

Multiple Entry and Exit System Under NEP 2020: An Analytical Review of Policy Framework, Expected Benefits and Implementation Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) recommends a Multiple Entry and Exit System (MEES) in Indian higher education to replace the long criticised “all or nothing” degree pathway. MEES, buttressed by the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), allows learners collect, bank, and later redeem credits toward a certificate (after Year 1), diploma (Year 2), bachelor’s degree (Year 3) or bachelor’s degree with research (Year 4). This paper synthesises policy documents, regulatory guidelines and recent empirical literature to examine the expected benefits and implementation challenges of MEES. Though, MEES promises to democratise access, curb dropout rates and promote lifelong learning, it also demands a drastic redesign of curricula, robust student support ecosystems, and a carefully regulated credit transfer and fee framework. Pragmatic solutions—such as scaffolded employability skills in early exit credentials, digital credit ledgers, and capacity building for faculty advisors—are proposed to maximise the reform’s impact.

Keywords: Multiple Entry and Exit System (MEES), Academic Bank of Credits (ABCs), NEP 2020, Flexible Learning, Higher Education Reform, Lifelong Learning, Credit Mobility

INTRODUCTION

The National Education Policy which was effective till now was formulated almost 34 years ago. A more felicitous vision was needed to meet the aspirations of the New India. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is an ambitious and futuristic policy that strives to remove rigid boundaries and create new possibilities for students to choose and learn the subjects or courses of their choice.

The policy proposes a large number of changes that can transform higher education in India. One such change that has caught everyone’s attention is changing the 3-year undergraduate course structure into a 4-year pattern with multiple entry and exit points to make higher education more suited to get jobs later. At present, students who leave the course in between are labelled as drop-outs and they get no qualification certificate or diploma for the credits earned during the period in the college.

NEP 2020 seeks to pave the way for flexible and lifelong learning and encourages students to choose their academic path leading to the award of certificate, diploma, and degree. Hence, Multiple Entry and Exit System (MEES) is the corner stone of the new National Education Policy (NEP 2020) in higher education. The system allows students to drop their course and resume it at a later stage as and when they desire or deem it worth pursuing. This arrangement will prove to be a boon for those students who cannot continue their studies due to financial, social or any other reason and desire to resume their studies when the conditions become favourable in due course of time.

Rationale and Conceptual Framework

How the system will function? As per the draft of the NEP 2020 the undergraduate degree will be of either 3 or 4-year duration with multiple entry and exit options within this period, with appropriate certifications -- a certificate after completing 1 year in a discipline or field including vocational and professional areas, a diploma after 2 years of study, or a Bachelor's degree after a 3-year programme. The 4-year programme may also lead to a degree ‘with Research’ if the student completes a rigorous research project in the major area(s) of study as specified by the higher education institution.

NEP 2020 states that innovative and flexible curricular structure under multiple entry and exit points will abolish the currently prevalent rigid, uniform and mechanical structure to create new possibilities for students to choose and learn the subjects of their choice as per their preference, convenience, or necessity. Major benefits associated with the system can be outlined as under:

Expected Benefits of the Multiple Entry and Exit System

The Multiple Entry and Exit System (MEES), as envisioned under NEP 2020, introduces unprecedented flexibility and learner-centricity into Indian higher education. It allows students to exit after completing one, two, three, or four years of undergraduate study with a certificate, diploma, bachelor's degree, or bachelor's degree with research, respectively. It serves as a stress-relief mechanism for students by preventing the loss of academic years due to unforeseen circumstances or a change in career goals. Overall, MEES empowers learners to design their educational journey in a manner that best suits their aspirations, circumstances, and evolving interests. Following points highlight the benefits of Multiple Entry and Exit System (MEES) at higher education:

1. **Stress Reduction through Zero-Year Loss Mechanism:** The MEES is a stress-busting reform, allowing students to pause or change academic paths without forfeiting prior efforts, thereby mitigating the fear of losing academic years.
2. **Recognition of Partial Completion with Academic Value:** The provision of certificates or diplomas after one or two years acknowledges the time and effort students invest, offering meaningful credentials even if they exit early.
3. **Enhanced Flexibility and Student Autonomy:** Students gain the liberty to switch, pause, or resume courses based on evolving interests and career aspirations, supporting personalised learning trajectories.
4. **Promoting Continuity and Reducing Dropout Rates:** MEES aims to reduce dropout rates and increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio by providing re-entry options for students, aligning with NEP 2020 goals.
5. **Academic Bank of Credits for Seamless Credit Mobility:** The ABC system enables credit storage and transfer, allowing students to resume studies after breaks without academic penalty.
6. **Sabbatical Support and Degree Personalisation:** Students can take breaks (sabbaticals) and return with their credits intact, giving them autonomy to build customised degrees through chosen majors and minors.
7. **Encouraging Voluntary and Interest-Driven Learning:** By eliminating compulsion, MEES ensures that only genuinely interested students continue toward a full degree, promoting motivation-driven education.
8. **Aligning Indian Higher Education with Global Standards:** This reform moves India toward an internationally benchmarked, modular, and flexible higher education system in line with global practices.
9. **Support for equity and inclusion:** Flexible pause-restart mechanisms particularly benefit marginalised groups facing financial, familial or geographic constraints.
10. **Catalyst for pedagogical innovation.** Modular curricula encourage outcome based design, competency mapping and blended learning delivery models.

In the light of above stated facts, multiple entry and exit system seems to be a very positive change. However, a more in-depth analysis of the concept raises few practical hitches as well. Hence, following concerns need to be addressed for the effective implementation of Multiple Entry and Exit System (MEES):

Challenges in the Implementation of Multiple Entry and Exit System (MEES)

1. **Curriculum Design and Exit-Level Proficiency:** Implementing a Multiple Entry and Exit System (MEES) requires a fundamental restructuring of the curriculum. It is a significant challenge to determine what knowledge, skills, and professional competencies a student would gain after exiting with just a one-year certificate or a two-year diploma. The curriculum must be carefully scaffolded to ensure that each exit point represents meaningful, employable proficiency in a subject area. This demands interdisciplinary collaboration, modular course construction, and outcome-based learning frameworks aligned with the National Higher Education Qualifications Framework (NHEQF).
2. **Need for Robust Academic Guidance and Counselling:** In the absence of structured academic counselling and career guidance, students may face confusion, misinformed choices, and a chaotic decision-making process regarding exit and re-entry. These issues may disproportionately impact students from disadvantaged or rural backgrounds who are more susceptible to dropping out due to socio-economic, emotional, or familial pressures. Hence, higher education institutions (HEIs) must institutionalise student support cells that provide academic mentoring, psychological counselling, and career advice at all stages of the learner's journey.
3. **Employability of Early Exit Certificate and Diploma Holders:** A major concern relates to the value of early-exit credentials in the job market. With a large number of degree holders already struggling to find meaningful employment, students possessing only a certificate (after one year) or a diploma (after two years) may find it even more challenging to secure jobs unless these qualifications are embedded with industry-specific technical or vocational skills. Policymakers must engage industry stakeholders in the curriculum design process to ensure these short-cycle qualifications are job-relevant.

4. **Risk of Early Exit Being Stigmatized as Academic Failure:** There is an apprehension that students exiting early may be perceived as dropouts or academic failures rather than individuals making deliberate career or life choices. This could hinder their social mobility and professional reputation. Unless the value of certificates and diplomas is widely recognised and validated by employers and society, the system may inadvertently create a hierarchy of credentials that disadvantages early leavers. This calls for a sustained awareness campaign and employer sensitisation to reframe early exits as legitimate academic milestones.
5. **Admission and Re-Entry Logistics in HEIs:** MEES poses operational challenges in terms of admissions and infrastructure planning. For instance, when student intake is fixed in a programme, institutions may face logistical difficulties if several students exit mid-course while a different group seeks re-entry after a gap. This flux can disrupt faculty-student ratios, classroom allocation, laboratory access, and hostel accommodation. Therefore, HEIs must design dynamic seat-allocation systems, maintain flexible intake provisions, and invest in infrastructure that can adapt to fluctuating enrolments.
6. **Low Probability of Return among Early Exit Students:** A significant risk lies in the likelihood that many students who leave after a year or two may never return to complete their degrees. Financial pressures, shifting priorities, early employment, or lack of motivation may prevent them from re-entering higher education. This may inadvertently widen educational inequality and hinder the attainment of long-term educational goals. Thus, institutions must develop mechanisms to maintain contact with such students, offer incentives for re-entry, and provide flexible learning opportunities such as online or hybrid modules.
7. **Ensuring Equity in Fee Structures and Preventing Exploitation:** Another pressing concern is the potential misuse of the system by private or profit-driven institutions. Without regulatory oversight, these institutions may charge exorbitant fees from students seeking re-entry, thereby commercialising flexibility. This would disproportionately affect economically weaker sections and undermine the equity goals of NEP 2020. A centralised fee regulation mechanism, perhaps overseen by UGC or state higher education councils, must be instituted to ensure transparency and affordability for all learners.
8. **Seat matrix and resource planning.** Variable enrolments complicate teacher–student ratios, infrastructure provisioning and timetable logistics, especially in resource constrained HEIs.

CONCLUSION

MEES is a bold step toward a learner centred, globally compatible higher education ecosystem. The model promises flexibility, employability and inclusivity but will succeed only if early exit curricula embed demonstrable skills, if ABC infrastructure is seamless, and if students receive consistent academic and career guidance. Policymakers should prioritise phased rollout with pilot evaluations, industry partnerships for credential recognition, and continuous professional development for faculty. Done well, MEES could make Indian higher education not merely a venue for degrees but a lifelong learning continuum.

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