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The NEP 2020 Syllabus Paradox: Why Incorporation Succeeds but Implementation Largely Fails – A Management Analysis

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative vision for India's education system, emphasizing multidisciplinary learning, flexibility, skill integration, holistic development, and alignment with 21st-century demands. In many institutions, particularly in higher education, the syllabus incorporation phase has achieved notable success: universities and colleges have relatively swiftly adopted revised curricula, updated course structures, introduced credit-based systems, and integrated vocational elements on paper, often propelled by regulatory mandates from bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) and state governments. However, a striking paradox persists when examining ground-level execution. Implementation largely fails to translate these policy intentions into effective classroom practices, meaningful pedagogical shifts, and sustainable learning outcomes. This article, through a management lens, qualitatively explores the underlying causes of this incorporation–implementation gap. Drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders—including faculty members, institutional leaders, administrators, and policy implementers—the study uncovers critical factors such as inadequate institutional leadership and change management practices, resource constraints (including infrastructure deficits, funding shortages, and digital divides), insufficient faculty capacity building coupled with resistance to innovative teaching methodologies, bureaucratic hurdles, uneven stakeholder alignment across central-state-institutional levels, and weak monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and guided by management theories such as Kotter's eight-step change model and organizational behaviour perspectives, the thematic analysis reveals how top-down policy adoption thrives under compliance pressures, while bottom-up execution encounters systemic inertia, cultural barriers, and capability gaps. Participants' lived experiences highlight the disconnect between regulatory-driven incorporation and the practical realities of classroom transformation, underscoring leadership deficits and decentralized coordination as pivotal issues. The study argues that bridging this paradox demands strategic leadership interventions, targeted capacity enhancement programs, redesigned incentive structures, and more coordinated yet decentralized governance approaches. Ultimately, addressing these managerial and organizational challenges is essential for realizing NEP 2020's ambitious goals. The paper offers actionable, contextually grounded recommendations derived from stakeholder insights to convert policy vision into sustainable educational reform, fostering equitable and quality outcomes across India's diverse institutional landscapes.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Curriculum, Implementation Gap, Management, Higher Education Governance

1. Introduction

Education stands as the cornerstone of national development, shaping the intellectual, social, and economic fabric of a society. In India, a nation with over 1.4 billion people and a youthful demographic dividend, the education system

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has long been a focal point for reform to address persistent issues such as inequity, outdated curricula, and inadequate skill development. The evolution of India's education policies reflects this ongoing quest: from the Radhakrishnan Commission of 1948-49, which emphasized university autonomy and research, to the Kothari Commission (1964-66) that advocated for a common school system and vocational education, and the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986, which prioritized universal elementary education and introduced Operation Blackboard for infrastructure enhancement. These policies achieved milestones like increased enrollment through initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001) and the Right to Education Act (2009), boosting gross enrollment ratios (GER) in higher education from approximately 8-9% in the early 2000s to 27.1% by 2019-20 (Ministry of Education, 2021). However, they also highlighted systemic gaps, including rote learning dominance, urban-rural divides, and a mismatch between education and employability, with studies showing that only about 7% of engineering graduates were employable for core engineering roles as of around 2019 (Aspiring Minds, 2019).

Enter the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, approved by the Union Cabinet on July 29, 2020, marking the first comprehensive education overhaul in 34 years since the NPE 1986 (Ministry of Education, 2020). Crafted through extensive consultations involving over 2 lakh suggestions from stakeholders, NEP 2020 envisions transforming India into a "global knowledge superpower" by 2040, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) for inclusive and equitable quality education. At its core, the policy reimagines the syllabus and curriculum to foster holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible learning, departing from rigid, compartmentalized structures. Key syllabus reforms include a new 5+3+3+4 pedagogical framework replacing the 10+2 model: Foundational Stage (ages 3-8, emphasizing play-based learning), Preparatory Stage (Grades 3-5, introducing reading, writing, and numeracy), Middle Stage (Grades 6-8, incorporating experiential learning and vocational exposure), and Secondary Stage (Grades 9-12, allowing subject flexibility without stream hierarchies). This structure integrates multidisciplinary elements, reducing curriculum content to core essentials while emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, and 21st-century skills like AI, design thinking, and environmental education. Vocational integration begins early, with at least 50% of learners exposed to vocational education by 2025, including internships and "bagless days" for hands-on crafts. Multilingualism is promoted, with mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction until Grade 5 (preferably Grade 8), alongside a three-language formula to enhance cognitive flexibility. Assessment shifts from rote-based exams to competency-based, formative evaluations, with modular Board exams and a National Assessment Centre (PARAKH) to standardize learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2020).

On paper, the incorporation of NEP 2020's syllabus reforms has seen remarkable progress, driven by regulatory mandates from bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) and state governments. By 2023, significant strides were made in higher education institutions (HEIs) adopting multidisciplinary curricula, introducing credit-based systems under the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), and integrating vocational components, as evidenced by UGC initiatives and reports promoting flexible structures (University Grants Commission, n.d.). For instance, universities swiftly revised course structures to include flexible entry-exit points, allowing certificates after one year, diplomas after two, and degrees after three or four years with research options. This top-down adoption was facilitated by compliance pressures, with central funding tied to NEP alignment, leading to widespread policy endorsement. In school education, states like Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh rolled out foundational literacy missions, updating syllabi to emphasize numeracy by Grade 3, achieving nominal incorporation rates in many areas. Such successes stem from the policy's clear frameworks, like the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2023, which guided syllabus updates with local flavors while maintaining national standards (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Yet, a profound paradox emerges: while syllabus incorporation succeeds through administrative fiat, implementation largely falters, failing to translate visionary reforms into tangible classroom outcomes. This gap is evident in empirical studies, where ground-level execution reveals systemic inertia. For example, a survey of college students in India highlighted perceptions of an overburdened syllabus, with 37.5% agreeing it poses a challenge, ranked among key issues, and grouped under "Educational Disparity" in factor analysis (Sharma & Sharma, 2022). Students feared the

multidisciplinary approach would dilute core subjects, with inadequate credits for electives and a lack of updated textbooks, exacerbating execution woes. Infrastructure deficits compound this, with many students agreeing on the lack of facilities like digital libraries and transportation, leading to "Financial and Coverage Gap." Rural-urban disparities persist, with limited rural schools equipped for technology-integrated learning, as noted in various 2024 analyses of NEP challenges (e.g., studies in *IJFMR* highlighting execution difficulties among faculty) (*International Journal of Formal Methods and Research*, various 2024 papers).

Faculty capacity remains a critical bottleneck. Teachers require extensive training for new pedagogies, yet shortages and inadequate workshops hinder progress. In relevant studies, teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by heavy syllabi and the need for digital fluency, with stakeholders emphasizing capacity building through seminars and curriculum enhancements (various Sage Journals and related publications). The RISE Programme analysis underscores governance challenges, noting high teacher absence (nearly one in four during surprise visits) and low instructional time due to administrative burdens, with no significant learning gains from school management reforms despite national scaling (RISE Programme, n.d.). Funding constraints further widen the gap: NEP aims for 6% GDP allocation to education, but actual spending hovers at 3-4%, leading to uneven institutional readiness and digital divides, particularly post-COVID. Bureaucratic hurdles and center-state conflicts exacerbate this, as seen in states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala delaying full implementation due to linguistic and federal concerns.

From a management perspective, this paradox embodies classic change management failures, as theorized by John Kotter's 8-step model, where creating urgency and building coalitions succeeds in policy adoption but sustaining transformation falters amid resistance and resource shortages (Kotter, 1996). Top-down mandates ensure quick incorporation, leveraging compliance and regulatory leverage, but bottom-up execution demands decentralized governance, stakeholder alignment, and incentive structures—areas where NEP lags. Organizational behaviour insights reveal systemic inertia: small schools (over 40% with fewer than 50 students) pose pedagogical and supervisory challenges, while mismatched curricula leave students behind, with flat learning trajectories. Psychological barriers, including teacher demotivation and student anxiety over disparities, further impede progress, as explored in educational psychology analyses of state-level oppositions. Empirical evidence from audits in states like Madhya Pradesh shows overstated learning outcomes, underscoring weak monitoring and accountability.

This article delves into the NEP 2020 syllabus paradox through a management lens, diagnosing causes like leadership deficits, resource constraints, and bureaucratic silos, while proposing strategies such as Kotter-inspired interventions, targeted capacity building, and decentralized governance. Drawing on theories like organizational change models and empirical data from stakeholders, it argues for bridging the incorporation-implementation divide to realize NEP's goals of equitable, quality education. Ultimately, addressing this paradox is pivotal for India's aspirations, ensuring policy visions yield sustainable reforms rather than unfulfilled promises.

2. Method of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative research design to deeply explore the incorporation-implementation gap in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 syllabus from a management perspective. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for investigating complex, context-bound phenomena such as educational policy execution, where the focus is on understanding lived experiences, perceptions, meanings, and underlying processes rather than measuring variables statistically. It enables rich, nuanced insights into organizational dynamics, leadership practices, resistance to change, resource constraints, and institutional inertia that contribute to the paradox of successful syllabus adoption on paper but limited classroom-level translation.

The study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which prioritizes subjective interpretations and the construction of meaning by participants in their natural settings. This paradigm aligns well with the management-oriented inquiry, as it facilitates examination of how stakeholders make sense of NEP 2020 reforms, drawing on established theories such as Kotter's eight-step change model and concepts from organizational behaviour to frame the

analysis of why top-down incorporation succeeds under regulatory mandates while bottom-up implementation falters amid systemic and cultural barriers.

The target population comprises key stakeholders directly engaged in NEP 2020 syllabus reforms, primarily in higher education institutions (HEIs) with supplementary perspectives from selected school-level contexts across India. These include faculty members, institutional leaders (principals, deans, department heads), administrative staff, and policy implementers who have firsthand experience with curriculum revision and execution. A multi-stage purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure diversity, depth, and relevance. Initially, states with varying implementation trajectories were selected purposively: early adopters such as Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh, alongside those with noted delays or resistance like Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Within these states, 18 HEIs and associated colleges or schools were chosen based on criteria including institutional type (central, state, private, deemed), size, geographic location (urban and rural), and evidence of NEP syllabus alignment from official reports, websites, or UGC documentation.

Data were collected primarily through 28 in-depth semi-structured interviews and five focus group discussions (FGDs), each involving 8–10 participants. Interview and FGD participants were purposively selected to include individuals with direct involvement in syllabus rollout, such as department coordinators, faculty development program facilitators, implementation committee members, and frontline teachers/administrators. Additional participants were identified via snowball referrals to access hard-to-reach informants with specialized insights. Interview guides and FGD protocols were developed to probe core themes: leadership's role in driving or hindering change, organizational resistance and cultural factors, resource allocation and infrastructure realities, bureaucratic and inter-governmental impediments, stakeholder alignment, monitoring mechanisms, and potential managerial strategies for bridging the gap. Interviews lasted 45–75 minutes and were conducted in English, Hindi, or the participant's preferred regional language, audio-recorded with explicit consent, and transcribed verbatim. To enhance trustworthiness and provide contextual grounding, secondary data sources were systematically reviewed, including the official NEP 2020 document, National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023, UGC guidelines and circulars, institutional annual reports, state-level implementation updates, and relevant empirical literature on educational governance and policy execution.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), employing a six-phase process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Analysis combined inductive coding (allowing themes to emerge directly from participant accounts) with deductive application of sensitizing concepts derived from Kotter's change management framework and organizational theory literature (e.g., leadership deficits, resource constraints, systemic inertia). NVivo software facilitated systematic coding, memo-writing, theme mapping, and organization of the dataset. To ensure rigor, inter-coder reliability was established by having two researchers independently code 20% of the transcripts, achieving agreement above 87%. Member checking was conducted with select participants to verify interpretations, and reflexivity was maintained through researcher journaling to address potential biases.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. Formal approval was obtained from the institutional ethics review board prior to commencement. Participants received clear information sheets detailing the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, and provided written or verbal informed consent, including permission for audio-recording and use of anonymized quotes. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without repercussion. Confidentiality was protected through anonymization (using pseudonyms or role descriptors in reporting), secure password-protected storage of data, and restricted access. The research adhered to principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and respect for persons, with particular sensitivity to regional, institutional, socio-economic, and power differentials among participants.

The study is delimited to a management-focused lens, primarily on higher education with selective school-level insights, and relies on participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions. These limitations are mitigated through triangulation of multiple data sources (interviews, FGDs, policy documents), diverse stakeholder perspectives, and thick description of contexts to enhance transferability and credibility. This qualitative methodological framework enables a

robust, in-depth exploration of the NEP 2020 syllabus paradox, yielding rich, contextually grounded insights and practical managerial recommendations to facilitate more effective policy implementation in India's diverse educational landscape.

3. NEP-2020 Instructions, Incorporation & Implementation

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 promised a paradigm shift in Indian education, moving away from rote memorization toward holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible learning. While syllabus incorporation—revising course structures, introducing credit systems, and aligning with multidisciplinary frameworks—has progressed relatively smoothly in many higher education institutions (HEIs) due to regulatory compliance from the University Grants Commission (UGC) and state directives, the actual implementation remains fragmented. This section draws on rich qualitative data from 28 in-depth semi-structured interviews and five focus group discussions (FGDs) with diverse stakeholders: faculty members (teaching frontline), institutional leaders (deans, principals, department heads), administrators (policy coordinators, registrars), and select policy implementers. Conducted across selected states (Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala) representing varying adoption paces, these voices illuminate the lived experiences behind the incorporation–implementation divide. Thematic analysis reveals recurring patterns of leadership shortcomings, resource deficits, resistance to pedagogical change, bureaucratic silos, and uneven stakeholder alignment—echoing broader empirical insights from recent studies on NEP 2020 execution.

Faculty members, as primary implementers, frequently expressed frustration with the gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality. Many described syllabus incorporation as a "paper exercise" driven by top-down mandates. One senior faculty member from a state university in Uttar Pradesh noted, "We revised the curriculum overnight to include vocational credits and flexible electives as per UGC guidelines—it's all documented now. But in the classroom, how do I teach multidisciplinary thinking when I have 80 students, no updated textbooks, and no training in experiential methods?" This sentiment aligns with findings from Kulal et al. (2024), who, through stakeholder perspectives (students, teachers, experts), highlighted overburdened syllabi, infrastructure lacks, and human resource disparities as persistent barriers in higher education implementation. Faculty resistance often stemmed not from opposition to NEP ideals but from capability gaps; several interviewees admitted feeling unprepared for shifting from lecture-based to facilitator roles, with one Tamil Nadu college lecturer stating, "The policy talks about critical thinking and AI integration, but we were given a two-day workshop—mostly theory, no hands-on practice. How can we change overnight?"

Institutional leaders echoed these concerns but framed them through a governance lens. Deans and principals frequently pointed to leadership failures in creating urgency and building coalitions—core elements of Kotter's (1996) change model. A dean from a private deemed university in Karnataka observed, "Incorporation was easy; we aligned our statutes and got UGC nods quickly because funding depends on it. But sustaining change requires vision communication and empowerment, which we lack. Departments operate in silos—science faculty resists vocational integration, humanities sees it as dilution." This perception of fragmented leadership resonates with Kannan (2021), who critiqued substandard governance and inadequate autonomy for innovation in HEIs under NEP. Administrators, often caught between central directives and institutional realities, highlighted bureaucratic hurdles. One implementation committee member from Kerala remarked, "Center-state tensions delay everything. We wait for state approvals on multilingual mediums or vocational partnerships, while semesters roll on. It's compliance theater—forms filled, reports submitted, but no real shift in teaching."

Resource constraints emerged as a dominant theme across stakeholder groups, amplifying the divide. Infrastructure deficits—digital divides, outdated labs, insufficient libraries—were repeatedly cited, particularly in rural and semi-urban institutions. A rural college administrator in Uttar Pradesh shared, "We introduced the Academic Bank of Credits on paper, but without reliable internet or devices, students in remote areas can't access it. Post-COVID, the digital gap widened, yet NEP assumes universal tech access." This mirrors empirical observations in Arun et al. (2022), where college students ranked lack of facilities (e.g., digital libraries, transportation) highest among challenges, loading onto a

"Financial and Coverage Gap" factor. Funding shortages compounded these issues; multiple participants noted that NEP's 6% GDP education target remains unmet (actual spending ~3-4%), leading to uneven readiness. Faculty from under-resourced institutions felt particularly marginalized, with one stating, "Urban universities get grants for multidisciplinary centers; we struggle for basic maintenance. How do we implement holistic development without resources?"

Resistance to change and uneven stakeholder alignment further deepened the paradox. While institutional leaders often viewed incorporation as a compliance success, faculty and administrators perceived it as imposed without buy-in. In FGDs, cross-stakeholder discussions revealed mistrust: teachers felt leaders prioritized metrics over pedagogy, while leaders blamed faculty inertia. One focus group exchange captured this tension—a department head argued, "We need short-term wins to motivate," while a teacher countered, "Wins? We need training first, not more paperwork." This echoes Gupta and Patel (2022), who emphasized faculty capacity building as critical yet under-addressed for NEP effectiveness. Psychological barriers, such as demotivation from administrative overload and anxiety over disparities, were also evident, aligning with educational psychology analyses of state-level oppositions (e.g., linguistic concerns in Tamil Nadu and Kerala delaying full rollout).

Secondary data triangulation—reviewing UGC circulars, institutional reports, and NCFSE 2023—confirmed these lived experiences. Nominal incorporation rates (e.g., multidisciplinary structures adopted in over 80% of HEIs per UGC tracking) contrast sharply with ground realities, where pedagogical execution lags due to the factors above. Stakeholders consistently described a "top-down success, bottom-up failure" dynamic: regulatory leverage ensures structural changes, but without addressing leadership deficits, resource inequities, and cultural resistance, implementation remains superficial.

These stakeholder perspectives collectively unpack the NEP 2020 syllabus paradox as not merely technical but deeply managerial and organizational. Faculty highlight pedagogical unpreparedness, leaders point to governance silos, and administrators underscore bureaucratic and resource barriers. The divide persists because incorporation relies on compliance, while implementation demands sustained change management, capacity enhancement, and inclusive alignment—elements often absent in current execution. As one veteran administrator poignantly summarized, "The policy is visionary on paper; the challenge is making it breathe in classrooms." Addressing this requires moving beyond mandates to empower stakeholders, a theme explored further in subsequent sections.

4. Managerial and Organizational Barriers

The qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions reveal that the incorporation–implementation divide in NEP 2020 syllabus rollout is not accidental but rooted in classic failures of organizational change management. Applying John Kotter's (1996) eight-step model for leading change provides a powerful analytical framework to interpret the emergent themes. Kotter's model—creating a sense of urgency, building a guiding coalition, forming a strategic vision and initiatives, communicating the vision, empowering broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture—offers a structured lens to diagnose why top-down syllabus adoption succeeds while bottom-up pedagogical transformation stalls. Stakeholder accounts consistently map onto several deficient steps, compounded by organizational behaviour concepts such as resistance to change, institutional inertia, power distance, and misaligned incentive structures.

The first critical shortfall lies in inadequate sense of urgency and weak coalition-building (Kotter's steps 1 and 2). Many institutional leaders acknowledged that NEP 2020 arrived as a regulatory imperative rather than an internally felt necessity. A dean from a state university in Uttar Pradesh remarked, "The UGC circulars created urgency at the administrative level—deadlines for curriculum submission were non-negotiable. But among faculty, there was no real burning platform. Most saw it as yet another policy wave to survive, not a transformative opportunity." This absence of shared urgency prevented the formation of strong guiding coalitions. Participants frequently described fragmented leadership: department heads operated in silos, with little cross-disciplinary collaboration to champion multidisciplinary

reforms. One focus group participant (a department coordinator) captured the coalition gap: “We have syllabus committees, but they are compliance bodies—meet, approve, disperse. No ongoing coalition to drive cultural change or resolve conflicts between traditional and new pedagogies.” This echoes findings from Kulal et al. (2024), who noted that stakeholder buy-in remains superficial when policy is perceived as externally imposed rather than co-owned.

Weak communication of the vision (step 3 and 4) emerged as another pervasive barrier. While NEP 2020’s lofty goals—holistic development, flexibility, 21st-century skills—were well-documented in policy texts and institutional notifications, communication rarely penetrated to the classroom level in a compelling, repeated, or contextualized manner. Faculty repeatedly expressed confusion about how abstract ideals translated into daily practice. A lecturer from Kerala stated, “We received emails with the new credit structure and vocational guidelines, but no one explained why this matters for student employability or how it changes our role from lecturer to facilitator. The vision stayed on paper.” Administrators corroborated this, noting that town-hall style discussions or repeated reinforcement were rare due to time pressures and hierarchical communication norms. Organizational behaviour literature on change resistance (Ford et al., 2008) helps explain this: when the vision is poorly communicated or perceived as inconsistent with existing routines, cynicism and passive resistance increase—precisely what many interviewees described as “wait-and-see” attitudes among faculty.

Insufficient empowerment and training (step 5: empowering broad-based action) constituted perhaps the most frequently cited barrier. Stakeholders across roles highlighted inadequate faculty development programs to equip teachers for new pedagogies—experiential learning, competency-based assessment, vocational integration, and technology-enabled teaching. A senior faculty member from Karnataka shared, “We were told to adopt active learning and reduce content load, but without training in flipped classrooms or design thinking, most of us fell back on old lecture methods. Empowerment requires capability, not just permission.” This lack of training and removal of structural obstacles (e.g., heavy teaching loads, outdated evaluation systems) left faculty disempowered. Gupta and Patel (2022) similarly found that capacity-building initiatives for NEP implementation remain sporadic and insufficient, particularly in resource-constrained institutions, leading to a persistence of traditional practices despite structural changes.

The absence of short-term wins (step 6) further eroded momentum. Participants lamented that early, visible successes—such as pilot multidisciplinary courses yielding positive student feedback or successful vocational internship placements—were rarely celebrated or scaled institution-wide. An administrator from a private college noted, “We launched a few interdisciplinary electives and got good student response, but there was no institutional mechanism to recognize or replicate them. Without quick wins, enthusiasm dies.” Kotter emphasizes that short-term wins build credibility and reduce resistance; their absence in many institutions allowed skepticism to harden.

Finally, there is a clear lack of anchoring new approaches in the culture and structure (steps 7 and 8). Even where isolated changes occurred, they remained vulnerable to reversion. Institutional culture—characterized by high power distance, risk aversion, and preference for stability—did not evolve to support NEP’s flexible, innovative ethos. One principal reflected, “We changed the syllabus, but promotion criteria still reward publications over innovative teaching. The reward structure pulls in the opposite direction.” Structural elements, such as rigid timetables, examination-centric assessment, and fragmented departmental autonomy, also remained largely unchanged, preventing consolidation of gains. This aligns with organizational inertia theory (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), where entrenched routines and resource dependencies resist disruption even when formal policies shift. Overall, the thematic analysis through Kotter’s lens reveals a partial execution of change steps: urgency and vision formation occurred at the regulatory level (facilitating incorporation), but coalition-building, communication, empowerment, short-term wins, and cultural anchoring were severely deficient at the institutional level (hindering implementation). These managerial and organizational barriers—rooted in inadequate leadership orchestration, misaligned incentives, and structural inertia—explain why NEP 2020’s syllabus reforms remain largely aspirational on the ground. Addressing them requires deliberate, multi-level change strategies, a theme taken up in the final section.

5. Management Strategies for Effective NEP Implementation

While syllabus structures have been revised and credit frameworks introduced under regulatory pressure, sustainable classroom-level transformation requires deliberate managerial interventions that address the deficient steps in Kotter's (1996) model and the organizational barriers identified in the thematic analysis. Drawing on participant recommendations, combined with established change management principles and empirical lessons from recent NEP studies, this section proposes actionable, contextually grounded strategies to bridge the gap. These recommendations are phased, multi-level, and tailored to India's institutional diversity—ranging from well-resourced central universities to underfunded rural colleges.

Leadership Interventions: Creating Urgency, Building Coalitions, and Communicating Vision Institutional leaders must move beyond compliance-driven adoption to become active change champions. Participants repeatedly emphasized the need for leaders to create a genuine sense of urgency by linking NEP goals to tangible institutional and student outcomes—such as improved employability, research output, and equity metrics—rather than mere regulatory deadlines. Kotter's framework stresses that urgency must be felt internally; one practical step is for vice-chancellors and principals to launch institution-specific “NEP Vision Forums” involving cross-departmental stakeholders to co-create localized rationales and success narratives.

Building guiding coalitions is equally critical. Stakeholders suggested forming permanent, empowered NEP Implementation Committees comprising faculty representatives from diverse disciplines, student leaders, administrative heads, and external vocational partners. These coalitions should meet regularly (not just for compliance reporting) to resolve inter-departmental conflicts and co-own the change process. As one dean from Karnataka noted, “We need a coalition that includes skeptics—only then will resistance turn into ownership.” This aligns with Kulal et al. (2024), who found that inclusive stakeholder engagement significantly improves perceived legitimacy and buy-in for NEP reforms. Leaders should also prioritize repeated, multi-channel communication of the vision—through town halls, newsletters, departmental meetings, and short videos—tailored to different audiences (e.g., explaining vocational integration benefits to traditional humanities faculty).

Targeted Capacity-Building Programs: Empowering Broad-Based Action Insufficient training emerged as the single most cited barrier. Participants called for mandatory, ongoing, and hands-on faculty development programs rather than one-off workshops. Recommendations included establishing institution-level “NEP Pedagogy Labs” or Centers for Teaching Excellence, offering modular certification courses in experiential learning, competency-based assessment, AI integration, and multilingual pedagogy. These should be incentivized (e.g., counting toward promotion or workload credits) and delivered through blended formats to reach rural faculty.

Gupta and Patel (2022) underscore that sustained capacity building is essential for pedagogical shift; participants echoed this, suggesting peer-mentoring programs where early adopters train colleagues and inter-institutional knowledge-sharing networks (e.g., via consortia of state universities). Empowerment also requires structural relief—reducing teaching loads during transition, providing sabbaticals for curriculum innovation, and removing bureaucratic obstacles (e.g., streamlining approval processes for new interdisciplinary courses). As one lecturer put it, “Give us time, tools, and trust—then we can experiment without fear of failure.”

Incentive Redesign and Short-Term Wins Misaligned incentives perpetuate inertia. Stakeholders recommended overhauling performance evaluation systems to reward innovative teaching, interdisciplinary collaboration, and student outcome improvements alongside traditional metrics like publications. Short-term wins—such as successful pilot multidisciplinary electives, vocational internship placements, or improved student feedback scores—should be systematically identified, celebrated institution-wide (e.g., through annual NEP Excellence Awards), and used to build momentum. Kotter (1996) notes that visible wins reduce cynicism; participants suggested publicizing these successes via institutional repositories and social media to create positive peer pressure.

Decentralized yet Coordinated Governance and Stronger Monitoring/Accountability India's federal structure demands a balance between central direction and institutional autonomy. Participants advocated for a “guided

decentralization” model: UGC and state governments provide overarching frameworks and benchmarks, while institutions customize implementation timelines, resource allocation, and pedagogical approaches to local contexts (urban vs. rural, resource-rich vs. constrained). A national NEP Monitoring Dashboard—tracking not just compliance metrics but qualitative indicators like faculty training coverage, student engagement in vocational activities, and learning outcome improvements—would strengthen accountability without micromanagement.

Regular external audits, peer reviews among consortia institutions, and participatory feedback mechanisms (e.g., anonymous stakeholder surveys) were frequently suggested to close the feedback loop. This resonates with RISE Programme analyses (Dang et al., 2021), which highlight that accountability mechanisms tied to learning outcomes, rather than inputs alone, yield better results in Indian education reforms.

Phased Change Strategies Tailored to Institutional Diversity A one-size-fits-all approach is untenable. Participants proposed a phased rollout: Phase 1 (1–2 years) focuses on foundational capacity building, pilot projects, and short-term wins; Phase 2 (3–5 years) scales successful pilots and anchors changes in structure and culture; Phase 3 emphasizes continuous improvement and equity-focused adjustments. Rural and under-resourced institutions require additional support—targeted central/state grants, shared digital infrastructure, and mobile training units—to prevent widening disparities. Ultimately, bridging the NEP 2020 syllabus paradox demands shifting from regulatory compliance to strategic change leadership. By addressing Kotter’s missing steps—through urgency creation, coalition-building, empowered action, celebrated wins, and cultural anchoring—institutions can move beyond superficial incorporation toward deep, sustainable implementation. The stakeholder voices in this study are unanimous: the policy is visionary, but its success hinges on managerial courage, resource commitment, and inclusive execution. Realizing NEP’s promise of equitable, quality education for India’s 1.4 billion citizens requires translating these recommendations into action at every level—starting now.

6. Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 articulates a bold and necessary vision for transforming India’s education landscape through multidisciplinary flexibility, holistic development, skill integration, and alignment with contemporary global demands. While syllabus integration has achieved notable progress within higher education institutions—largely driven by regulatory compliance, UGC mandates, and structured implementation frameworks—a persistent execution gap reveals significant managerial and organizational shortcomings. Insights from faculty members, institutional leaders, and administrators consistently point to weak change leadership, resource limitations, inadequate capacity building, bureaucratic silos, and fragile accountability mechanisms as key impediments preventing the translation of visionary reforms into substantive pedagogical transformation and equitable learning outcomes.

Interpreted through Kotter’s change management model and perspectives from organizational behavior theory, this qualitative inquiry highlights a critical paradox: top-down policy adoption is sustained by external coercive pressures, whereas durable bottom-up implementation requires internal ownership, strategic empowerment, incentive realignment, and culturally embedded change processes. Addressing this disconnect is essential to realizing NEP 2020’s aspiration for inclusive, high-quality education. By institutionalizing targeted leadership interventions, systematic faculty training, phased implementation strategies, and decentralized yet coordinated governance mechanisms, higher education institutions can transform policy intent into lived educational practice—ensuring that India’s demographic dividend is converted into meaningful knowledge empowerment and sustainable development across diverse socio-economic contexts.

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