implementation also identifies faculty readiness as an important barrier to reform (Sivaraman et al., 2026).

Curriculum-Employability Mismatch

Many rural institutions continue to offer programs that are not sufficiently aligned with local economic needs or changing job demands (Sidhu, 2017). Limited practical and skill-based learning can further weaken the transition from higher education to employment. National employment data highlight the broader challenge of graduate employability: in 2022, the unemployment rate among young graduates was 29.1% (International Labour Organization & Institute for Human Development, 2024).

Governance and Funding Constraints

Limited financial and institutional autonomy can restrict the ability of rural colleges to redesign curricula, allocate resources, and develop partnerships suited to local needs

(Agarwal, 2006; Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020). Funding constraints can also limit investment in infrastructure, technology, faculty development, and student services. Addressing these resource gaps is therefore important for effective NEP 2020 implementation (Sivaraman et al., 2026).

Student Support and Social Barriers

Rural students may also face limited access to academic advising, mentoring, career guidance, and other institutional support. Financial and social barriers can further affect participation and progression. Strengthening student support is therefore important for achieving the equity and inclusion goals of NEP 2020 (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020).

Rural Higher Education in Practice: Selected Cases

Evidence from rural higher education institutions illustrates how structural challenges can occur together. A case study of Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University in Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir, found that the university contributed to local employment and economic activity (Iqbal & Qazi, 2019). Studies of rural colleges in Ludhiana district, Punjab, have also identified challenges related to institutional facilities and curriculum relevance (Sidhu, 2017). Other evidence from rural Punjab similarly points to gaps in infrastructure, teaching facilities, and student support (Kaur, 2017). Together, these cases illustrate how infrastructure, curriculum, institutional capacity, and local development can intersect in rural higher education.

A Policy Framework for Restructuring Rural Higher Education

This proposed framework responds to the major challenges facing rural colleges through five connected reform areas: decentralized governance, curriculum reform, technology-enabled learning, faculty capacity building, and community and industry engagement.

Decentralized Governance and Institutional Autonomy

- **Local Autonomy:** Greater institutional autonomy can help rural colleges design programs and partnerships that respond to local needs (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020).

- **Targeted Funding:** Rural HEIs could receive targeted funding linked to infrastructure, faculty development, and locally identified institutional needs.

Curriculum Reform and Multi-disciplinarity

- **Locally Relevant Programs:** Rural colleges can combine multidisciplinary education with subjects and skills connected to regional priorities, including agriculture, public health, sustainability, and entrepreneurship (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020; Sidhu, 2017).

- **Flexible Learning:** The Academic Bank of Credits can support flexible learning pathways by allowing students to accumulate and transfer credits (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020).

Technology-Enabled Blended Learning

- **Digital Resources:** National digital platforms and online resources can supplement classroom teaching and expand access to learning materials (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020).

- **Sharing Networks:** Digital collaboration across institutions could allow neighboring colleges to share learning resources, guest lectures, and faculty expertise.

Faculty Capacity Building

- **Institutional Mentoring:** Partnerships between rural colleges and larger universities could support faculty development, research collaboration, and resource sharing.

- **Faculty Incentives:** Targeted research support and professional development opportunities could help strengthen faculty capacity in rural institutions.

Community and Industry Engagement

• **Local Partnerships:** Partnerships with local businesses, women's self-help groups, community organizations, and village councils can provide students with practical learning opportunities.

• **Community Development:** Connecting student projects with local needs can strengthen the contribution of rural colleges to community and regional development (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020; Iqbal & Qazi, 2019; University Grants Commission, 2022).

Implementation Considerations

Implementation will require coordination among central and state governments, regulatory bodies, and higher education institutions (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020). Given differences in institutional capacity across rural areas, a phased approach can help prioritize immediate needs while allowing longer-term reforms to develop gradually.

Note. Proposed by the author based on NEP 2020 priorities and the implementation challenges discussed in this paper.

CONCLUSION :

Strengthening rural higher education is essential to achieving the equity, access, and quality objectives of NEP 2020 (Government of India, Ministry of Education, 2020). Rural institutions require approaches that respond to their specific infrastructure, faculty, curriculum, resource, and community contexts rather than simply replicating urban institutional models. The framework proposed in this paper brings together institutional autonomy, locally relevant curricula, technology-enabled learning, faculty development, and community engagement as interconnected areas for reform. Through context-sensitive and phased implementation, rural higher education institutions can play a stronger role in expanding educational opportunity and supporting regional development.

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Table 1 : Key NEP 2020 Provisions and Implications for Rural Higher Education Institutions

NEP 2020 Provision	Policy Focus	Potential Application in Rural HEIs
<i>Institutional Autonomy</i>	Greater academic freedom	Programs based on local needs
<i>Multidisciplinary Education</i>	Multidisciplinary institutions and programs	Integration of locally relevant subjects
<i>Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)</i>	Flexible credit accumulation and transfer	Flexible learning pathways
<i>Digital and Online Education</i>	Technology-supported learning	Wider access to learning opportunities
<i>Equity and Inclusion</i>	Support for disadvantaged groups	Improved rural participation and access

Table 2 : Step-by-Step Plan for Rural Higher Education Reform

Reform Phase	Main Focus	Key Actions for Rural Colleges
<i>Phase I (Short-term)</i>	Building Capacity	Improve internet and digital infrastructure; begin faculty development; strengthen institutional autonomy; provide targeted infrastructure support
<i>Phase II (Medium-term)</i>	Program Reform	Introduce multidisciplinary programs; implement the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC); expand blended learning; develop community and industry partnerships
<i>Phase III (Long-term)</i>	System Integration	Strengthen governance and accountability; develop regional research collaboration; improve long-term funding mechanisms; connect rural colleges with wider higher education networks