

Beyond Formal Education: Reimagining Lifelong Learning Ecosystems under NEP 2020

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Abstract:

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 proposes a transition from age-bound educational provision towards flexible, multidisciplinary and continuing opportunities to learn. This article examines the emerging lifelong learning ecosystem through a documentary and descriptive analysis of official secondary sources, including the policy, All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), Ministry of Education annual reports, SWAYAM statistics and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS). A conceptual framework distinguishes access, participation, recognition, progression and learning outcomes. Official data reveal significant expansion in higher education enrolment and online course activity, yet they cannot by themselves establish equitable participation, durable skills acquisition or employment impact. The article argues that lifelong learning depends less on a single digital platform than on coordination among universities, vocational institutions, employers, local learning centres and regulatory systems. It proposes a learner-centred governance model with portable credits, counselling, multilingual provision, accessible assessment and transparent outcome measurement. The findings identify implementation priorities for public institutions and offer a cautiously evidence-based interpretation of the opportunities and constraints associated with NEP 2020.

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1. Introduction

The familiar model of education divides life into three periods: preparation through schooling, specialization through higher education and application through work. That sequence no longer adequately describes contemporary learning. People move between employment, caring responsibilities, migration, further study and technological change. Professional knowledge can become outdated while citizens also need opportunities for cultural, civic and personal development. Lifelong learning therefore concerns the capacity to enter, leave and re-enter organized learning without being permanently excluded by age, location or previous educational history.

In India this ambition is especially significant because the education system serves a population marked by sharp differences in geography, language, income, disability, gender and institutional opportunity. Expansion in formal higher education has been

considerable, but expansion alone does not guarantee that a working adult can return to study or that a course completed outside a university will be recognised by an employer. NEP 2020 places flexibility, multidisciplinary education, vocational integration, digital learning and adult education within a broader transformation agenda. Its promise lies in connecting these provisions into an ecosystem rather than treating them as isolated programmes.

An ecosystem is a network of interacting institutions, rules, technologies and people. A learner may begin with a community literacy programme, acquire a vocational certificate, pursue online modules, transfer credits to a degree, and subsequently undertake professional development. Such a pathway requires more than course availability. It needs reliable information, affordable access, appropriate teaching, trusted assessments, recognition of prior learning, financial support and compatible institutional rules. A fragmented arrangement can create the appearance of choice while leaving learners unable to convert participation into meaningful progression.

This paper evaluates the emerging architecture of lifelong learning under NEP 2020 with particular attention to higher education and its interfaces with adult education, skills and employment. It avoids treating policy intentions as achieved outcomes. Instead, it combines verified descriptive indicators with critical institutional analysis, explicitly identifying what available statistics can and cannot demonstrate.

2. Conceptual and Policy Foundations

Lifelong learning refers to learning across the whole life course and across formal, non-formal and informal settings. Lifewide learning adds attention to the multiple settings in which learning occurs: family, workplace, community, civic organizations and digital environments. A functional lifelong learning ecosystem should enable learning opportunities to be discovered, accessed, completed, assessed, recognized and used for further progression. These stages form a chain: failure at any one stage may undermine the value of all the others.

Human capital theory emphasizes productivity and employability, whereas a capabilities perspective asks whether individuals gain genuine freedom to pursue valued lives. These lenses should be used together. A course that improves occupational competence may have clear economic value, but literacy, critical thinking, environmental understanding and civic participation are also legitimate outcomes. A policy focused exclusively on employment indicators would overlook important public benefits; one focused exclusively on enrolment could overlook whether skills are actually learned. NEP 2020 encourages flexible curricular structures, multidisciplinary institutions, technology-supported learning, vocational exposure and adult education. It envisages increased higher education participation and stronger connections between education and skills. The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and the National Credit Framework (NCrF) are intended to facilitate accumulation and transfer of recognised learning, subject to applicable rules and institutional implementation. Multiple entry and exit arrangements seek to reduce the penalty associated with interrupted study. These measures are best interpreted as enabling architecture, not automatic guarantees of portability. Digital systems such as SWAYAM can extend the supply of courses beyond a campus. However, open enrolment should not be confused with open educational resources in the strict licensing sense: free access to view content does not necessarily confer permission to adapt or redistribute it. Nor does enrolment demonstrate learning completion. A credible ecosystem must maintain distinctions among course registration, assessment participation, certification, credit acceptance and longer-term educational or occupational benefit.

3. Review of Relevant Literature

International scholarship presents lifelong learning as a continuing social commitment rather than a remedial service for adults who missed schooling. UNESCO's lifelong learning perspective emphasizes inclusion, participation and learning across contexts.

Research on adult learning stresses relevance, self-direction, experience and practical barriers such as time and care work. Studies of digital education add that online provision expands geographical reach but may reproduce inequalities in connectivity, language, confidence and study support.

The literature on credit mobility draws attention to the tension between standardization and institutional autonomy. Common credit descriptors make qualifications more legible, yet institutions differ in curricular sequence, quality assurance, assessment practice and disciplinary expectations. The recognition of prior learning can reduce unnecessary repetition, but only where evidence standards are transparent and staff are trained to evaluate diverse forms of competence. Micro-credentials offer a possible bridge between short courses and formal qualifications; their value depends on trusted issuing bodies and demonstrable competencies.

For India, the policy debate has frequently highlighted SWAYAM, ABC and vocational integration as separate initiatives. An ecosystem perspective instead asks whether a learner can move reliably between them. This shift is analytically important because programme-level success can coexist with system-level fragmentation. The present study therefore treats institutional interoperability, inclusion and outcomes as central dimensions of implementation.

4. Objectives and Research Questions

The study has four objectives: to map the principal components of the lifelong learning architecture under NEP 2020; to examine selected official indicators of higher education and digital learning; to identify institutional and equity-related constraints; and to propose a feasible monitoring and governance framework. The corresponding questions are: What kinds of learning pathways does the policy enable? What does available secondary evidence reveal about scale and participation? Where are the critical discontinuities between access, completion and recognition? Which institutional arrangements could make lifelong learning more inclusive and credible?

5. Research Methodology

This is a qualitative policy analysis supported by descriptive secondary statistics. The documentary corpus includes NEP 2020, the Ministry of Education Annual Reports 2023–24 and 2024–25, the official AISHE 2021–22 release and the PLFS 2023–24 release. Sources were selected for institutional authority, relevance to the research questions and clear reporting periods. Data were transcribed from official tables or releases, retaining original definitions wherever possible.

The analysis follows four steps. First, policy provisions were classified into access, delivery, recognition, support and outcomes. Second, published statistics were organized by year and unit of measurement. Third, simple percentages were calculated where the numerator and denominator came from the same official table. Fourth, patterns were interpreted alongside known limitations of administrative data. No primary interviews, surveys or experiments were conducted, and no inferential causal claims are made. The numerical results should not be read as a representative estimate of all adult learners.

Administrative platform counts can include multiple course enrolments by one person. SWAYAM's 2024 enrolment count is therefore not a count of distinct lifelong learners. Similarly, the share certified among enrolments is a descriptive ratio, not necessarily a course dropout rate: learners may audit content without seeking certification, and certification requirements differ. The AISHE figure describes formal higher education, whereas PLFS labour indicators describe economic activity. These datasets illuminate different aspects of the ecosystem and cannot be merged into a single causal series.

6. Findings: Expansion and Participation

Official AISHE reporting indicates that enrolment in Indian higher education rose from approximately 3.42 crore in 2014–15 to 4.33 crore in 2021–22. The gross enrolment ratio increased from 23.7 to 28.4 over the same period. Female enrolment increased from

approximately 1.57 crore to 2.07 crore. These changes suggest a broader formal education base from which continuing education pathways might develop. They do not directly measure re-entry by working adults, short-course participation or the successful transfer of prior learning.

The Ministry of Education's 2024–25 annual report provides a more granular view of digital provision. Across the January and July 2024 SWAYAM semesters, it reports 2,677 courses run and 7,897,805 course enrolments, together with 1,896,181 examination registrations, 1,655,690 examination appearances and 1,138,106 certifications. The reported certified-to-enrolment ratio is approximately 14.4%, while certified-to-appeared is approximately 68.7%. These figures reflect different denominators and should not be described as a single completion rate.

The report also states that SWAYAM Plus, launched in February 2024, had over 150,000 registered learners and over 350 employability-focused courses as of 1 January 2025. It reported 58 industry partnerships and 90 courses aligned with NCrf. These developments indicate an attempt to connect online provision with labour-market needs. Whether partnerships lead to sustained employment improvements requires longitudinal evidence not supplied by the reported counts.

The PLFS 2023–24 indicates an overall labour force participation rate of 60.1% among persons aged 15 and above, with male and female rates of 78.8% and 41.7%, respectively. This gender gap is relevant to programme design because adult learners face unequal access to paid work, time, mobility and household resources. It would nevertheless be inappropriate to attribute any change in labour participation to NEP 2020 without an appropriate causal research design.

Table 1. Selected official indicators of ecosystem scale

Indicator	Period	Value	Source
Higher education enrolment	2014–15	3.42 crore	AISHE release
Higher education enrolment	2021–22	4.33 crore	AISHE release
Gross enrolment ratio	2021–22	28.4%	AISHE release
SWAYAM course enrolments	2024 semesters	7,897,805	MoE 2024–25
SWAYAM exam appearances	2024 semesters	1,655,690	MoE 2024–25
SWAYAM certifications	2024 semesters	1,138,106	MoE 2024–25
SWAYAM Plus learners	1 Jan 2025	Over 150,000	MoE 2024–25

Note. Indicators represent different populations and reporting periods and should not be combined as a single participation measure.

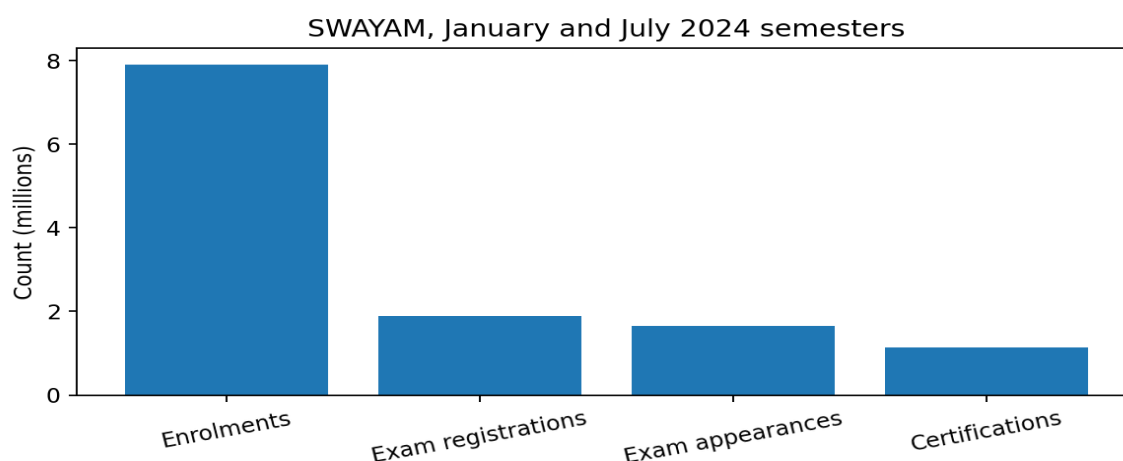


Figure 1. SWAYAM activity indicators, Ministry of Education Annual Report 2024–25. Distinct stages are not interchangeable.

Table 2. Analytical distinction between indicators

Measure	What it indicates	What it does not prove
Enrolments	Course registrations	Unique individuals or completion
Exam appearances	Assessment participation	Skills retained or credit accepted
Certifications	Awarded course certificates	Employment gain or degree completion
Credit transfer	Institutional recognition	Universal portability

7. The Architecture of a Lifelong Learning Ecosystem

An effective ecosystem requires a coordinated supply of learning opportunities. Universities and colleges can provide credit-bearing modules, professional development and flexible postgraduate offerings. Open universities and distance education institutions can serve geographically dispersed learners. Industrial training institutions and sector-specific providers contribute practical training. Community centres and libraries can support literacy, digital skills and guided access to online material. Employers can identify emerging competencies, provide workplace learning and recognize verified achievement. Public agencies must coordinate funding, quality and interoperable records.

The second component is a navigable learner pathway. Individuals need clear guidance about eligibility, course level, cost, duration, assessment and recognition. Information should be available in accessible formats and relevant languages. A learner with interrupted schooling may require foundational modules before advanced courses. Someone already employed may need evening or asynchronous delivery. A person with a disability may require captioning, screen-reader compatibility or adapted examinations. Flexibility is meaningful only when support matches the circumstances of the learner.

Third, credentials must be trustworthy and portable. Credit frameworks can help express learning volume and levels, but institutions must specify which courses count towards which awards. The receiving institution should publish its acceptance criteria in advance. Otherwise, learners risk accumulating certificates that do not advance their goals. Prior learning recognition can be particularly valuable for experienced workers, artisans and informal-sector participants, provided the assessment is rigorous, affordable and not biased against those without conventional documentation.

Fourth, digital infrastructure must be treated as a public learning utility rather than simply a website. Connectivity, devices, electricity, data affordability, platform usability and technical assistance all shape access. Digital learning centres located in colleges, libraries or local institutions can complement remote platforms. Downloadable resources, low-bandwidth versions and offline assessment preparation may help learners with unstable connections. Open licensing can also support translation and contextual adaptation where permissions allow.

Finally, lifelong learning requires feedback loops. Course evaluation should examine who enrolled, who participated, who completed, whose credits were accepted and whether learning supported subsequent study or work. Institutions should distinguish the performance of different learner groups without collecting unnecessary personal information. Monitoring systems need safeguards for privacy, consent, retention and appropriate access to educational records.

8. Equity, Quality and Institutional Constraints

The strongest argument for lifelong learning is also its most demanding test: it should reach people whom traditional systems have served poorly. Rural residents, women with unpaid care responsibilities, first-generation learners, low-income households, older adults and persons with disabilities may experience overlapping barriers. Free course content does not eliminate the costs of devices,

connectivity, travel to examinations or foregone earnings. An equitable programme must therefore measure affordability and support, not only tuition charges.

Language remains a significant issue. Learners may be comfortable with professional practice in a regional language but face English-dominant assessment. Translation alone may not solve this problem when technical terms, examples and teaching practices are culturally unfamiliar. Institutions should commission subject review and local adaptation, including accessible captioning and transcripts. Assessment should measure the intended competence rather than incidental linguistic disadvantage.

Quality assurance presents a different challenge. Rapid course production can expand options but create variability in instructional design and feedback. Learners need structured activities, formative assessment and opportunities to ask questions. For practice-oriented subjects, online instruction may need supervised laboratories, apprenticeships or workplace demonstrations. A credible blended model makes the limitations of each mode explicit instead of assuming that video lectures substitute for every kind of educational experience.

Institutional incentives also matter. Colleges may be reluctant to accept external credits if budgets, staffing and accountability remain tied to traditional course delivery. Teachers need workload recognition for mentoring online learners and evaluating portfolios. Employers need understandable credential descriptions rather than an uncontrolled proliferation of badges. Regulators should reduce unnecessary administrative friction while preserving minimum academic standards.

The digital divide is not a single access/no-access distinction. A learner may own a smartphone but lack a quiet space, adequate data or confidence to complete assessments. Accessible technology can also be undermined by inaccessible teaching materials. Hence evaluation should capture usable access, effective participation and successful progression. Such a layered understanding prevents policymakers from declaring inclusion merely because a portal is publicly available.

9. Discussion: From Programme Expansion to System Coherence

The findings reveal a difference between expanding provision and building a learning ecosystem. SWAYAM offers evidence of large-scale course activity; AISHE documents growth in formal enrolment; SWAYAM Plus demonstrates an emerging policy interest in employment-linked short courses. None of these statistics, taken alone, establishes that learners can consistently move from one opportunity to another. The next stage of implementation must therefore focus on the connections among programmes.

One promising approach is to organize provision around learner journeys rather than departmental schemes. Consider a returning learner who left college to work. The relevant question is not simply whether a MOOC exists, but whether the learner can receive counselling, identify an appropriate module, study with sufficient support, demonstrate competence and have the achievement accepted towards a recognized qualification. An ecosystem succeeds when these transitions are predictable. It fails when each institution imposes incompatible rules or when the learner must repeatedly prove the same competence.

The same logic applies to community and vocational learning. A skilled worker may possess expertise acquired outside classrooms. Recognition of prior learning should offer a transparent assessment pathway without equating experience automatically with credit. The institution should verify evidence against explicit outcomes and provide bridging instruction where necessary. This preserves standards while avoiding the wasteful assumption that all learning begins with formal enrolment.

The evidence also counsels caution about employment narratives. Lifelong learning may improve skills and adaptability, but labour-market outcomes depend on job availability, discrimination, local industries and economic conditions. The PLFS indicators show why economic participation matters, yet they cannot demonstrate the effect of a particular course. A stronger evidence base would

link consent-based learner follow-up with employment transitions, wage changes, continued study and self-reported agency, using appropriate comparison designs.

The proposed model therefore emphasizes five linked stages: discovery, access, supported participation, validated recognition and progression. Each stage requires its own indicators. Reporting only the number of courses or registrations encourages supply-side expansion without demonstrating learner value. Reporting only certificates may undervalue informal learning, but certificates remain important when a learner seeks formal recognition. A balanced scorecard should incorporate both outcomes and legitimate diversity of learning purposes.

10. Policy Recommendations

First, each higher education institution should publish a lifelong learning policy that identifies entry routes, credit acceptance rules, prior-learning assessment procedures and learner support services. A designated coordinator can help connect departments, vocational partners and digital platforms. Institutional policies should be aligned with applicable national regulations but written in language that students and working adults can understand.

Second, public investment should support assisted digital learning. Local study hubs, libraries and community institutions can provide devices, internet access, accessible workstations and academic guidance. Support should be prioritized using transparent evidence of need rather than the volume of platform registrations alone. Financial assistance may be especially important for examination costs, travel and childcare.

Third, course design should adopt multilingual and accessibility standards from the beginning. This includes transcripts, captioning, readable materials, alternative formats, accessible assessment and locally meaningful examples. Quality assurance should evaluate both subject accuracy and learner experience. Open educational resources should use clearly specified licences when adaptation and redistribution are intended.

Fourth, credit portability needs operational transparency. Universities should maintain current catalogues of eligible courses, equivalence rules and procedures for appeal. Recognition of prior learning should employ trained assessors, published rubrics and moderation. Learners should be informed before enrolment whether a short course carries academic credit, an industry certificate or only a participation record.

Fifth, institutions should partner with employers without allowing short-term vacancies to define all educational priorities. Courses should support transferable skills, critical thinking and ethical judgment alongside occupation-specific competence. Industry partners can contribute practical projects and assessments, while academic institutions retain responsibility for educational standards and broader learning outcomes.

Sixth, government reporting should separate unique learners from course enrolments and disaggregate outcomes by relevant equity categories where lawful and statistically reliable. Indicators should include supported participation, assessment success, credit acceptance, continuation into further learning and employment-related outcomes. Privacy protections and transparent definitions are essential for trustworthy monitoring.

Seventh, independent evaluations should examine whether flexible pathways reduce exclusion. Longitudinal cohorts and carefully designed comparisons could test the effects of counselling, local learning hubs, multilingual instruction and credit transfer. Such evaluations would provide stronger evidence than descriptive growth statistics and help direct scarce resources to effective interventions.

11. Conclusion

NEP 2020 offers a substantial policy foundation for lifelong learning in India, particularly through curricular flexibility, digital platforms, credit frameworks, vocational connections and renewed attention to adult education. Official statistics demonstrate a growing base of formal higher education and substantial online course activity. They also reveal the need to distinguish registrations from meaningful educational outcomes. The central implementation challenge is not merely to increase the number of courses, but to ensure that learners can enter, persist, receive credible recognition and progress across institutional boundaries.

A resilient lifelong learning ecosystem must be inclusive, academically credible, administratively interoperable and sensitive to local conditions. Universities, open learning institutions, community centres, employers and public agencies each have indispensable roles. When these actors coordinate around the learner rather than around separate programmes, lifelong learning can become a practical opportunity for social participation, professional renewal and personal development. Future research should prioritize longitudinal outcomes and direct evidence from adult learners, especially those facing multiple barriers to participation.

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