

# The Coming Liberal Arts Wave in India

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There are clear indications that India's higher education sector will ride a liberal arts wave in the 2020s. This is evident from the success of universities like Ashoka University and the emergence of several other similar private institutions emphasizing liberal arts education and even offering bachelor degrees in liberal arts. The signs are also visible in recent initiatives by some of the country's leading public institutions—including select branches of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIITs), and the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs)—to launch new degree programs that combine courses in their core areas of engineering and management with courses in the liberal arts.

IIT-Bombay has launched a unique liberal arts, science, and engineering (LASE) program. IIIT-Delhi offers a BTech in computer science and the social sciences. IIM-Bangalore will soon begin an undergraduate program in the liberal arts. While all these initiatives signal the coming of a liberal arts wave in India, none is more significant than the recommendations made in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which has effectively legitimized the liberal arts trend. And while NEP 2020 does not explicitly state as such, it is quite evident from the 2019 draft version of the document that India's policy makers are hoping that a greater emphasis on the liberal arts—understood primarily as multidisciplinary education—will improve the low employability rates of college graduates.

## Abstract

India's higher education sector is likely to witness a liberal arts wave in the 2020s. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes multidisciplinary education as the path forward. This is also expected to boost the employability of college graduates. However, it will not happen without a broader set of reforms across the higher education sector—in areas such as governance, regulatory structures, institutional autonomy, and others—to improve the overall quality of college education.

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### NEP 2020 and Liberal Arts

India’s universities have traditionally offered three-year undergraduate degrees with a specialization in one discipline, without offering students the opportunity to take up a sufficient number and variety of courses outside that discipline. This means that in obtaining a college degree, students acquired deep knowledge in one subject area and almost none in others, unless they did so on their own. NEP 2020 aims to replace the current system with a four-year multidisciplinary education.

In its section on higher education, NEP 2020 identifies “a rigid separation of disciplines, with early specialization and streaming of students into narrow areas of study” as one of the main problems in higher education. As a solution, it “envisions a complete overhaul and reenergizing of the higher education system” including “moving towards a more multidisciplinary undergraduate education.” It justifies this shift by citing the examples of India’s ancient universities, such as Takshashila and Nalanda, and extensive interdisciplinary literature. Accordingly, it emphasizes that the “knowledge of many arts or what in modern times is often called the ‘liberal arts’ (i.e., a liberal notion of the arts) must be brought back to Indian education.”

Further, NEP 2020 asserts that “a holistic and multidisciplinary education” is needed “to lead the country into the 21st century and the fourth industrial revolution,” and calls for all higher education institutions to become multidisciplinary by 2040—so that engineering students take up more liberal arts courses, while arts and humanities students learn more science.

Since NEP 2020 was approved by the government in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has taken a while for the central and state governments to begin implementing its recommendations, including multidisciplinary education. For example, an 18-member task force, appointed by the state of Maharashtra under noted scientist Dr. R. A. Mashelkar, only recently submitted its [report](#), including a timeline for the implementation of several NEP 2020 recommendations.

### Why Liberal Arts?

One of the main challenges of India’s higher education today is providing reasonably good quality mass education to the considerable, and ever growing number of college students, so that they are employable. The number of students has increased from 30.2 million in 2012–2013 to 38.5 million in 2019–2020, and, worryingly, the employability rate of college graduates has remained below 50 percent.

While NEP 2020 does not acknowledge that one of the primary reasons for recommending multidisciplinary education is to improve student employability, the much lengthier and detailed 2019 draft version of the document does so on several occasions. For example, it states that “the purpose of a liberal arts education is not simply to prepare for one’s first job, but also for one’s second job, third job, and beyond. With the coming fourth industrial revolution, and the rapidly changing employment landscape, a liberal arts education is more important and useful for one’s employment than ever before.”

The [2021 India Skills Report](#) offers some interesting insights into the employability rates of college graduates under the current system. Only 45.9 percent of college graduates are considered employable, of which engineering graduates are the most employable at 46.8 percent, followed by MBA graduates at 46.6 percent. However, only 12.6 percent of undergraduate students are in engineering and technology. Interestingly, arts graduates do not fare badly compared to those with engineering or business degrees. 40.3 percent of arts graduates are employable, far more than science graduates, whose employability is at 30 percent. These figures are important because 32.7 percent of all undergraduate students are enrolled in arts/humanities/social sciences, compared to 16 percent in science and 14.9 percent in commerce.

The higher employability of students with arts degrees augurs well for India’s young population and more so if their employability continues to improve. At the same time, it seems that science students, in particular, might benefit from taking more liberal arts courses.

Overall, however, with less than 50 percent of college graduates considered employable, India is facing a deep crisis. While employability figures have gone up by a few

percentage points from 37.2 percent in 2015 to just under 50 percent today, they are still disappointing.

### **The Real Challenge: Improving the Quality of Education**

The central issue in India's higher education is not whether or how liberal arts can improve employability or lead India into the twenty-first century, but whether specific steps can be taken for India's universities to improve the quality of education across the board, which in turn would certainly improve graduate employability. For example, it is quite unreasonable to think that the employability of the 70 percent of science graduates considered unemployable will increase significantly if they take some liberal arts courses.

While the turn toward multidisciplinary education is laudable, it will be insufficient to push employability rates upward significantly. Employability will only improve with a broader set of changes including better governance of universities, reform in regulatory structures, institutional autonomy, recruitment of better-qualified faculty, and much more. Such reforms are, of course, recommended in NEP 2020. For example, the document states that "[t]he Board of Governors (BoG) of an institution will be empowered to govern the institution free of any external interference, make all appointments including that of head of the institution, and take all decisions regarding governance." However, anyone remotely familiar with the actual functioning and governance of public universities knows how improbable it is that the appointment of vice-chancellors will become free of political interference. No one should be under the illusion that things will change because NEP 2020 says so.

In the absence of deep, fundamental changes in terms of how India's universities are run, the coming liberal arts wave will promise much, but deliver much less for India's college students. ▲

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*These are his personal views.*