

A Comparative Study of National Education Policy 1986 and 2020 for Inclusion, Equity and Diversity in Higher Education Institutes in India

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) plays a pivotal role in shaping the educational landscape of a nation, influencing policies, practices, and outcomes across various levels of education. This article conducts a comparative analysis of the National Education Policy of 1986 and 2020, focusing on their approaches in promoting inclusion, equity, and diversity in higher education institutes in India. The NEP of 1986 laid the groundwork for addressing issues of inclusion, equity, and diversity in higher education, emphasizing access, quality enhancement, and social relevance. However, its approach was limited by the prevailing socio-political context and technological constraints of the time. In contrast, the NEP of 2020 represents a paradigm shift in its vision and strategies in promoting inclusion, equity, and diversity in higher education institutes. The policy prioritizes multidisciplinary education, flexible learning pathways, and inclusive practices which aims to create vibrant, equitable, and inclusive higher education ecosystems that cater to the diverse needs of all learners. Through a comparative analysis of the two policies, this study identifies key similarities and differences in their approaches to inclusion, equity, and diversity in higher education. It examines how the evolving socio-economic landscape, technological advancements, and changing educational paradigms have influenced policy formulation and implementation. This article critically analyses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of each policy. It offers insights into the effectiveness of policy interventions in promoting specifically inclusion, equity, and diversity in higher education institutes in India. It provides valuable implications for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders seeking to address the evolving needs of a diverse student population and build a more inclusive and equitable higher education system.

Keywords: National Education Policy (NEP), Inclusion, Equity, Diversity, NEP 1986, NEP 2020, Educational Reforms, Policy Analysis.

1. Introduction to Policy Context and Study Rationale

Education plays a central role in promoting social transformation, economic development, and national progress. In a socially and culturally diverse country like India, higher education assumes particular importance in addressing long-standing inequalities linked to caste, gender, region, language, disability, and socio-economic status. National education policies serve as important instruments in shaping the governance, access structures, and equity orientations thereby influencing who participates in higher education and under what conditions. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 marked a significant milestone in India's efforts to expand educational access and promote social justice. The policy acknowledged structural inequalities in Indian society and introduced measures aimed at improving participation among marginalised groups, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and economically disadvantaged populations. In the context of higher education, NPE 1986 prioritised institutional expansion, quality improvement, and alignment with national development goals. However, its approach to inclusion and diversity was shaped by the socio-political conditions and technological limitations of the period which resulted in an emphasis on access-oriented interventions rather than systemic transformation. More than three decades later, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reflects a substantially reoriented vision for higher education. Responding to changing

demographic realities, technological advancements, and global shifts in educational paradigms, NEP 2020 places inclusion, equity, flexibility, and diversity at the core of higher education reform for the country. The policy promotes multidisciplinary education, flexible entry and exit options, digital learning platforms, and targeted support mechanisms for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. It also emphasises the need for institutional cultures that recognise linguistic, regional, and cultural diversity while ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students. A comparative examination of NPE 1986 and NEP 2020 reveals significant shifts in how inclusion, equity, and diversity are conceptualised and operationalised within Indian higher education policy. These shifts reflect broader transformations in governance approaches, and understandings of social justice, influenced by both domestic challenges and global policy discourses. Against these circumstances, this study undertakes a systematic comparison of the two policies to analyse continuities and changes in policy vision, instruments, and implementation emphasis. The study aims to contribute to higher education policy research by providing insights into how the policy framework has evolved and what this means for building a more inclusive and equitable higher education system in India.

1.1 Historical Evolution of Education Policy in India

India's education policy trajectory has evolved in response to persistent social inequalities as well as international developments in education and human development. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 emerged following extensive national consultations and was strongly influenced by the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964–66), which emphasised equal educational opportunity as a foundation for social justice. NPE 1986 sought to democratise access to education by prioritising underrepresented groups, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and economically weaker sections, thereby extending the policy focus beyond basic education to higher education participation. In higher education, NPE 1986 emphasised institutional expansion, capacity building, and quality enhancement as means of supporting national development and social mobility. Figure 1 illustrates the chronological evolution of education policy in India, highlighting the transition from access-oriented reforms under NPE 1986 to systemic and equity-driven reforms under NEP 2020. While these measures contributed to increased enrolment among marginalised groups, implementation was constrained by limited financial resources, uneven institutional capacity, and inadequate technological infrastructure. As a result, equity was largely framed in terms of access and affirmative action, with relatively limited attention to retention, academic support, or differentiated learner needs. The National Education Policy 2020 represents a departure from this access-centred model toward a more systemic and outcome-oriented approach. NEP 2020 was developed in a time of rapid socio-economic change, digital advancement, and increasing global integration, and it aligns with international frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for everyone.

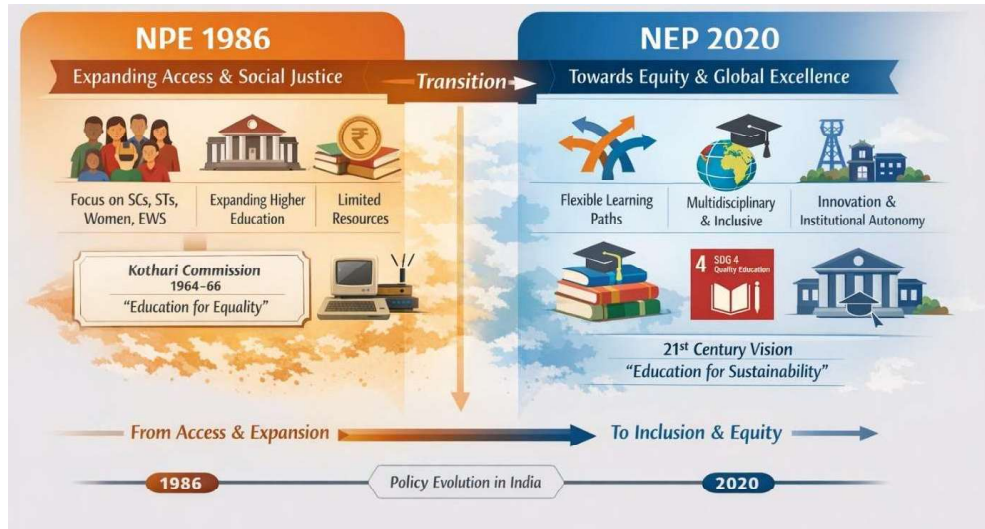


Fig.1 Evolution of Educational Policy in India from NPE 1986 to NEP 2020

The policy embeds equity and inclusion within the structural design of higher education through reforms related to institutional autonomy, curricular flexibility, governance rationalisation, and regulatory restructuring. This evolution from NPE 1986 to NEP 2020 reflects a broader shift from compensatory inclusion strategies toward a transformative model of equity-driven reform. Rather than focusing solely on widening access, NEP 2020 emphasises student success, institutional responsibility, and long-term social mobility. This reflects a broader and more comprehensive understanding of inclusion in higher education policy, especially through institutional flexibility and learner-centred reforms (Kumar & Madhuri, 2024; Sharma, 2025).

1.2 Conceptual Dimensions of Inclusion and Equity in Higher Education

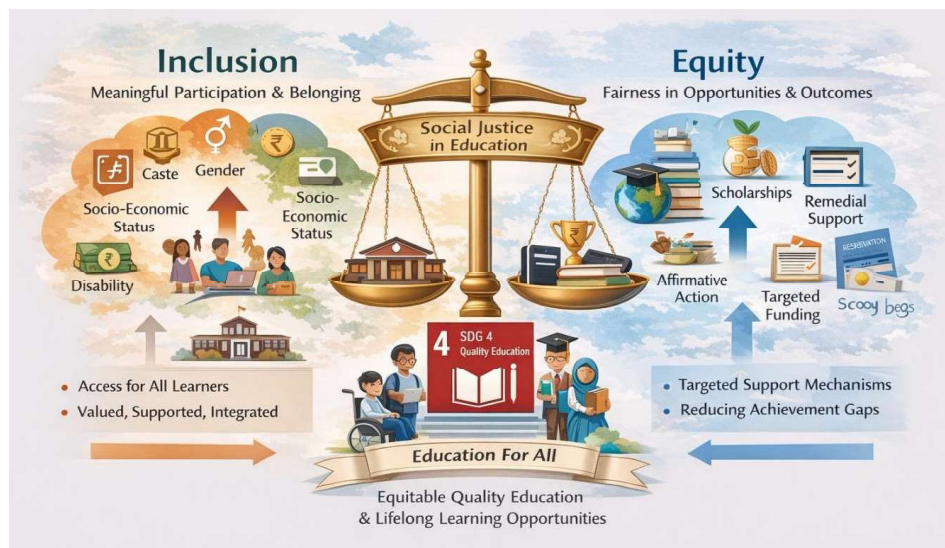


Fig. 2 Conceptual dimensions of Inclusion and equity in quality education and lifelong learning opportunities

Inclusion and equity are interrelated yet conceptually distinct principles that underpin contemporary debates on social justice in higher education. Inclusion refers to the creation of educational environments that enable all students, irrespective of their social, economic, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds, to participate meaningfully in academic and institutional life. It extends beyond access and enrolment to address barriers associated with caste, gender, disability, geographic location, language, and socio-economic status, with an emphasis on belonging, representation, and institutional responsiveness.

Equity, by contrast, focuses on fairness in educational opportunities and outcomes. It recognises that students enter higher education with unequal starting points shaped by structural and historical disadvantages and therefore require differentiated forms of support to achieve comparable outcomes. Equity-oriented interventions include measures such as affirmative action, scholarships, and targeted financial assistance. They also involve academic mentoring and institutional support mechanisms. These interventions are designed to reduce disparities in student retention, completion, and post-graduation outcomes among underrepresented groups (Kumar & Madhuri, 2024; Bhutia, 2024).

Both inclusion and equity are central to global education policy frameworks, including UNESCO's interpretation of Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasises inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. While inclusion focuses on participation and institutional belonging, equity addresses the distribution of resources and support necessary for student success. Together, these concepts provide a critical analytical lens for examining how higher education policies respond to structural inequalities and advance social justice in practice (Kumar & Madhuri, 2024; Bhutia, 2024). Figure 2 presents the conceptual dimensions of Inclusion and equity in quality education and lifelong learning opportunities.

1.3 Empirical Evidence on Inclusion and Equity in Indian Higher Education

Empirical research on inclusion and equity in Indian higher education presents a mixed assessment of progress and persistent challenges. Recent studies examining the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 highlight a continuing gap between policy intent and institutional practice. Mangat's (2024) case study of higher education institutions in Punjab illustrates that, despite policy commitments to inclusivity, students from marginalized backgrounds continue to face barriers related to financial constraints, digital infrastructure, and language support, which affect both access and retention. Similarly, Kumar and Madhuri (2024) report increased enrolment among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women following recent policy reforms. However, their findings indicate that socio-economic and cultural barriers continue to influence academic performance, completion rates, and post-graduation opportunities. These studies suggest that access-oriented gains must be complemented by sustained institutional support mechanisms to achieve equitable educational outcomes. Rangarajan, Sharma, and Grove (2024), applying the Context-Led Model of Education Quality, argue that while NEP 2020 articulates a strong normative commitment to inclusion and equity, gaps remain in monitoring mechanisms, institutional capacity, and accountability structures. They emphasise that without systematic evaluation and outcome-based assessment, equity objectives risk remaining aspirational. Collectively, this body of literature indicates that although NEP 2020 represents a significant advancement in policy design, effective implementation depends on adequate resourcing, institutional preparedness, digital access, and continuous

evaluation. These findings underscore the importance of analysing national education policies not only as normative frameworks but also in relation to their practical implications for inclusive and equitable higher education outcomes (Mangat, 2024; Kumar & Madhuri, 2024; Rangarajan et al., 2024). A summary on key findings from above empirical studies on inclusion and equity is demonstrated pictorially in Figure 3.

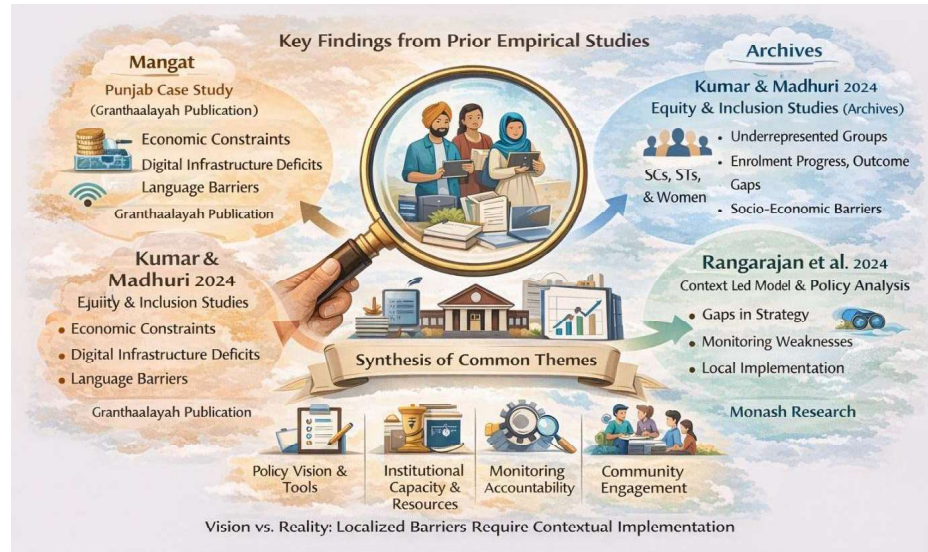


Fig. 3 Key findings from some empirical studies on inclusion and equity

2. Conceptual and Policy Analysis Framework

This study integrates Equity Theory and the Inclusive Policy Framework to analyse education policy texts and their implications for higher education in India. Equity Theory posits that fairness in education cannot be achieved through uniform treatment alone; instead, it requires recognition of structural inequalities and historical disadvantages that shape unequal educational outcomes. Policies informed by equity theory therefore emphasise differentiated support, targeted interventions, and resource allocation strategies designed to reduce disparities among marginalised learner groups. In the context of higher education, such interventions include scholarships, academic mentoring, inclusive pedagogical practices, and financial and social support mechanisms for underrepresented students. The Inclusive Policy Framework complements this perspective by focusing on how policy objectives are translated into institutional practices. It emphasises the role of universities and colleges in creating inclusive learning environments through curriculum reform, pedagogical innovation, language policies, accessibility measures, and faculty development. This framework shifts attention from policy intent to implementation, highlighting the institutional conditions necessary for fostering participation, belonging, and student success. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive analytical lens for examining both the normative aspirations and the practical effectiveness of education policies. The combined framework also incorporates an intersectional perspective, recognising that students often experience multiple, overlapping forms of disadvantage related to caste, gender, class, disability, and geographic location. By integrating equity and inclusion perspectives, this study assesses whether policy provisions address structural barriers in a meaningful way and support institutional practices aligned with students lived realities. Previous research using similar frameworks demonstrates that policy design and implementation can either advance or constrain social justice outcomes, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive policy analysis in higher education research. A conceptual

and policy analysis framework for inclusion and equity in higher education is shown in Figure 4.



Fig. 4 Conceptual and Policy Analysis Framework for Inclusion and Equity in Higher Education

2.1 Analytical Framework for Inclusion, Equity, and Diversity

This research employs a qualitative document analysis method, which is well suited for examining the underlying assumptions, intentions, and implications of large policy documents such as NPE 1986 and NEP 2020. Document analysis is an interpretive process that allows researchers to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within policy language, enabling comparison across time. The rationale behind this method is that policy documents not only state what reforms aim to achieve but also reveal how educational priorities and values are structured. In this work, the two policy documents were systematically reviewed using thematic coding techniques to extract provisions related to *inclusion, equity, and diversity* in higher education. Themes included the explicit mention of marginalised groups, structural provisions for inclusive financing and funding mechanisms, provisions for diversity in curriculum, and accountability measures. The analysis was augmented with peer-reviewed scholarly sources, government reports, and empirical case studies to triangulate findings and provide context for how policy intentions align with implementation challenges. Purposive sampling was used to select sources that provided strong academic insights on inclusion and equity in higher education, ensuring that the analysis was based on reliable scholarly evidence. These included studies published in reputable journals with established DOIs, such as research on NEP 2020's implementation and equity initiatives (e.g., Mangat, 2024; Kumar & Madhuri, 2024; Rangarajan et al., 2024). The qualitative design enabled a nuanced understanding of how policy shifts reflect larger educational goals, as well as where gaps may remain between rhetoric and practice.

2.2 Education Policy Documents and Comparative Lens of Analysis

The primary data sources for this study are the official published policy texts:

National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 — Government of India policy document.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 — Government of India policy text outlining reforms for school and higher education sectors.

These were sourced directly from the official Ministry of Education archives and websites to ensure authenticity and accuracy of quotations and policy interpretation. Secondary data sources comprise peer-reviewed academic literature that evaluates, critiques, and interprets policy provisions and their impact on inclusion and equity in Indian education. Key secondary academic sources utilised in this study include:

- Mangat (2024), which provided empirical insights into NEP 2020's impact on inclusivity for marginalised higher education students.
- Kumar & Madhuri (2024), examining systemic equity challenges in higher education
- Rangarajan, Sharma, and Grove (2024), analysing NEP 2020 integration of inclusion and equity frameworks using theoretical models.

These studies were selected based on their academic rigour, relevance to the research topic, and availability of DOI links, ensuring the literature base is robust and traceable for publication quality. Other sources such as review articles and policy commentaries were also consulted where they offered peer-reviewed perspectives on policy evolution and implementation. This combination of primary and secondary sources provides a comprehensive foundation for analysing policy intentions and outcomes.

2.3 Policy Scope and Qualitative Comparative Research Methodology

This study examines how inclusion, equity, and diversity are addressed in India's National Policy on Education (1986) and the National Education Policy (2020), with particular focus on higher education. A qualitative comparative design was used, relying on document analysis to systematically review the official policy texts. The analysis employed thematic coding based on categories drawn from the study's theoretical framework and existing research. These categories included expansion of access, equity-focused interventions, institutional and curricular flexibility, support mechanisms for disadvantaged groups, and governance and accountability provisions. This approach enabled a clear and structured assessment of how both policies frame inclusion, equity, diversity, and broader reforms in higher education. A comparative matrix was developed to examine similarities and differences between the two policies over time. Special attention was given to references to marginalised groups, the nature of financial and institutional support, and the scope and depth of proposed reforms within the higher education sector. To strengthen the analysis, findings from recent peer-reviewed studies on the implementation of NEP 2020 were incorporated, particularly those examining equity-related outcomes in higher education. This integration of policy analysis with empirical evidence helped link policy intentions to implementation challenges and institutional practices, thereby improving the reliability of the study's conclusions (Rangarajan et al., 2024; Mangat, 2024). Overall, this approach offers a clear understanding of how India's higher education policies have evolved and what these changes imply for advancing inclusion and equity in higher education institutions.

3. Comparative Policy Analysis of NPE 1986 and NEP 2020

3.1 Policy Vision and Reform Orientation

The policy vision articulated in NPE 1986 was fundamentally rooted in the principle of *social justice through access*. The policy acknowledged historical inequalities in Indian society and aimed to reduce disparities by expanding educational opportunities, particularly for socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Its vision emphasised nation-building, social cohesion, and economic development through education, with higher education positioned as a means to produce skilled human resources and promote upward social mobility. However, the policy largely conceptualised equity in terms of

access and affirmative action rather than systemic transformation. In contrast, NEP 2020 presents a far more expansive and transformative vision for higher education. It positions equity and inclusion as foundational principles embedded within every aspect of the education system rather than as standalone objectives. The policy envisions higher education institutions as multidisciplinary, learner-centred, flexible, and inclusive spaces that respond to diverse learner needs. NEP 2020 explicitly recognises the heterogeneity of India's student population and calls for systemic reforms to address barriers related to language, socio-economic status, disability, gender, and geography. The shift in vision from NPE 1986 to NEP 2020 reflects broader global trends in higher education policy, where equity is increasingly linked to quality, innovation, and social relevance. NEP 2020's alignment with SDG 4 underscores its commitment to inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. This marks a transition from a largely compensatory approach to inclusion towards a more systemic and reform-oriented equity framework, as reflected in recent policy analyses and empirical assessments (Rangarajan et al., 2024; Sharma, 2025).

3.2 Policy Approaches to Inclusion of Disadvantaged Groups

The approach to inclusion of disadvantaged groups under NPE 1986 was primarily based on constitutional mandates and affirmative action policies. The policy focused on expanding access for SCs, STs, women, and rural populations through reservation policies, scholarships, hostels, and fee concessions. These measures played a significant role in increasing enrolment from marginalised communities in higher education. However, the policy did not sufficiently address issues of retention, academic support, or institutional culture, which limited its impact on long-term educational outcomes. NEP 2020, by contrast, adopts a broader and more nuanced understanding of disadvantage. It introduces the concept of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), encompassing not only caste and gender but also disability, geographic isolation, migrant status, and economic vulnerability. The policy proposes targeted initiatives such as the **gender inclusion fund**, **special education zones**, and expanded financial aid mechanisms to support these groups throughout their educational journey. Importantly, NEP 2020 recognises that inclusion is not achieved merely by admitting students from disadvantaged backgrounds but by ensuring their success and well-being within higher education institutions. Provisions for academic mentoring, language support, digital access, and flexible learning pathways reflect a shift toward a *student-centred inclusion model*. Empirical studies suggest that while these provisions have strong potential, their effectiveness will depend on adequate funding, institutional capacity, and sustained monitoring (Mangat, 2024; Kumar & Madhuri, 2024).

3.3 Curricular and Institutional Strategies for Diversity

Curricular diversity and culturally responsive institutional practices were not central concerns in NPE 1986, which largely adhered to conventional disciplinary structures and standardised curricula. While the policy acknowledged the importance of social relevance, it did not explicitly promote curricular frameworks that reflected India's linguistic, cultural, or regional diversity. As a result, higher education curricula often remained disconnected from the lived experiences of many students, particularly those from marginalised communities. NEP 2020 represents a significant departure by explicitly promoting diversity as an educational asset. The policy advocates for multidisciplinary education, integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, and the use of regional and local languages as mediums of instruction where feasible. These measures aim to make higher education more accessible and culturally relevant, thereby enhancing

student engagement and learning outcomes. The emphasis on curricular flexibility allows institutions to design programmes that respond to local needs and learner diversity. Additionally, NEP 2020 encourages faculty development in inclusive pedagogy, which is essential for translating curriculum reforms into meaningful classroom practices. By embedding diversity into curriculum design and institutional culture, NEP 2020 moves beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive transformation of higher education environments (Bhutia, 2024; Rangarajan et al., 2024). To synthesise the comparative analysis across key policy dimensions, a comparative analytical matrix is presented in Table 1, and the same information is concisely presented in Figure 5.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of NPE 1986 and NEP 2020 with respect to Inclusion, Equity, and Diversity in Higher Education

<i>Analytical Dimension</i>	<i>National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986</i>	<i>National Education Policy (NEP) 2020</i>
Policy Orientation	Primarily access-oriented, focusing on expansion of higher education infrastructure and enrolment growth.	Outcome-oriented and systemic, emphasising access, equity, quality, flexibility, and learner-centric reforms.
Conceptualisation of Inclusion	Inclusion largely addressed through social justice measures and reservation policies for disadvantaged groups.	Inclusion defined as a multidimensional and continuous process addressing socio-economic, gender, regional, and disability-related barriers.
Approach to Equity	Equity framed mainly through affirmative action and financial support mechanisms.	Equity embedded structurally through targeted interventions, holistic student support, and differentiated institutional strategies.
Target Groups	Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, women, and economically disadvantaged groups.	SC/ST/OBCs, minorities, persons with disabilities, socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs), first-generation learners, and learners from remote regions.
Access and Participation	Emphasis on increasing enrollment through establishment of institutions and reservation policies.	Emphasis on universal access through multiple entry-exit options, digital education, open learning systems, and flexible pathways.
Institutional Support Mechanisms	Limited institutional autonomy; support largely channelled through government schemes and scholarships.	Strengthened institutional autonomy with enhanced student support services, mentoring, scholarships, and digital infrastructure.
Curriculum and Pedagogy	Rigid curricula with limited interdisciplinary or learner flexibility.	Flexible, multidisciplinary curricula with choice-based learning, credit transfer, and learner-centric pedagogies.
Language and Cultural Diversity	Minimal emphasis on multilingualism and cultural diversity at the higher education level.	Strong emphasis on multilingual education, promotion of Indian languages, and respect for cultural diversity.
Use of Technology	Technology integration largely absent due to infrastructural and temporal constraints.	Extensive use of digital platforms, online learning, and educational technology to enhance access and equity.
Governance and Regulation	Centralised governance with multiple regulatory bodies and limited accountability mechanisms.	Streamlined governance through single regulatory bodies, transparency, accountability, and institutional performance frameworks.
Monitoring and Evaluation	Limited emphasis on systematic monitoring of inclusion and equity outcomes.	Strong focus on data-driven monitoring, evaluation, and continuous policy improvement.
Vision of Social Mobility	Education is viewed as a tool for social upliftment primarily through access.	Education is envisioned as a transformative instrument for social mobility, equity, and inclusive national development.

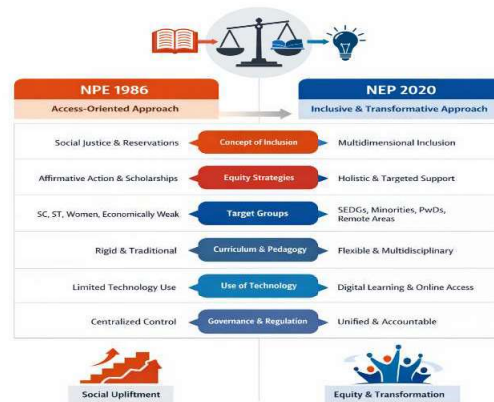


Fig. 5. Comparative Analysis of NPE 1986 and NEP 2020 in Higher Education

4. Findings and Policy Discussion

4.1 Key Findings of Inclusive Policy Measures

The findings of this study indicate that NEP 2020 conceptualises inclusion as a multi-dimensional process encompassing access, participation, retention, and success. Unlike earlier policies that focused primarily on enrolment, NEP 2020 emphasises creating enabling environments that support learners throughout their academic journey. Flexible entry and exit mechanisms, credit transfer systems, and online learning platforms are designed to accommodate diverse learner circumstances, particularly for working students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Inclusion under NEP 2020 also extends to institutional culture, with calls for inclusive governance, student support services, and sensitivity to linguistic and cultural diversity. These provisions signal a shift toward systemic inclusion, where institutions are expected to proactively identify and address barriers to participation. In contrast, NPE 1986 treated inclusion largely as a policy objective rather than an ongoing institutional responsibility. Empirical evidence suggests that inclusive measures under NEP 2020 have begun to reshape institutional practices, though uneven implementation remains a concern. The success of inclusion initiatives will depend on sustained commitment, adequate resources, and continuous evaluation to ensure that policy intent translates into meaningful outcomes (Mangat, 2024; Kumar & Madhuri, 2024).

4.2 Comparative Insights of Equity-Oriented Interventions

Equity emerges as a central pillar of NEP 2020, operationalised through targeted financial support, institutional accountability mechanisms, and data-driven planning. The policy moves beyond equal treatment to recognise the need for differentiated support based on learners' socio-economic contexts. This includes expanded scholarships, fellowships, and targeted funding for institutions serving disadvantaged populations. In contrast, NPE 1986 addressed equity primarily through reservation policies and broad access measures, with limited mechanisms to monitor outcomes or address disparities in completion and employability. NEP 2020's emphasis on outcome-based equity reflects contemporary understandings of social justice in higher education, where success is measured not only by access but by equitable outcomes across diverse learner groups. The policy's focus on institutional accountability and performance metrics has the potential to drive more equitable practices. However, scholars caution that without robust data systems and institutional capacity, equity goals may remain aspirational. Continuous monitoring and evaluation are therefore essential to ensure that

equity interventions achieve their intended impact (Bhutia, 2024; Rangarajan et al., 2024).

4.3 Policy Implications of Diversity-Responsive Reforms

Diversity under NEP 2020 is framed as both a value and a resource that enhances educational quality. The policy recognises India's linguistic, cultural, and regional diversity and calls for higher education institutions to reflect this diversity in curriculum, pedagogy, and governance. Multilingual education, inclusion of regional knowledge systems, and promotion of interdisciplinary learning are key strategies for fostering diversity-responsive higher education. This represents a significant advancement over NPE 1986, which did not systematically address diversity beyond social categories. NEP 2020's holistic approach acknowledges that diversity enriches learning environments and prepares students for participation in a pluralistic society and global workforce. Empirical studies suggest that diversity-oriented reforms can improve student engagement and learning outcomes, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds. However, the successful integration of diversity into higher education requires faculty training, institutional leadership, and supportive policy environments (Bhutia, 2024; Kumar & Madhuri, 2024).

5. Conclusion

This paper analysed the evolving policy discourse on inclusion, equity, and diversity in Indian higher education through a structured comparison of the National Policy on Education (1986) and the National Education Policy (2020). Situating the analysis within a higher education policy framework, the study highlights how shifts in national priorities, governance structures, and conceptions of social justice have shaped policy approaches across time. The findings suggest that NPE 1986 reflected a predominantly expansionary and redistributive policy logic, addressing inequality primarily through access-oriented strategies and affirmative action measures. While these interventions played a significant role in broadening participation, the policy offered limited institutional guidance on addressing differentiated learner needs, internal equity processes, or long-term outcome disparities. In contrast, NEP 2020 signals a substantive reorientation in higher education policy by embedding inclusion and equity within broader systemic reforms related to governance, curriculum flexibility, institutional autonomy, and accountability mechanisms. The comparative analysis indicates that NEP 2020 adopts a more nuanced understanding of disadvantage, recognising the intersection of socio-economic, regional, linguistic, and ability-related factors. Its emphasis on flexible academic pathways, multidisciplinary education, and technology-enabled access positions institutions as central actors in advancing inclusive outcomes rather than passive implementers of centrally defined measures. From a policy perspective, this shift reflects an increasing expectation that higher education institutions actively design and manage equity-oriented practices within a regulated but autonomous framework. At the same time, the study underscores that policy effectiveness cannot be inferred solely from policy design. Emerging evidence points to persistent challenges related to uneven institutional capacity, resource constraints, digital divides, and faculty readiness, all of which influence how inclusion and equity are realised in practice. These implementation dynamics highlight the need for coherent coordination between policy intent, regulatory frameworks, and institutional governance. This paper contributes to higher education policy scholarship by offering a comparative lens on long-term policy evolution in a large and diverse higher education system. While the analysis is limited to policy documents and secondary literature, it provides a foundation for future empirical research examining how national policy reforms are translated into institutional

strategies and student outcomes. Understanding this policy–practice interface will be critical for assessing whether the inclusive ambitions of NEP 2020 lead to sustainable and equitable transformation within Indian higher education. From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the importance of aligning institutional governance, capacity building, and monitoring mechanisms with the inclusive objectives articulated in NEP 2020. Strengthening institutional accountability and evidence-based evaluation will be critical for translating policy intent into equitable outcomes across diverse higher education contexts.

Acknowledgements (Use of AI Technology)

The authors acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI) as an artificial intelligence–based tool to support language editing, clarity improvement, and structural refinement of the manuscript. The AI tool did not contribute to the study design, data analysis, or interpretation of results. All academic content and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the authors, who have reviewed and validated the manuscript for accuracy and ethical compliance.

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