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## Academic Freedom Index (AFi)- A Strategic Approach for the Success of National Education Policy-2020

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### Abstract

The gap between the current state of learning outcomes and what is desirable must be bridged through undertaking major reforms to bring the highest quality and integrity into the system, from early childhood education through higher education (NEP, 2020). Will the New Education policy which came after a gap of 34 years, bring in the desirable paradigms shift in Indian education system? With the prevailing infrastructure and standards, can India become a global knowledge power as stated in the policy? To answer these questions the implementation of the policy is equally important as formulating it. One of the key disappointments is that the real problem plaguing the educational system in the country and the higher education system is the erosion of Academic Freedom. India has scored considerably low in the recent International Academic Freedom Index (Academic Freedom index) 2019, with a score of 0.352. India has not fared well in components like institutional autonomy, campus integrity, freedom of academic and cultural expression and constitutional protection of academic freedom. To empower the policy makers and envisage the new changes, Academic Freedom Index (AFi) could be used as a strategic tool. The NEP 2020 aims to de-bureaucratise the education system by giving governance powers to academicians. NEP 2020 also talks about giving autonomy to higher education institutions by handing over their administration to a board comprising academicians. This paper examines on how Academic Freedom Index (AFi) could help implementing the NEP-2020 effectively in higher education and also help in improving the quality and standard of higher education, making India the global leader in knowledge power.

**Keywords: Global knowledge power, NEP 2020, Academic freedom in higher education, International Academic Freedom Index (AFi), NEP vs Academic Freedom index**

**Academic Freedom Index (AFi)- A Strategic Approach for the Success of National Education Policy-2020****Subhashini Sundara Raman**Research Scholar  
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‘Education is a human right, a powerful driver of development, and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender, equality, peace, and stability,’ notes World Bank Education. National Education Policy (NEP) was approved by the Union Cabinet of India on July 28<sup>th</sup>,2020. After a gap of 34 years, Indian Government had formulated the policy after consulting experts from every related field for 50 full months. The whole policy was based on Dr. Kasturirangan committee report. As the policy was released amidst various social and economic changes, it raised great expectations from all the stakeholders of education.

**Major objective of NEP 2020- Higher Education**

The policy aims at overhauling of the educational system in the country and making “India a global knowledge superpower”. This National Education Policy aims at building a global best education system rooted in Indian ethos, and aligned with the principles enunciated above, thereby transforming India into a global knowledge superpower. (NEP, 2020). Other objectives include,

1. Increasing GER (Gross Enrolment Ratio)
2. Quality Universities and Colleges: A New and Forward-looking Vision for India’s Higher Education System
3. Institutional Restructuring and Consolidation
4. Towards a More Holistic Education
5. Optimal Learning Environments and Support for Students
6. Motivated, Energised, and Capable Faculty
7. Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education
8. Teacher Education
9. Reimagining Vocational Education

10. Professional Education
11. Promoting high-quality research: National Research Foundation
12. Effective Governance and Leadership for Higher Education Institutions
13. Transforming the Regulatory System of Higher Education

The new system is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal-4 (SDG 4). It also emphasises on raising the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), in higher education to 50% by 2035 (GER was 26.3% in 2018) and ending the spiralling dropout rate in India. According to a government report, the dropout rate at the secondary school level in India is more than 17%, while the dropout rate at upper-primary (VI to VIII) and primary level is 1.8% and 1.5% respectively.

### **Academic Freedom Index (AFi)**

The index, which goes by the abbreviation AFi, is a collaborative effort by FAU; the Global Public Policy Institute, a Berlin-based think tank; the Scholars at Risk Network, a New York-based organization that monitors academic freedom conditions and assists threatened scholars; and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, which is based at the University of Gothenberg, in Sweden (Academic Higher Ed, 2020). The Academic Freedom Index provides a strong and vigorous assessment of academic freedom levels worldwide that can inform and guide advocacy and educational policy efforts. The Academic Freedom index has eight elements. Three are based on valid data and the residing five are ‘expert-coded’: they’re directed on the 1,810 scholars’ estimates “integrated in a Bayesian measurement model”. The factors are: Freedom to research and educate, Freedom of educational communication and dissemination, Institutional independence, Campus quality, Freedom of educational and cultural manner, Constitutional safety of academic freedom, Global legal commitment to academic freedom under the International Pact on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Presence of universities. The index has an ultimate value of 1, although a historical calculation the authors undertook demonstrates the value has reached up to 4 in the last century. The index helps to define each country’s academic freedom level and the researchers asserted that the primary goal behind this idea is to comprehend a university’s attractiveness in addition to its infrastructure, research output, etc.

### **Academic Freedom Index (AFi), 2019**

The new Academic Freedom Index is composed of five expert-coded indicators. These determinants capture key elements in the de facto realization of academic freedom:

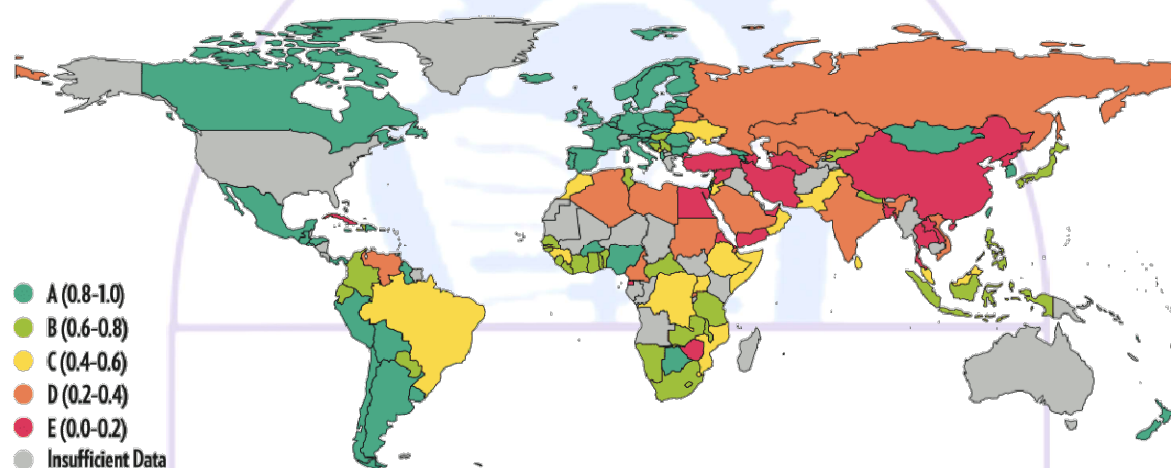
1. Freedom to research and teach
2. Freedom of academic exchange and dissemination

3. Institutional autonomy
4. Campus integrity
5. Freedom of academic and cultural expression.

Other complementing determinants used were,

- Constitutional support
- International levels

Figure 1: Global Levels of Academic Freedom 2019: Status Groups According to the Academic Freedom Index



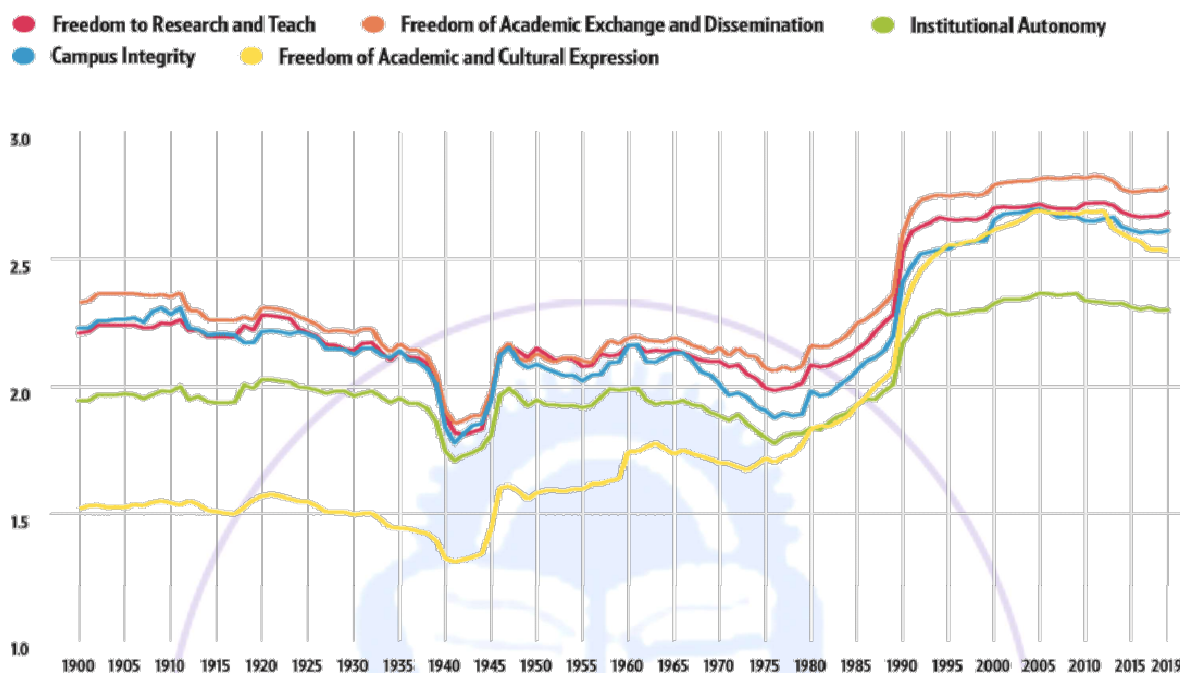
Whether universities have ever existed in a given country.

Sources: Academic Freedom Index Report 2019

Fig.1 Global levels of Academic Freedom Index 2019

### India's score in Academic Freedom Index (AFi), 2019

India has scored considerably low in the recent 2019 international index of academic freedom which marks the poor ranking on universal indices of media freedom. According to the report, India has scored Academic Freedom index of 0.352 equivalent to the scores of Saudi Arabia and Libya. Unexpectedly, countries that marked higher than India include our neighbor Pakistan (0.554), south American country, Brazil (0.466), Ukraine (0.422), Somalia (0.436), and Malaysia (0.582). Uruguay and Portugal top the list with scores of 0.971 each, followed closely by Latvia and Germany. At the end are North Korea (0.011), Eritrea (0.015), Bahrain (0.039), and Iran (0.116). India is one of a few countries whose Academic Freedom index dropped by at least 0.1 points in the last five years until the year 2019.



Sources: Academic Freedom index Report 2019

Fig.2 Global trends in components of academic freedom, 1900–2019

### NEP vs ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The NEP 2020 claims that it is based on principles of creativity and critical thinking and envisions an education system that is free from political or external interference. As stated in the policy the education system has to give preference to creativity and critical thinking which might help achieve Academic Freedom in Higher Education.

The policy also states that faculty will be given the freedom to design their own curricular and pedagogical approaches within the approved framework. If educators, who are working practically on-ground are given such freedom, the education system might take a new shape and form wherein new innovations in teaching strategy and method can evolve. This in turn could elevate India's Academic Freedom index.

The policy advocates, establishing an Apex Advisory Body for Indian Education and an Indian Education Service (IES). The IES would institutionalise a core professional capacity within the State and Central Governments in curriculum planning and development. This advisory body can discuss and suggest ways to modify or revive the activities to rejuvenate educational sector as and when there is a lag witnessed. This again will help India's position in the world order.

The new Policy promises, Affordable and Quality Education for All. In order to attain the goal of world-class education in India an increase in public investment in education is needed - by both the Central government and all the State Governments. This will help in achieving

the said 6% of GDP at the earliest, and reach 20% of all public expenditure over a 10-year period. Once this target is achieved it would pave way to enhance the Academic Freedom index.

NEP also suggests constituting a National Research Foundation (NRF), a merit-based and peer-reviewed research funding, which will be governed, independently of the government. This step is going to allow academic freedom to all the probable researches to come in future. NEP 2020 advocates National Research Foundation (NRF) which will have a rotating Board of Governors consisting of the very best researchers and innovators across fields. This measure will surely help the future research scholars to get expert advices and directions. This also will ensure world class research in the country and make Indian researchers competitive enough in the world research forum.

21<sup>st</sup> century being a Technology era, every country in the world allocates funds and grants to education through technology. It is proposed that, National Education Technology Forum (NETF) will be setup to facilitate decision making on the induction, deployment and use of technology. The forum also has to have freedom to introduce newest technology available in education sector and have freedom to suggest and modify the obsolete technology. This should also enable educators to have proper training in technology introduced and keep up with the changing trend.

### **Potential strategic use of Academic Freedom index (AFi)**

- Academic Freedom index data can provide a basis for international academic freedom monitoring and directing the new mechanisms.
- Higher education policy-makers must respond to changing Academic Freedom index scores and immediately respond in action to rectify it.
- Higher education authorities must use Academic Freedom index data to evaluate the probable trajectory of their work by reviewing the dimensions of Academic Freedom index over time.
- Academic Freedom index can help now and then the policy makers to analyse and react to changing levels and grave violations of academic freedom.
- Policy makers and government representatives must reprimand on these violations and raise concerns with the government and ensure penalties to such offenders in academic sector.
- Policy makers must use relative changes in Academic Freedom index data over time to evaluate government's adherence to their respective commitments.

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- Academic Freedom index data could help detect softer forms of repression in any of the university sector and direct passably a solution which could ensure Academic freedom within the institution.
- Periodic and Regular iterations of the index would help advocacy groups to demonstrate trends and patterns to evaluate the effectiveness of enacted policy reforms.
- Academic Freedom index data definitely could help to bridge between academic freedom and quality higher education and standard researches.
- Researchers could use Academic Freedom index data individually to find answers to their research questions which would relate to academic freedom and violations thereof.
- Academic Freedom index data could help in starting a debate on existing academic freedom and probable freedom which could be attained in near future at one's institution.
- The Academic Freedom index could help researcher scholars and graduate students who are indulged in research work to assess the level of academic freedom before even embarking on to the research fieldwork.
- The Academic Freedom index could surely inform individual students and researcher scholars in their decisions about where to apply for academic jobs, academic study, or apply for a semester abroad.

### **Implementation of NEP 2020**

Any policy is only as good as its implementation. Such implementation will require multiple initiatives and actions, which will have to be taken by multiple bodies in a synchronized and systematic manner. Therefore, the implementation of this Policy will be led by various bodies, including MoE, RSA, Union and State Governments, education-related Ministries, State Departments of Education, Boards, NTA, the regulatory bodies of school and higher education, NCERT, SCERTs, schools, and HEIs, along with timelines and a definite plan for review, in order to ensure that the policy is implemented in its spirit and intent, through coherence in planning and collaboration across all stakeholders in education.

### **Recommendations on the Implementation of NEP 2020**

The implementation of the spirit and intent of the new Education Policy will itself be the most critical issue. While the Policy do provide much detail, but the intent and the spirit of the Policy should serve as an important consideration. The main aim of the policy which has been

a trend changing in recent years in education sector should become successful which is “India becoming the vishwaguru” in the knowledge world.

1. It is important to implement the policy initiatives in a segregated manner, as each and every policy point has itself have several steps in a hierarchy level, each of which will require the previous step to be implemented successfully before moving to the next step. Enough caution has to be taken in taking care of the minute details at each and every step.
2. Prioritization will be very important in ensuring the optimal sequencing of every policy point, and that the most critical and most urgent actions are to be taken up first on a priority basis, thereby enabling a very strong base for such implementation of the policy. This might include Technology advancement in the whole education sector.
3. Comprehensiveness will be the key to the whole implementation, as this new Policy will be interconnected and be holistic. The understanding of the policy and desired objectives of the said policy will be fully achieved only when it is implemented in full and not in parts. The success of the policy lies in holistic implementation.
4. Since education appears in the concurrent list of subjects, it would need to be carefully designed, planned, monitored and then implemented at both central and state level simultaneously. Both governments have to go hand-in-hand with enough understanding to make it possible.
5. While implementation takes place, sufficient level of required resources are to be injected into the stream to avoid any lag for want of any resources. Whether it is physical-human, financial-monetary infrastructure, it has to be infused both at the Central and State levels. This will ensure the satisfactory execution of the Policy.
6. Careful analysis and review of all the linkages between multiple parallel level of implementation steps will be necessary to ensure effective interlocking of all initiatives. This will also include early investment in some of the specific actions (such as the setting up of early childhood education infrastructure) that will be imperative to ensuring a strong base and a smooth progression for all subsequent programmes and actions. (NEP, 2020).

### Conclusion

The key elements of Academic Freedom index, wherein India is lagging behind are institutional autonomy, campus integrity, freedom of academic and cultural expression and constitutional protection of academic freedom. These components have to be achieved through introduction of policies under NEP, which could strengthen international academic



exchange programs with comprehensive autonomy in the field of academia, supplemented by professional skills and protected by constitution would escalate the Academic freedom in higher education.

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