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A VERY SHORT POLICY BRIEF

India's National Education Policy

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The Australia India Institute's A VERY SHORT POLICY BRIEF series examines key questions facing contemporary India and the Australia-India relationship. It combines in-depth academic analysis with clarity and policy relevance.

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Introduction

The draft National Education Policy (DNEP), prepared by a committee chaired by Dr. K Kasturirangan and released in June 2019, is the first comprehensive policy statement on education in India since 1986. An Implementation committee has now been set up, a new report has been prepared that distils the recommendations, and phased implementation is likely in the Indian Spring 2020.

The DNEP is bold, wide-ranging and impressive. Its key recommendations are now well known but bear repeating in summative form.

The DNEP recommends a doubling of funding for public education from 10% of total public expenditure to 20% (roughly 6% of total GDP) by 2025 and links this to a major overhaul of school and university education. Most notably, DNEP proposes a **new structure for school education**, which includes three pre-school years as part of the formal educational system; school education becomes compulsory from ages 3 to 18. This is linked to a series of school reforms, such as introducing breakfasts alongside the established midday meal scheme and using social workers to ensure that children participate in school.

The DNEP also suggests **a new curriculum in schools**, promoting especially a 'liberal education' encompassing creativity, collaboration, social responsibility, multilingualism, and digital learning. Distinctions between different streams of study in schools – such as Arts, Science and Commerce - would be abolished and compulsory courses would be established on topics such as ethical reasoning, and current affairs. The existing structure of high stakes examinations in Grades 10 and 12 would be replaced by a modular system throughout grades 9 to 12. This would relieve pressure on youth and stem the growth of India's parasitic coaching culture. Schemes of appointing temporary, part-time 'para-teachers' would be abandoned, and all teachers would now be required to qualify in large multidisciplinary universities rather than the small, low quality 'B.Ed. Colleges'.

The DNEP could be a springboard for educational renewal and imaginative international partnership.

Higher Education

DNEP focuses especially on higher education. Four key points stand out. First, DNEP sets the target of 50% of youth being enrolled in universities by 2035 but **spotlights the widespread underdevelopment of higher education across India**, especially the State-run universities and college where 93% of students study. We learn that this is partly a problem of fragmentation: 20% of degree colleges nationally have fewer than 100 students. But it also relates to the curriculum; the report notes that 40% of tertiary-level colleges in India teach a single subject, depriving students from opportunities to acquire a breadth of perspective. More broadly, the DNEP notes that research in India is concentrated in specialist institutes, central universities and a small number of elite State universities. In addition, senior leaders and faculty at universities and colleges – who, the report argues, have typically been selected via arbitrary measures rather than merit - are characterised by a "severe lack of motivation and innovation" (GOI 2019: 204). The existing higher education system is characterised by the "widespread prevalence of vested/commercial interests" and "a mechanistic and disempowering regulatory system" (GOI 2019: 205). The report hints at other issues: woefully poor library and general infrastructural facilities (see also Kapur and Mehta 2017) and an atmosphere among students of cynicism and disappointment (see Jeffrey 2010; Jha 2017).

Second, the DNEP recommends **dismantling entirely the current system of universities** (roughly 900 across India) and non-degree granting private and public colleges (40,000) entirely. These would be replaced by a smaller number of institutions – between 10,000 to 15,000. As the DNEP states:

> The main thrust of this policy regarding higher education is the ending of the fragmentation of higher education by moving higher education into large multidisciplinary universities and colleges, each of which will aim to have upwards of 5,000 or more students (GOI 2019: 234).

All of the institutions in the new system would have the capacity to grant degrees but would be organised into three types (originally tiers but likely to be set out in less hierarchical terms in the final report): Type 1 universities would focus on research and teach the gamut of undergraduates through to PhD students. In a move to spread a research culture broadly across India, Type 2 institutions - while teaching-focused – would also carry out research. Type 3 institutions would be teaching-only undergraduate colleges.

Third, and equally boldly, the DNEP **argues for the value of education for democratic citizenship and human flourishing rather than as a preparation for employment**. It notes "Higher education must develop good, well-rounded, creative individuals with intellectual curiosity, a spirit of service, and a strong ethical compass" (GOI 2019: 203). The DNEP recognises that interdisciplinarity rests on mutual respect for different disciplines, and humanities and social sciences are championed.

Fourth, the **DNEP also recommends a largely new regulatory structure**, with a new National Education Commission, chaired by the Prime Minister, at the apex. Under this body, a new National Higher Education Regulatory Authority will regulate higher education, a revamped National Assessment and Accreditation Council will develop an accreditation ecosystem, and the University Grants Commission will be renamed as the Higher Education Grants Commission. In addition, a new National Research Fund will be established charged with developing a research culture, with an annual budget of 200 billion rupees.

Will DNEP work?

Five critical points in relation to DNEP are especially important. First, several commentators have argued that not **enough consideration is given in the DNEP to the relationship between the centre and India's constituent States** (see Kunda 2019). Roughly 85 percent of all education expenditures and 50% of all higher education expenditure occurs at the State level (Redden 2019). The DNEP's recommendation to centralise control over higher education may be a sticking point in negotiations with States (see Nanda 2019).

Second, commentators have noted that **DNEP is silent on the issue of vested interests at regional and local levels and is unlikely to be implementable in its current form**. It will be difficult to compel private educational entrepreneurs running specialist colleges into transforming their institutions into multidisciplinary enterprises, if that is what is ultimately recommended. Many regional players and local elites benefit from the higher education system and school education system as currently constituted, for example profiting from the process through which affiliations are disbursed (see Jeffrey 2010; Bhushan 2019).

Third, **DNEP does not adequately address gender, caste, and class inequalities and processes of marginalisation**. People with disabilities are severely under-represented in universities, as are Muslims. Caste discrimination remains a major problem in many institutions. Talk of inclusion and 'upliftment'–a common trope in the DNEP–is not enough (see Vasavi 2019). Greater attention must be paid to the role of individual forms of inequality in shaping people's access to education, experience of school and university, and trajectories post-education. Some have also argued that the topic of academic freedom is not given enough attention.

Fourth, **DNEP does not discuss the issue of graduate employability and related to question of skills in sufficient depth**. The focus on enrolling 50% of the population in university may be unhelpful in an environment in which graduate unemployment is high (see Mehrotra 2018) and in which manual and craft labour is often stigmatised. DNEP argues that vocational educational should be introduced more comprehensively in schools and universities, but the point is not well integrated into the report (see Robinson 2019).

Fifth, **DNEP may lead to a rapid privatization of universities**. Some commentators have argued that DNEP, in emphasising the 'autonomy' that universities will possess in the new system and enjoining them to seek philanthropic donations, is preparing for an environment in which government funding will decline significantly, and universities depend upon fees and corporate income. The upshot, as many student organisations have also argued, might be a privatised system that marginalises those with modest economic means (see Devasahayam 2019; Robinson 2019).

There are other important issues that require some reflection: there is little indication of how the DNEP relates to some earlier schemes such as India's efforts to identify six 'Institutes of Excellence'; rural and agricultural education get short thrift as does STEM learning (Vivek 2019); some of the educational terminology employed in discussing curricular change is confusing and used inconsistently (see Dhanka 2019); and the issue of how to define 'liberal arts' is more complex and political than DNEP suggests (see Arora 2019; Kumar 2019; Ravi et al. 2019).

These criticisms should be read in context, however. DNEP rethinks education at a scale consistent with the challenge and it discusses many positive initiatives, especially in relation to school education but also in its insistence on the need to spread a research culture across universities, provide more flexibility in how students engage with universities, and broaden curricula to focus much more on the humanities and social sciences. DNEP is much more focused on internationalisation, openness, the public value of education, and the need for radical reform than might have been anticipated before it was released. This reflects in part the public drive in India since the early 1990s for improvements to education (see Kumar 2019).

How does Australia engage with India in the wake of the new policy?

For countries seeking to engage with Indian education, such as Australia, there are important new possibilities for educational collaboration. This reflects a close congruence between how Australia and DNEP envisage international partnership. There is growing recognition across Australian universities that ensuring a steady flow of Indian students into Australian universities - which is important financially to Australia and intellectually for Australian faculty and students – will entail building research partnerships and long-term collaborative relationships. DNEP likewise emphasises a need to construct long-term, meaningful partnerships and sets out its own goals for the internationalisation of Indian higher education. For example, DNEP argues for the introduction of scholarships for students from abroad who wish to study in India, establishes a Study in India Portal for international students coming to India, and reiterates a previous call from the Government of India to allow the top 200 universities in the world to establish a physical presence in India. The document emphasises partnerships between universities abroad and in India, outlines measures for improving the two-way flow of faculty across national boundaries, and emphasizes leveraging the Indian diaspora to enhance global research and teaching cooperation. None of these measures are likely to be controversial as DNEP makes its passage into official policy and comes to be implemented.

Possibilities for partnership post-DNEP will require careful thought. But eight areas stand out. First, and most importantly, **Australia could partner with India in the development of research capacity in Indian universities and thereby assist in building an Australia-India research nexus**. DNEP emphasises mentorship as a basis for the development of research capacity. Australia can play a key role in developing research capacity in India while at the same time learning from Indian institutions and researchers. It can do so by: enlarging opportunities for faculty exchanges, utilising Indian schemes such as SPARC, STRIDE and GIAN and developing complementary Australian initiatives; developing post-doctoral networks that span the two countries, building on the success of the Australia India's Institute's (Aii) New Generation Network; upscaling and expanding the doctoral training initiatives such as those currently run by the University of Queensland, and Monash; enhancing opportunities for two-way student mobility, especially opportunities for Australian undergraduates to have semester-length experiences in Indian and vice versa; extending the Australia India Strategic Research Fund to humanities and social sciences; and supporting the development of an Australia Research Cooperation Hub in India. These various measures would not only improve the research and teaching environments within each country but also create an Australia-India research nexus. There are many reasons why such a nexus is important: key challenges facing Australia and India, such as climate change, transcend national

boundaries; specific processes – for example related to health or agriculture - play out differently in India and Australia; and Australia and India have complementary research strengths.

Second, and closely related to the first area, **Australia could collaborate with India in developing links with industr**y. There may be particular opportunities to work with major industries that operate across the India/Australia boundary such as Tata, Wipro, Tech Mahindra, and Infosys in areas such as applied research, sponsored PhDs, and internships.

Third, **Australia could collaborate in relation to regulation**. The new openness to dialogue at the highest levels in Indian educational planning creates opportunities to develop regulatory partnerships between India and Australia.

Fourth, **Australia could partner in teaching the teachers**. The shift to training schoolteachers in multi-disciplinary universities rather than specialist Bachelors of Education colleges will create enormous demand for university lecturers capable of teaching teachers. Some of this demand could be met internally, but India will also need to provide the teaching staff responsible for 'teaching the teachers' in India with opportunities to acquire education abroad. Australian universities have strengths in this area.

Fifth, **Australia universities could work together in the area of social equity**. Australia's experience in social inclusion could inform India's efforts at addressing similar issues, and India could teach Australia a great deal in this area. Australia and India could use DNEP as a platform for thinking more generally about the public good function of universities.

Sixth, **Australia and India could collaborate in discussing how to internationalise higher education**. This is an area of considerable success in Australia. The emphasis in DNEP in ensuring rapid, smooth internationalisation via the development of new world-class institutions and further strengthening of existing top flight universities points to possibilities for productive dialogue.

Seventh, **Australia and India could partner to develop better research on education internationally**, especially higher education. Australia and India have some superb research centres, but they are sub-scale relative to the challenge of examining education in transition in South Asia and how India's 800 million young people experience school and tertiary education.

Eighth, **Australia and India could partner in the space of online education**. The proposed expansion of higher education cannot occur through bricks and mortar. India will be looking to international partners for assistance in online and distance learning, an area where Australia has strength.

Implementing these various forms of joint working will require ensuring regular and meaningful contact between university executives in Australia and India, including peak bodies and Vice Chancellors. It might also usefully involve developing a small joint working group of education champions drawn from both sides with involvement from government.

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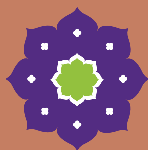

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