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Institution-building Process in the Development of Multidisciplinary Institutions (MDI)

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Abstract

NEP 2020 and subsequent guidelines from UGC on transforming higher education into multidisciplinary institutions have mandated the establishment of multidisciplinary institutions across Indian state/districts by 2030. Agreeing with the view that the NEP 2020 recommendation and the Guidelines are prepared on a positive note, scrutiny of these points highlights several challenges on the way to implementing guidelines into practice. There are two major challenges pointed out by the researchers in this paper. The first one is regarding the nature of institutions. ‘Institution’ is not a well-recognised and emphasized idea in the academic circle in Indian context while studying higher education especially in relation to multidisciplinary institutions. The second issue analyzed here belongs to the domain of institution building process. It is argued that the concept of institution building is practiced in a half-hearted manner. It is seen more as an exercise of developing institutional infrastructure and other visible and tangible aspects in the name of institution building, but the academic process is not given due weightage. Researchers suggest that to materialize the dream of transforming higher education institutions into multidisciplinary institutions, the process of institution building must be focused.

Keywords: *Multidisciplinary Institutions, Higher Education Institutions, NEP2020*

Introduction

National level Policy document (NEP, 2020) and subsequent detailed guidelines brought by UGC (2022) advocated the establishment of multidisciplinary institutions across the districts by 2030. It will involve converting the existing stand-alone single-stream specialized institutions into interdisciplinary institutions. It is a welcome move but a daunting task. Establishing new multidisciplinary institutions and transforming existing institutions into multidisciplinary institutions are pertinent concerns in institution building. Understanding how institution-building takes place and operates within the institution will be the first step towards visualizing the multi-disciplinary landscape of Indian higher education in 2030, the date NEP 2020 has set to establish at least one multidisciplinary institution in almost every district of the Indian state. (10.7. NEP 2020: 35)

The present world is organizationally oriented and these “organizations fill our world” (Cawsey et al. 2015: 5). If one notices happenings in their surroundings, everyone will find themselves surrounded by many organizations and institutions. It is a matter of routine requirements that humans engage and interact with so many institutions daily. Even our identity got intertwined with institutional identity (Ramarajan, 2014: 589). That is why humans are characterized as organizational beings. One should not feel surprised by this characterization as humans are shaped under the influence of a widespread organizational network. It is also a common observation that individuals who become members of some organizations and institutions hold the same views and perspectives as the organization and institutions may hold and promote. This is one of the reasons that explain how individuals' identities evolve under the aegis of institutional identity. Individual identity is well connected nowadays with institutional affiliation.

Institutions have a deep-rooted impact and influence on the human psyche. Institutions including educational ones are capable enough to structure social relationships and behavior. Their influences are not limited to the physical boundaries of the institution, but they grow and transcend the four walls of the institution and organizations. These influences are far-reaching and encompass all experiences, ranging from communication, interaction, social relationships, personal, and professional behavior.

Institutional building, used as a framework to understand higher education, offers a rich and significant insight. It explores the institution-building processes involved in making and sustaining these institutions. Institution building is about creating sustainable organizations which overtime continue to be guided by the mission and vision and have an abiding value (Karlo & Sharma, 2016:192-202). However, this approach has not received due attention from scholars and researchers, especially in the Indian context. There are few studies here and there, but in general, silence seems to be prevalent among Indian academia to conceptualize higher education organizations as institutions and understand the far-reaching implications of this notion. The lack of institutional perspective regarding higher education in the Indian context is a big gap. This realization has encouraged the authors of this paper to understand and analyze the NEP 2020 recommendations and UGC guidelines on the development of multidisciplinary institutions and fit these ideas into the prism of institution building.

NEPs Intent to Transform Higher Education Institution into Multidisciplinary Institutions

NEP 2020 ushers in a policy shift after a gap of around 30 years. It tries to address the issues of the present time. The recommendations provided by the document span from pre-primary to higher education institutions. At each level, some very drastic measures were suggested. One of them about higher education is to follow and adopt the multidisciplinary approach in higher education (Kumar, 2022: 6557-6561).

A Multidisciplinary Institution (MI) is defined as ‘an institution where courses are offered and research is carried out in all disciplines and streams such as science, technology, social science,

humanities, professional disciplines, and vocational education under a single institutional framework and governance and management. It is intended to provide holistic and multidisciplinary competencies for students by promoting flexibility to choose courses from diverse disciplines according to their interests and to promote research beyond the rigid boundaries set by disciplines (NIEPA, 2020:113).

Policymakers believe that the world is facing so many challenges now and that the most effective solutions may not come from one single disciplinary background. Issues have grown bigger and deeper, and they need to be analyzed comprehensively and in totality. The issues of environment, water crisis, sustainable development goals, and especially the challenges of education may not be addressed from one single frame of knowledge and skills. The situation demands that shared focus emerging from the plurality of disciplinary knowledge and skills should deal with these challenges of modern times. This is a multi-disciplinary approach based on a diverse set of perspectives. Also, students who are future citizens and nation builders cannot be productive enough by getting trained in a limited disciplinary approach. Considering these factors, NEP 2020 proposed multi-disciplinary programs to be included in higher education institutions. Reflecting on ground reality a 2020 NIEPA document mentions that ‘There are many colleges which are single discipline colleges such as Medical, Dental, physically handicapped, Ayurveda, Nursing, Home Economics, Teacher Education and Business Studies institutes. For multidisciplinary research and teaching purposes, single-discipline colleges will have to be merged with the university (NIEPA, 2020: 116).

The 4-year integrated program is a step in this direction. It was observed by the committee members of NEP 2020 that many stand-alone and specialized institutions exist in the country that are not equipped with the necessary disciplinary departments and operational facilities to offer multidisciplinary programs. In such cases, the policy has given a call to transform all these single-stream standalone specialized institutions into multidisciplinary institutions besides creating and establishing multidisciplinary institutions in each district of India by 2030, including newly created and transformed institutions.

The call to transform and establish multidisciplinary institutions is a part of the larger scheme of total transformation and overhauling of Indian high education institutions. This re-orientation is suggested to take place in a time-bound but phased manner. The process of transformation has begun already, and news has started coming from different corners of the country about implementing 4-year integrated programs and converting existing institutions into multi-disciplinary institutions. The instances where IITs have started 4-year integrated B. Ed. program, is one of the examples. This process will go through different phases and forms, such as the creation, establishment, structuring, transformation, and development of educational institutions.

As at the center of this major change is multidisciplinaryity, one may find it relevant to address this idea before the discussion moves to the next part. Multidisciplinary education is an academic and pedagogical approach to developing multiple capacities in the intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical,

emotional, and moral domains, among the students inside and outside the classroom, by integrating formal and informal learning opportunities and teaching, research, and community engagements and promoting cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives and academic practice' (NIEPA, 2022: 114). Multidisciplinarity brings together, combines, and integrates multiple disciplines as the name itself indicates. Research methodology, analysis, data, content, and so many other aspects can be integrated to get a wider perspective on certain pressing issues. Scholars from across the disciplines can collaborate on matters of prime importance, whether they are academic or pragmatic in nature. Scholars with distinct disciplinary backgrounds will be able to share their expertise and perspectives and will evolve shared approaches to solve real-life, complex, and contemporary issues in hand. The diverse perspectives on given issues have more reasons to be successful in addressing the brutal challenges of the time. Multidisciplinarity brings diverse perspectives on issues and most prominently, it questions the persisting academic silos among different departments and disciplines that have the potential to open new windows to unseen worlds and ideas. Multidisciplinarity in a big way pushes to end the disciplinary fragmentation so that the focus on the challenges of real-life issues can be sharper. Multidisciplinarity brings diverse perspectives on issues and most prominently, it questions the persisting academic silos among different departments and disciplines that have the potential to open new windows to unseen worlds and ideas. Multidisciplinarity in a big way pushes to end the disciplinary fragmentation so that the focus on the challenges of real-life issues can be sharper (Chai & Pak 2008:351-365)

The trend to adopt a multidisciplinary approach and transform specialized institutions into multidisciplinary institutions is not a new idea, though it should be well recognized that NEP 2020 has made a significant push in this direction and made it a part of one of the major recommendations. Scholars around the world have woken up to the need for multidisciplinarity for a long, especially since the beginning of the 21st century (Kasturirangan, 2022). Some very relevant projects were taken, and studies were conducted because of this shared multidisciplinary approach. At the same time, institutions have started moving in the direction of transforming themselves into multidisciplinary institutions. For example, even before NEP was adopted and implemented, many technical and specialized institutions in the country started embracing different disciplines and other non-core disciplines. For example, IITs had departments of humanities and social sciences as well as management before NEP 2020 called for it. Highlighting this fact in no way undermines the value of work done by NEP 2020 or takes away credit from NEP for its bold call to transform all higher education institutions into multidisciplinary institutions. Institutions have already started to follow footsteps like IIT Delhi takes multiple initiatives towards implementing NEP 2020.

The model of multidisciplinary programs advanced by NEP 2020 is characterized by flexibility with special reference to curriculum. It offers options for multiple entry and exit. Students can continue the learning process while working in a real-life situation after taking exit from the course. It was also

made feasible that the students can earn credits in online and offline mode/ plurality of modes and these credits can be easily transferred from one institution to another where students want to shift through academic bank credits.

Critical Reflection: Is the Target Ambitious?

The call for introducing multi-disciplinary programs and institutions is not new but it is institutionalized on a notable scale with the NEP 2020 which advocated for a complete shift towards the multi-disciplinary institutions. There is no doubt about the relevance of this recommendation, but a host of factors play their roles between the intention and execution. It is argued that any target and the deadline must be accommodative of enabling factors as well as distracting factors that will crucially determine the feasibility of reaching the target on time. Some of the factors that will play a crucial role (which will be discussed in detail in the next section) include handholding and capacity-building of the stakeholders, including teachers and leaders who are required to play the role of institution builders.

The experience, if considered in any way a precedent of the future, suggests something different. The National Knowledge Commission ignited academic consciousness in 2009 when it said that the nation would create 1500 universities in India by the end of 2015 (NKC,2009: 14). It is to everyone's eyes that the target could not be met. Not being able to reach the defined target is a question mark to the credibility of promises, but that is not the only issue. The major problem is about the quality. Many institutions that are created at any given time lack the quality and element of sustainability; they are more visible in terms of infrastructure and less known in terms of academic excellence. Educational institutions should be the embodiment of the quality and characteristics that are meant for them. They should follow the due process and not only the tag of higher education institutions that they carry. In this light, when the projection made by NEP 2020 about the creation of multi-disciplinary institutions in each district by 2030 is seen, it looks ambitious though the target is appreciated. It requires structural institutional changes and supports to Institutions and teachers in this transition journey. Certain factors can make it happen, but they need to be well taken care of. That's why it demands scrutiny and analysis.

It is also worth mentioning that review is needed periodically to assess the progress internally at the institutional level as well as the national level regarding institution building. This monitoring may help to fix issues at various levels that arise during the implementation beforehand. The concern becomes significant at a time when the tendency is growing where colleges to be upgraded as universities just by changing the nomenclature without providing any meaningful support to them to grow as institutions. Such cases are reported in the media in alarming numbers.

Roadmap for the Transformation of HEI into MDI and UGC Guidelines

Transformation of higher education which is the main theme of this document simply suggests

that some broad moves are awaiting on the path to transformation. The first among the major steps vouched by the guideline is to characterize the single-stream stand-alone and specialized institution as multidisciplinary institutions that will offer broad-based and holistic education. This proposition has large implications for the nature and character of higher education institutions. This transformative measure paves ways to enhance institutional capacity to provide a platform for different disciplines to come together and offer multidisciplinary programs.

Some ways are suggested in the guidelines as per NEP 2020 recommendations which will facilitate the structural organizational, institutional, and procedural changes to realize the demand for multidisciplinary education keeping in mind the existing reality on the ground. It is suggested that those stand-alone, single-stream, and specialized institutions that are not in a position structurally to run multi-disciplinary programs should be merged with multidisciplinary institutions. It seems a practical suggestion because all such institutions may not be able to develop themselves in each time as multidisciplinary institutions due to financial, logical, and infrastructure limitations.

Another crucial step in this direction is engagement in the exercise of creating and adding new departments to materialize the cause of multi-disciplinary departments that will offer academic programs in multidisciplinary areas. Guidelines also aptly take the attention towards the serious engagement/ business of academic collaboration. Collaboration among institutions, scholars, faculty members, and administrative units will result in pooling the resources both in the forms of human and materialistic resources. Faculty and institutional expertise in respective areas, which remain many times underutilized within the four walls of the institution, will be shared with other institutions. Institutions can build cooperative partnerships and offer required support to each other institutions for the clusters and can engage in collaborative research for a smooth transition. In this journey of transformation, other measures include the 'student's orientation program' to make them aware of these changes such as multidisciplinary, career opportunities, academic bank, credit, etc.

Given the vastness of the country and the complexities involved in the process of transformation, the journey towards multidisciplinary institutions must be gradual and in a phased manner. It won't look practical that all the institutions on the same day will be able to implement all the changes. The story of policy implementation in the last four years since the launch of NEP 2020 officially is a testimony to it. Looking closely at this journey towards the establishment of multi-disciplinary institutions shows that it will take three forms, processes, and approaches; they are the 'transformed' multidisciplinary institutions, 'created multidisciplinary institutions', and 'developing multidisciplinary institutions. The details are presented in the following lines.

The thrust area of the document is the transformation of higher education institutions into multidisciplinary institutions. It is to be understood that the process of transformation is instituting a shift in the life of the institution which must go through the phases of transformation. During this process, the existing institutions will be reshaped and re-oriented to suit the demands of

multidisciplinarity. One can guess the existing institutions here will mean the single-stream stand-alone and specialized institutions passing through this process. The existing institution will undergo a drastic and fundamental change in the nature and organizational character of these institutions. This will culminate in the expansion of institutions as well as impetus will be provided to move ahead of disciplinary silos and become truly multidisciplinary.

In comparison to the aspects of ‘transformed’ multidisciplinary institutions that work well with existing institutions, ‘created’ multidisciplinary institutions imply building institutions from scratch. It will lead to a new institution with a fresh mandate, organizational structure, infrastructure, and operational system. The authors would like to project the addition of new departments to the existing institution under this category. So basically ‘created’ multidisciplinary institutions will include both the creation of totally new institutions as well as the establishment of new departments within existing institutions. The creation of new institutions and departments may not be an easy task on any parameter, but they have the advantage of remaining free from facing the transitional resistance or cultural shock that can be recurring themes in the transformative journey of existing institutions towards new models and apparatus. Newly founded institutions and departments may consist of people who are on the same page from day one, unified and cohesive by the same mission, vision, and rigor.

Whether it is the process of transformation or creation, the next stage is always followed by the process of consolidation of what has been achieved, created, and established in previous stages. This phase can be appropriately considered as the developmental stage in the life of institutions. Institution building is not a one-time activity. The institutions that emerged out of the transformative and creation journey need continuous support, routine intervention, and regular involvement/ engagement. The institution that is newly born or transformed needs space and support for its nurturing. The developmental aspect of institution building is part of the institutional evolutionary journey. Creating and transforming institutions is one part of the institutional journey. The other aspect from a long-term point of view is the sustainability and quality of the institution. Strengthening the system and capabilities is an ongoing regular exercise. In its developmental journey, regular monitoring, evaluation of progress made, and tracking the cyclical journey of educational institutions in the light of institutional objectives and goals is a routine requirement. Another fact that must be kept in mind is that the developmental process takes place, incrementally and gradually, and it will continue for the whole life cycle of the institution- part of the total evolutionary journey.

Institution-building Process in MDI: Why focus on Institution-building?

Evaluating and assessing institutions does not take our attention beyond what is visible. The quality of institutions is equated with the manifestation of physical elements within the four walls of the higher education institutions. They may include prominent infrastructure, neatly maintained records, photos, and videos of the different events, the number of faculty recruited and their profile available

on the online portal, the number of students enrolled in the institution, placement records, and research output. Everything that can be beautifully quantified is considered as bright evidence of institution building. We tend to believe all those on their face value. This uncritically shallow attitude to accept tangibly manifested aspects as the significant milestones of institution building is questionable. These all aspects mentioned above are the outcome. The process of institution building can be seen behind the 'face value' and 'surface reading'. The institution building is a process-oriented approach. This confusion in the minds of the masses may be attributed to the fact that they may lack the analytical view about the fine distinction between processes embedded in institutions and the infrastructure that is associated with institutions. But the overall less attention paid to studying 'institution building' by Indian academia is a striking feature.

Conclusion

Educational Institutions fail for many external reasons, but a big reason is the lack on the part of internal machinery within the institutions to understand and follow the process of institution building. The machinery overlooks the principles of institution building in its evolutionary journey and establishes itself on superficial foundations. The neglect of the institution-building process in favor of fulfilling quantitative parameters is bound to lead to institutional failure. Those educational institutions that merely stand as infrastructural and architectural manifestations without appropriate alignment of their routine activities with the vision and mission and other dimensions of institution building will sink into oblivion and leave behind the legacy as mediocre institutions. The lackadaisical attitude shown by many Indian institutions toward strengthening the system on the line of institution building may accelerate their fall and they may end as degenerated institutions.

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