



Multidisciplinarity in education: Moving towards holistic development under NEP 2020

Dr. Chaitali Biswas

Assistant Professor, JHBC College, West Bengal, India

Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places holistic development at the centre of educational reform in India and treats multidisciplinarity as one of the principal means of achieving it. The policy argues that education must move beyond rote learning, rigid subject boundaries, and narrow examination-based success toward the development of intellectual, social, emotional, ethical, aesthetic, and practical capacities. This review paper examines how NEP 2020 connects holistic development with multidisciplinary education across school and higher education. The study is based on document analysis of the NEP 2020, the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage 2022, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023, UGC guidelines on multidisciplinary institutions, and related official documents. The analysis shows that NEP 2020 envisions holistic development through reduced curricular load, experiential and competency-based learning, arts and sports integration, flexible subject choice, reformed assessment, multidisciplinary higher education institutions, and renewed teacher preparation. It also emphasizes institutional restructuring, including the transformation of single-stream institutions into multidisciplinary higher education institutions by 2040. The paper concludes that multidisciplinarity is not treated in NEP 2020 as a mere structural reform; rather, it is a philosophical and pedagogical shift intended to produce well-rounded, creative, ethical, and socially responsible learners equipped for the demands of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: NEP 2020, holistic development, multidisciplinary education, higher education institutions, assessment reform, teacher education

Introduction

Indian educational thought has historically valued broad-based learning rather than narrow specialization. Ancient centres such as Takshashila and Nalanda are frequently invoked in NEP 2020 as examples of institutions where diverse branches of knowledge were studied together and where education was linked to intellectual, ethical, and civilizational development. Building on this legacy, NEP 2020 proposes a major reorientation of Indian education by placing holistic and multidisciplinary learning at the core of both school and higher education reform.

Holistic development in the context of NEP 2020 refers to the integrated development of all human capacities: intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional, and moral. The policy explicitly states that the aim of education is not only cognitive growth but also character formation and the creation of well-rounded individuals equipped with key twenty-first-century capacities. Thus, education is expected to cultivate critical thinking, ethical reasoning, creativity, communication, collaboration, constitutional values, and social responsibility along with disciplinary knowledge.

At the same time, NEP 2020 sees rigid boundaries between arts, sciences, vocational studies, and professional education as obstacles to genuine learning. Therefore, it promotes multidisciplinarity as a means of reducing fragmentation of knowledge and enabling learners to understand complex real-world problems more meaningfully. In this framework, multidisciplinarity is directly linked to holistic development because students learn not only content but also relationships across domains, practical application, and broader human purposes of education.

Objectives

This paper has the following objectives:

1. To explain the concept of holistic development in the context of NEP 2020.

2. To examine the relationship between holistic development and multidisciplinary education.
3. To analyse the major recommendations of NEP 2020 related to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher education, and institutional reform.
4. To discuss how multidisciplinary education in schools and higher education institutions can help develop well-rounded twenty-first-century citizens.

Research Methodology

This paper is a qualitative review study based on document analysis. The primary source for the study is the official National Education Policy 2020. Secondary official sources include the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage 2022, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023, UGC guidelines on transforming higher education institutions into multidisciplinary institutions, and the UGC Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes. These documents were examined thematically to identify how NEP 2020 conceptualizes holistic development and how multidisciplinary education is proposed as an institutional and pedagogical strategy for achieving it.

The analysis is descriptive and interpretive rather than statistical. Themes such as curriculum reform, arts and sports integration, assessment reform, flexible subject choice, teacher preparation, institutional restructuring, and multidisciplinary higher education were identified and organized into the discussion below. Since this is a review paper, the “results” are presented as thematic findings derived from policy and curriculum documents.

Results and Discussion

1. Holistic development as a central aim of NEP 2020

A major finding of this review is that NEP 2020 redefines educational success in holistic rather than narrowly academic terms. The policy states that education must move

away from rote learning and toward real understanding, problem-solving, creativity, and “learning how to learn.” In this view, a learner is not simply an examination performer but a developing human personality whose emotional, social, ethical, artistic, and physical growth matters as much as academic attainment. This marks a significant conceptual shift from content-heavy schooling to learner-centred development.

The curriculum frameworks released after NEP 2020 reinforce this orientation. The NCF for the Foundational Stage and the NCF for School Education both present education as a continuous developmental process that must respond to the needs of learners at different stages. They emphasize curiosity, play, inquiry, expression, wellbeing, values, inclusion, and meaningful participation rather than passive memorization. Thus, holistic development is not an additional component of education; it becomes the organizing principle of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

2. Curriculum and pedagogy for holistic development

Another major finding is that NEP 2020 links holistic development to curricular and pedagogical reform. The policy recommends reducing curriculum load to its essential core so that there is more room for discussion, analysis, discovery, creativity, and application. It advocates experiential, inquiry-based, discussion-based, and competency-based learning across stages of education. Such an approach is intended to move students from passive reception of information to active engagement with ideas and problems.

A particularly important recommendation is the removal of hard separations between “curricular,” “co-curricular,” and “extra-curricular” areas, and between arts, humanities, sciences, sports, and vocational education. NEP 2020 and the NCF-SE 2023 treat arts education, physical education and wellbeing, vocational education, and environmental learning as integral to education rather than as secondary or optional add-ons. This is crucial for holistic development because it widens the meaning of educational achievement and recognizes multiple human abilities.

3. Role of teachers and institutions in fostering holistic growth

The documents also show that holistic development depends heavily on teachers and the learning environment they create. NEP 2020 gives teachers greater responsibility not merely to complete syllabi but to facilitate conceptual understanding, socio-emotional growth, and student agency. The policy repeatedly stresses that teachers should be empowered to adopt suitable pedagogical approaches while remaining aligned with curricular goals. This means that teacher professionalism becomes central to holistic education.

For this reason, teacher education itself is to be restructured. NEP 2020 states that by 2030 teacher education will be moved into multidisciplinary colleges and universities, and the 4-year integrated B.Ed. will become the minimum qualification for teaching. This is significant because a teacher prepared in a multidisciplinary environment is expected to better understand child development, pedagogy, subject knowledge, inclusion, language, and the broader aims of education. Holistic learning for students therefore requires multidisciplinary formation of teachers as well.

4. Assessment reform as a measure of holistic development

This review also finds that NEP 2020 and subsequent official documents seek to redesign assessment so that it reflects broader learning outcomes. The policy proposes that the traditional progress card be transformed into a holistic, multidimensional report capturing progress in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. It also encourages self-assessment, peer assessment, project work, inquiry-based learning, and competency-based evaluation. This is a major shift because it moves assessment away from one-time, memory-based examinations toward a fuller picture of learner development.

The establishment of PARAKH as the national assessment centre is part of this reform. Official ministry releases state that PARAKH has been set up under NCERT to help bring school boards onto a common platform for assessment reform and to support standard-setting, equivalence, and competency-based evaluation. NEP 2020 also proposes reduced examination stress, more flexible board examinations, and a stronger focus on core capacities and application of knowledge rather than rote reproduction. Together, these reforms attempt to align assessment with the larger aim of holistic development.

5. Multidisciplinary education as the route to holistic development

A central result of this analysis is that NEP 2020 treats multidisciplinary as the structural route to holistic education, especially in higher education. The policy states that a holistic and multidisciplinary education develops all capacities of human beings in an integrated manner and helps create well-rounded individuals with critical twenty-first-century skills. The UGC’s guidelines for transforming higher education institutions further explain that a multidisciplinary institution should not merely house multiple departments; it should create innovative programmes and flexible learning pathways that widen learners’ thinking and equip them to address emerging challenges.

In practical terms, this means that undergraduate education should allow broader subject choice, interdisciplinary exposure, skill-based learning, community engagement, and a balance between specialization and breadth. The UGC’s Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes operationalizes this by promoting flexible curricula, multiple entry and exit options, credit mobility, and a multidisciplinary approach. These reforms aim to help students build communication skills, research aptitude, social awareness, creativity, and employability alongside disciplinary knowledge.

6. Restructuring higher education institutions

The review also highlights that NEP 2020’s multidisciplinary vision is institutional, not merely curricular. The policy envisages a future in which higher education institutions become large, vibrant, multidisciplinary entities engaging in teaching, research, and community service. It proposes the establishment of Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs) and the gradual transformation of existing single-stream institutions into multidisciplinary HEIs. UGC guidelines and parliamentary documentation further support the long-term objective that by 2040 all HEIs should move

toward multidisciplinary character through expansion, clustering, or merger.

This institutional shift is important because holistic development cannot be achieved only by adding a few elective courses. It requires a campus culture in which students encounter different disciplines, values, practices, and forms of inquiry. A multidisciplinary university is expected to create this environment by enabling cross-disciplinary dialogue, research collaboration, innovation, and broader educational experiences. Hence, institutional redesign is a necessary condition for the policy's vision of holistic learner development.

Conclusion

NEP 2020 presents a major rethinking of Indian education by placing holistic development at its centre and by identifying multidisciplinary as one of its most important pathways. The policy does not view education as the acquisition of isolated subject knowledge alone. Instead, it envisions education as the development of intellectual competence, ethical sensitivity, creativity, emotional maturity, social responsibility, physical wellbeing, and practical capability. This broader educational aim is reflected in recommendations concerning curriculum reform, pedagogy, arts and sports integration, assessment, teacher education, flexible undergraduate programmes, and institutional restructuring.

The paper therefore concludes that multidisciplinary in NEP 2020 is both a philosophy and a strategy. It is a philosophy because it recognizes the interconnectedness of knowledge and the fullness of human development. It is a strategy because it is being translated into concrete reforms in schools, teacher education, assessment bodies, undergraduate frameworks, and higher education institutions. If implemented effectively, these reforms can help India move toward an education system that is more humane, flexible, creative, and globally relevant while remaining rooted in its own civilizational and constitutional values.

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