

Advancing Higher Education through Flexible Curricular Structures and Multiple Entry and Exit Pathways

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Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 has introduced a transformative reform in higher education driven by the need for adaptability, relevance, and inclusivity with rapidly changing world. By adopting multidisciplinary learning approaches and contemporary pedagogies the policy aims to revitalize higher education system through a flexible curricula and multiple entry-exit options as pivotal strategies. This is an innovative framework that allows students to pursue diverse academic interests, combine different disciplines by breaking down silos between traditional academic disciplines and engage in experiential learning opportunities. The concept embodies a departure from rigid, discipline-centric structures towards dynamic and interdisciplinary education. The national education policy 2020 envisions an integrated flexible curriculum framework that caters the diverse career pathways, and learning styles of students, thereby enhancing engagement, retention, and overall academic success. Through a qualitative analysis, this paper elucidates the benefits associated with implementing flexible curricula in terms of best practices and emerging trends across different educational contexts. Furthermore, the integration of multiple entry-exit options represents a fundamental shift towards democratizing higher education and promoting lifelong learning. This allows individuals to enter, exit, and re-enter the educational system seamlessly, thereby promoting accessibility, equity, and continuous skill development. This paper explores the rationale behind multiple entry-exit systems and discusses the critical role of flexible curricula and multiple entry-exit options in developing workforce readiness and bridging the gap between academic learning and employability. By fostering adaptability, inclusivity, and innovation, in higher education system the policy 2020 advocates to empower learners, revitalize institutions and create learner-centric ecosystems that can change and embrace the full spectrum of human potential.

Keywords: higher education, flexible curricula, multiple entry-exit options, lifelong learning, learner-centric ecosystems.

1. Introduction

The National Education Policy 2020 approved by the Union Cabinet on July 29, 2020 marked a significant milestone in the reforming education system at all levels of education. Since its approval, the

implementation of NEP 2020 has been underway, with both central and state governments working to enact the proposed reforms and initiatives outlined in the policy. (NEP,2020).

Flexible curricula in ancient Indian universities were a hallmark of the educational systems during that time. While modern notions of flexibility may differ, ancient Indian universities, such as Takshashila, Nalanda, and Vikramashila, offered a diverse range of subjects and allowed students to tailor their education to their interests and goals to some extent. Ancient Indian universities emphasized a multidisciplinary approach to education, offering instruction in various fields such as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, philosophy, literature, and more. This allowed students to pursue a wide range of subjects based on their interests, skills and career aspirations leading to holistic development (Shukla et al., 2022).

Introduction of multidisciplinary and flexible curricular framework will allow students to choose from a wide range of subjects and design their own learning pathways. This curricular structure can accommodate diverse interests, aspirations, and learning styles, making higher education more attractive and accessible to a larger segment of the population. NEP 2020 integrates vocational education into mainstream higher education, offering practical, job-oriented courses alongside traditional academic programs. This integration enhances the relevance of higher education to the needs of the workforce, attracting a broader spectrum of students who seek both academic and vocational skills.

One of the notable reforms introduced by NEP 2020 is the implementation of a flexible undergraduate education system that allows students to enter and exit degree programs at various stages. Under this system, students can pursue a degree at their own pace, earning certificates or diplomas along the way, and have the option to re-enter the academic stream if they take a break. multiple entry and exit options in higher education offer a learner-centred approach that promotes flexibility, customization, and inclusivity, ultimately empowering learners to achieve their academic and professional competencies required for 21st century (James et al., 2021).

The implementation of flexible curricular framework with multiple entry and exit options can reduce barriers to entry in higher education and will increase the likelihood of students pursuing higher education there by increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020, particularly its new framework of curriculum, is expected to have a positive impact on the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India (NEP ,2020). With these reforms the policy 2020 aims to make Indian institutions more competitive, inclusive, and globally engaged. These reforms offer opportunities for students to acquire a broad-based education, develop global competencies, and contribute to cross-border collaboration and innovation in higher education and research (Jain, 2021).

Objectives of Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To highlight and overview the flexible curricular framework in higher education under NEP 2020.
2. To understand and analyse the various aspects of multiple entry and exit options and its implementation in higher education by NEP 2020.
3. To discuss the merits of flexible curricular structure and multiple entry and exit options.

Methodology

The methodology for this research paper is a conceptual document analysis of National Education Policy 2020, highlighting various aspects, objectives and merits of flexible curricular framework and multiple entry exit options proposed under NEP 2020. The implications of the policy are analysed using predictive analysis technique.

Need of Study

The flexible curricular framework and multiple entry exit options introduced under National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in higher education were needed as:

- The flexible curricular framework allows students to choose subjects of their interest and create personalized academic pathways.
- Learners can combine disciplines creatively, leading to a more holistic and relevant education experience.
- If in case student face any problem that force them to discontinue their education midway, then multiple entry and exit points provide opportunities for learners to complete shorter modules (certificates, diplomas) even if they cannot pursue a full degree. This can decrease dropout rates and improves Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER).

Flexible Curricular Framework

Flexibility in curriculum means that students will be able to make choices from a flexible curriculum with creative combinations of subjects according to their own interest and needs. Through the implementation of a holistic multidisciplinary approach the policy states to break the disciplinary silos and bridge the separation between Arts and Science, vocational and academic streams. To achieve this NEP, 2020 reforms that promotes rigorous research-based specialization and opportunities for multidisciplinary work, including academia, government and interdisciplinary thinking at the graduate, Master's and doctoral level education in large multidisciplinary universities. It also states that, "Higher education qualifications leading to a degree/diploma/certificate shall be described by the National Higher Education Qualification Framework (NHEQF) in terms of such learning outcomes."

The new framework of multidisciplinary courses formulated by the policy consist of:

- **Major-Discipline-** Students will be able to enroll themselves in a specific major discipline at the beginning of the programme and they have option either to continue with the chosen major or switch to another major discipline within the second semester.
- **Minor-Discipline-** Students will be able to select a minor discipline at the end of second semester. The minor can be chosen from disciplinary, interdisciplinary or skill based vocational streams which will benefit students with additional knowledge and expertise in secondary area of study.
- **Ability-Enhanced Courses-** In these courses students will study Modern Indian Language (MIL), English, and international languages with a special emphasis on language and communication skills. These courses aim to develop student's linguistic abilities.
- **Skill-Development Courses** -These courses are specifically designed to enhance student's employability, practical skills, hands on training, soft skills development and all necessary competencies for the job market.

- **Value-Added Courses**-These are mandatory courses for all undergraduate students. These courses include courses on understanding India, environmental sciences, digital technologies, health and wellness, yoga, sports and fitness required for holistic development and human welfare.

Multiple Entry and Exit Options

Multiple entry exit options in higher education refer to the flexibility provided to students to enter and exit degree programs at different stages of their academic journey, without adhering to a strictly linear progression. Multiple entry exit options work as

Entry-Point

Students are not restricted to a single-entry point, such as the beginning of an academic year or semester. Instead, they have the flexibility to enrol in degree programs at various stages throughout the academic year or even during different years of their academic career.

Exit-Points

Similarly, students have the option to exit degree programs at different stages and receive recognition for the credits they have earned. This could include earning a certificate or diploma after completing a certain number of credits, even if they have not completed the full requirements for a degree.

Re-Entry

If students choose to exit a degree program, they have the opportunity to re-enter at a later time and continue their studies without penalty. This allows students to take breaks for personal, professional, or other reasons and resume their education when they are ready.

Modular Approach

Multiple entry exit options often involve a modular approach to education, where courses are broken down into smaller units or modules. This allows students to complete courses at their own pace and accumulate credits over time, even if they are not pursuing a full-time course load.

Flexibility

Multiple entry exit options provide students with greater flexibility and control over their academic journey. They can tailor their education to their individual needs, interests, and circumstances, whether that involves balancing work and study, pursuing additional opportunities outside of academia, or taking a non-traditional path to degree completion.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Multiple entry exit options also recognize the value of prior learning and experience outside of traditional academic settings. Students may receive credit for relevant work experience, professional certifications, or military service, allowing them to accelerate their progress toward a degree. Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning strengthens the flexible learning pathways are integrated in higher education (University Grants Commission, 2021).

Diverse Learning Trajectories

By accommodating diverse learning trajectories, multiple entry exit options promote inclusivity and accessibility in higher education. They open doors for students from non-traditional backgrounds, adult learners, and those with unique life circumstances to pursue higher education on their own terms.

Various Aspects of Multiple Entry Exit Options

The new higher education system is inclusive of all tertiary education and training sectors and learning pathways (Technical, Vocational Education and Training and higher education institutions, and cover public and private institutions) based on strong quality assurance that aims to enhance credibility and learning outcomes which can be comparable, recognizable, and transferable contributing to lifelong learning (University Grants Commission, 2021).

Multiple entry and exit options in the higher education, under- graduation and postgraduation qualifications such as certificate, diploma, degree are organized in a series of levels in an increasing order from level 5 to level 10. Level 5 represents certificate and level 10 represents research degree (Table 1). The entry and exit options for undergraduate programme, are as follows:

Undergraduate Programme

Year and Levels	Entry	Exit
1st year (Level 5)	Entry 1 After completion of secondary school education, a Bachelor degree program will be open for all.	Exit 1 A certificate will be awarded if the student exits at the end of year 1(2 semester)
2nd year (Level 6)	Entry 2 After completion of 1 st year (2 semester) of under-graduate programme.	Exit 2 A diploma will be awarded if the student exits at the end of 2 nd year 1(4 semesters)
3rd year (Level 7)	Entry 3 After completion of 2 years (4 semesters) of under-graduate programme.	Exit 3 A degree shall be awarded if the student exits at the end of 3 rd year 1(6 semesters)
4th year (Level 8)	Entry 4 After completion of 3 years (6 semesters) of Bachelor degree program with minimum CGPA of 7.5	Exit 4 A Bachelor Degree with Research shall be awarded if the student exits at the end of 4 th year 1(8 semesters)

Table 1: Undergraduate programme by NEP-2020

The Multiple Entry and Exit (MEE) framework under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to make higher education more flexible, inclusive, and learner-centred. It enables students to obtain appropriate academic qualifications at different stages of an undergraduate programme, subject to the prescribed credit requirements. The framework provides for a certificate after the first year, a diploma after the second year, a bachelor's degree after the third year, and a bachelor's degree with research after the fourth year, subject to the applicable academic requirements.

The University Grants Commission (UGC, 2021) emphasizes that multiple entry and exit, supported by the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), can facilitate credit accumulation, credit transfer, and academic mobility across higher education institutions. These provisions can enable students to resume their studies after a break and pursue education according to their individual circumstances and aspirations. Similarly, the UGC's Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes (2022) promotes curricular flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, and learner choice. Together, these reforms aim to support lifelong learning, improve access to higher education, and provide students with more flexible academic and career pathways.

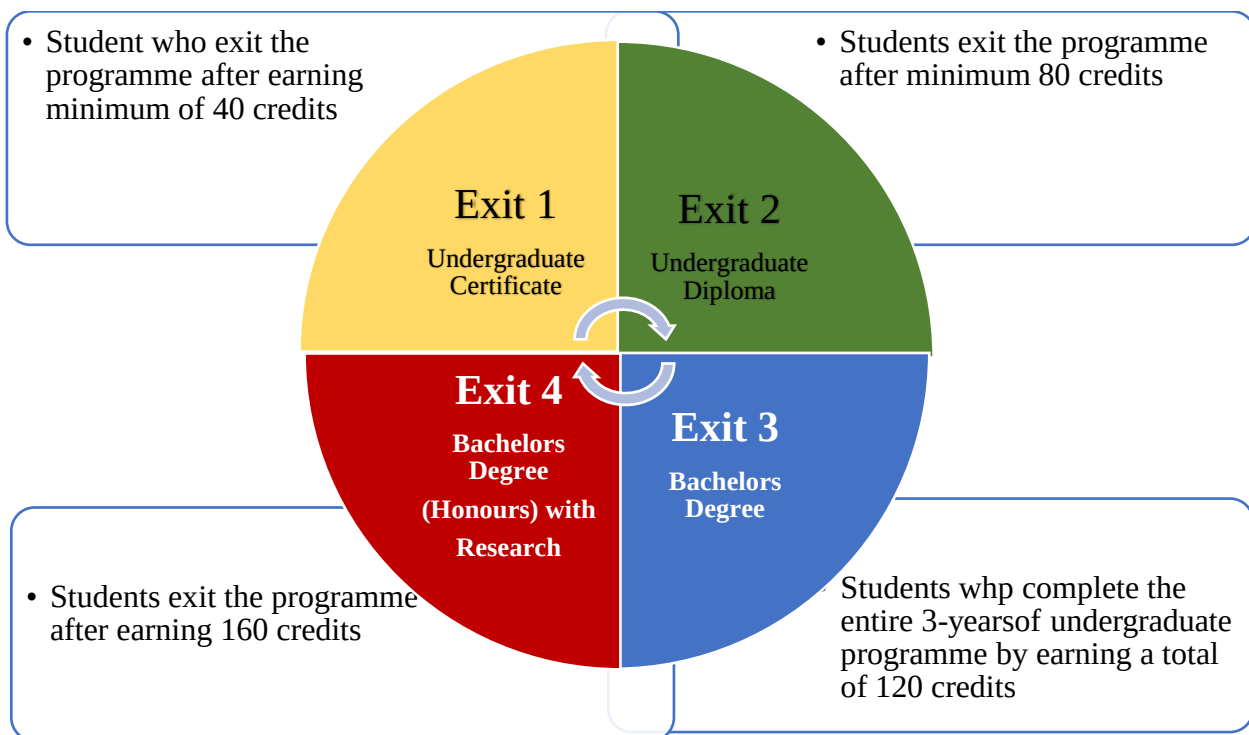


Figure 1: Multiple Entry Exit Model

The diagram illustrates the Multiple Entry and Exit (MEE) framework introduced under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and incorporated into the University Grants Commission's (UGC) *Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes* (UGC, 2022). The framework provides students with flexible academic pathways by allowing them to exit an undergraduate programme at different stages after earning the prescribed credits. Students who complete the first year and earn a minimum of 40 credits may receive an undergraduate certificate, while those who complete the second year and earn 80 credits may receive an undergraduate diploma.

Students completing three years and earning 120 credits may be awarded a bachelor's degree. Those completing four years and earning 160 credits may receive a bachelor's degree with honours or honours with research, subject to the applicable programme requirements. The framework promotes curricular flexibility, multidisciplinary learning, and student mobility by enabling learners to pursue education according to their interests, circumstances, and academic goals. The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) further supports this flexibility by facilitating credit accumulation and transfer, helping students resume their studies and progress towards completing their qualifications (UGC, 2021).

Master's Programme

UGC Guidelines for Multiple Entry and Exit in Academic Programmes 2020 in higher education offers:

- Three-years of Bachelors programme is mandatory for students who shall be admitted to a two-year programme with the second year devoted entirely to research.
- Students completing a four-year Bachelor's programme with Honours/Research, may be admitted to a one-year Master's programme.
- There may be an integrated five-year Bachelor's/Master's programme.

Year and Level	Entry	Exit
1st year Level 9	Entry 5 Entry five requires successful completion of 3 years (6 semesters) of bachelor degree programme	Exit 5 There will be only one exit point for student joining two years of master's programme. Student who Exits after first year will be awarded with Postgraduate Diploma
2nd year Level 10	After completion of 1 st year (2 semesters) of master programme or 4 years of Bachelor Degree with Research	Students will be awarded with a Master's Degree at the end of completion of master's programme

Table: 2 Masters Programme by NEP-2020

The postgraduate Multiple Entry and Exit (MEE) framework provides flexible academic pathways for students pursuing master's programmes in higher education. Under this structure, students who have completed a three-year bachelor's degree may enter a two-year master's programme (Entry 5). If a student chooses to exit after completing the first year of the master's programme and fulfilling the prescribed academic requirements, they may be awarded a Postgraduate Diploma. Students who successfully complete both years of the programme and meet the required credit and academic criteria are awarded a Master's Degree.

The framework also provides a separate pathway for students who have completed a four-year bachelor's degree with honours or honours with research, who may be eligible for a one-year master's programme, subject to the applicable admission requirements. These provisions support academic flexibility, credit

mobility, and opportunities for lifelong learning by enabling students to pursue higher education through different academic pathways (Ministry of Education, 2020; University Grants Commission, 2023).

Merits of Flexible Curriculum and Multiple Entry Exit Options in Higher Education

Flexible curriculum and multiple entry exit options in higher education offer numerous merits that contribute to a more inclusive, adaptable, and student-centred learning environment.

Personalized Learning Experience

Flexible curricula allow students to tailor their educational pathways according to their interests, goals, and learning styles. By selecting courses that align with their passions and aspirations, students are more engaged and motivated, leading to improved learning outcomes.

Enhanced Accessibility and Equity

Multiple entry exit options remove barriers to higher education by accommodating diverse learning trajectories and life circumstances. Students can enter and exit degree programs at various stages, ensuring that education remains accessible to individuals with work, family, or other commitments. This promotes equity and inclusivity in higher education, allowing a wider range of students to pursue their academic goals.

Increased Retention and Completion Rates

Flexible curricula and multiple entry exit options contribute to higher retention and completion rates by accommodating students' needs and preferences. Students are less likely to drop out due to academic or personal challenges, as they have the flexibility to take breaks, pursue alternative pathways, or re-enter the academic stream without penalty.

Promotion of Lifelong Learning

The flexibility offered by these options promotes a culture of lifelong learning, where education is viewed as a continuous and evolving process. Students are encouraged to pursue further education, acquire new skills, and adapt to changing career demands throughout their lives, fostering personal and professional growth.

Adaptability to Changing Needs

Flexible curricula and multiple entry exit options enable higher education institutions to adapt quickly to changing societal, economic, and technological trends. Institutions can introduce new courses, update existing curricula, and respond to emerging industry demands in a timely manner, ensuring that graduates are well-prepared for the workforce.

Global Competitiveness

By providing students with a more customizable and adaptable educational experience, flexible curricula and multiple entry exit options enhance the international competitiveness of graduates. Students develop a diverse skill set, interdisciplinary knowledge, and critical thinking abilities that are highly valued in today's globalized economy.

Conclusion

The flexible curriculum and multiple entry exit options in higher education extend beyond individual students to encompass broader societal benefits, including increased accessibility, retention, and global competitiveness. These options can empower students to pursue their educational aspirations on their own terms, fostering a culture of lifelong learning and adaptability in higher education. Multiple entry exit options in higher education offer students greater flexibility, autonomy, and opportunity to tailor their educational experience to their individual needs and goals. By promoting innovation a flexible curriculum, educational institutions empower students to customize their learning experiences based on their interests, strengths, and career aspirations. This flexibility allows students to explore interdisciplinary fields, pursue niche subjects, and engage in practical experiences such as internships, research projects, and entrepreneurial endeavours creating a learner-centric ecosystem in higher education.

As a result, students are encouraged to think creatively, problem-solve independently, and collaborate across disciplines. The ability to tailor their education to their individual needs enables students to push boundaries, experiment with new ideas, and develop innovative solutions to real-world challenges increasing more attention in research and development areas accommodating diverse learning pathways which can be boon in curtailing dropouts improving Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) (NEP, 2020). Additionally, internationalization initiatives such as study abroad programs, exchange partnerships, and global research collaborations provide students with opportunities to engage with different perspectives, immerse themselves in new cultures, and develop an interconnected world, where cultural competence and global citizenship are increasingly valued.

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