ASPIRING TO VISHWAGURU:
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON POLICY AND PRACTICE IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

India's aspiration to reclaim its historical role as *Vishwaguru* a global teacher and leader in knowledge production has emerged as a fundamental narrative in contemporary higher education policy, (NEP) 2020. Framed around the ambition of transforming India into a "centre of global knowledge" by 2040, the policy emphasizes multidisciplinary education, research excellence, internationalization, and equity. This paper critically examines the extent to which such policy aspirations align with institutional realities within Indian universities. Drawing on a synthesis of policy documents, academic literature, and analyses of recent critical trends, the study traces out the evolution of India's higher education and vision from ancient Gurukul traditions to neoliberal reform agendas, highlighting enduring tensions between symbolic claims of global leadership and structural constraints. The paper reveals the significant gaps between policy rhetoric and implementation. While initiatives such as the National Research Foundation, regulatory restructuring, and expanded access aim to enhance innovation and inclusivity, persistent challenges including inadequate funding, infrastructural deficits, faculty shortages, and widening socio-economic disparities undermine these goals. it concludes, requires addressing systemic inequities through accountable governance, equitable resource allocation, and sustained institutional support, without which India's ambitions may remain largely aspirational.

Keywords: Vishwaguru, National education policy 2020, Higher education reform, Policy-practice, Educational inequality.

Introduction

India's ambition to reclaim its historical stature as *Vishwaguru* a global teacher and centre of knowledge has become a central aspect in contemporary higher education discourse and policymaking. It has entrenched in civilizational narratives of India's ancient *gurukul* traditions and philosophical contributions to global knowledge, this aspiration has been institutionalized most recently in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which positions higher education reform as central to India's emergence as a "global knowledge superpower" by 2040. While the *Vishwaguru* ideal evokes a narrative of cultural pride and intellectual leadership, critical academic perspectives compel us to interrogate the disjunctions between rhetorical ambition and policy implementation, enlightening systemic constraints that menace rendering the *Vishwaguru* project aspirational rather than realistic.

NEP 2020 embodies the most comprehensive transformation of India's education policy in decades, with explicit assurances to expand access, enhance quality, adoptive multidisciplinary learning, and internationalize Indian higher education. It proposes structural reforms such as the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to rationalize governance and replace multiple regulatory bodies, the creation of a National Research Foundation (NRF) to catalyse research, and the promotion of multidisciplinary institutions capable of global engagement. The policy also targets a significant increase in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to 50 percent by 2035 and aims to make Indian institutions competitive on the world stage through international collaborations, credit mobility, and recognition of foreign credentials.

However, critical scholarship highlights the persistent structural and implementation challenges that obscure the realization of these goals. India's higher education system suffers from enduring underinvestment. public expenditure on education remains below UNESCO's recommended benchmark of 6 percent of GDP, constraining infrastructure, research capacity, and institutional support. Despite the NEP's ambitions, research spending in India flies around 0.7 percent of GDP, trailing far behind global competitors such as China and the United States, which spend approximately 2.4 percent and 3.5 percent respectively. This funding gap has direct implications for research output, faculty recruitment, and the ability of universities to attract and retain talent aspects fundamental to any credible claim to global knowledge leadership.

The human resource crisis in Indian higher education further undermines policy aspirations. A significant proportion of faculty positions in universities and colleges remain vacant, with shortages particularly acute in public institutions and specialized fields. Bureaucratic hiring processes, inadequate compensation, and limited professional development opportunities deter qualified scholars from academic careers, contributing to quality deficits in instruction and mentoring. Without addressing such foundational challenges, reforms emphasizing multidisciplinary curricula and research excellence risk remaining superficial.

The policy, practice gap is additional exacerbated by disparities in institutional capacity and regional development. While elite academic institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institute of Science (IISc) Bangalore have achieved higher visibility in global rankings, the broader ecosystem is uneven. Many state universities and colleges struggle with inadequate infrastructure, limited digital connectivity, and uneven faculty quality, especially in rural and socio-economically marginalized regions. The uneven distribution of quality institutions limits the scope of equitable access and weakens the case for a cohesive national strategy for global engagement.

The discourse of internationalization and India's attractiveness as a global education destination reveals further paradoxes. NEP 2020 encourages the establishment of foreign university campuses in India and the expansion of international collaborations as strategies for global visibility. However, institutional capacity constraints such as limited infrastructure for international students, a dearth of faculty dedicated to global engagement, and weak industry linkages pose significant barriers to achieving meaningful internationalization. A recent evaluation of institutional readiness found that a substantial proportion of universities lack the necessary administrative structures and collaborative networks to engage effectively with global partners, calling into question the feasibility of ambitious internationalization targets.

Socio-economic inequalities also remain embedded in the higher education landscape, complicating the narrative of inclusive global leadership. Despite policy provisions aimed at expanding access for underrepresented groups, disparities in educational attainment persist along lines of caste, class, gender, and geography. The cost of higher education beyond tuition, including living expenses and opportunity costs continues to pose barriers for economically disadvantaged students, even when scholarships and fee waivers are available. Such inequities are compounded by uneven digital infrastructure, which limits access to emerging modes of instruction and online learning opportunities, thereby reinforcing existing divides rather than ameliorating them.

The *Vishwaguru* narrative itself has drawn critique for its symbolic and ideological dimensions. While proponents frame it as a reclamation of India's historical contributions to global knowledge, critics argue that such civilizational rhetoric risks perplexing material policy challenges and reframing systemic problems as cultural or nationalist achievements. This can lead to a form of performative policymaking, where bold slogans overshadow the hard, incremental work required to build robust institutions and address entrenched inequities. The risk is that lofty visions of global leadership may become decoupled from the lived realities of students, faculty, and institutions struggling with basic operational challenges.

Significantly, critical perspectives do not dismiss the potential of NEP 2020 and related reforms; rather, they emphasize the need for grounded, context-sensitive implementation that prioritizes systemic strengthening. Achieving India's *Vishwaguru* aspiration necessitates sustained public investment in higher education, transparent and participatory governance mechanisms, and policies that centre equity and academic freedom. Enhanced accountability frameworks should balance

autonomy with support for institutional capacity building, ensuring that universities are both empowered and resourced to accomplish their mandates. Moreover, integration of global engagement goals with local needs requires strategies that build strong domestic foundations such as improving digital infrastructure, fostering industry–academia linkages, and strengthening research ecosystems across a wider array of institutions rather than concentrating excellence in a select few.

However, the *Vishwaguru* aspiration is not without contestation. Critical perspectives draw attention to structural deficits, implementation gaps, ideological underpinnings, and the socio-economic realities of Indian higher education. This essay examines the *Vishwaguru* discourse through a nuanced policy and practice lens, foregrounding both its potentials and the persistent challenges that obscure its realisation.

Methodology

This study has used qualitative methodology which evaluates the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the *Vishwaguru* discourse. The methodological framework involves a systematic documentary analysis of supplementary government frameworks, alongside a comprehensive review of literature that locates the *Vishwaguru* narrative within broader postcolonial and neoliberal contexts. The study traces the pedagogical evolution of Indian higher education from traditional Gurukul systems to contemporary market-oriented reforms, highlighting the persistent tensions between symbolic civilizational claims and material institutional realities. Furthermore, the analysis incorporates comparative trend assessment, utilizing secondary data on Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), public expenditure as a percentage of GDP, and research and development (R&D) output to empirically evaluate the "policy-practice gap". This multi-dimensional approach facilitates a nuanced critique of the *Vishwaguru* project as both a nationalist performative strategy and a transformative educational aspiration.

Discussion and findings

The term *Vishwaguru* appears in political rhetoric and policy narratives as a symbolic ideal of India as a global knowledge leader. Historically, it invokes India's rich philosophical, scientific, and pedagogical traditions, suggesting an educational system that not only serves domestic needs but also contributes to global intellectual leadership.

The Scholastic work emphasizes the *Vishwaguru* ideal has been interpreted as both a pedagogical imperative and a geopolitical aspiration. For example, Sullivan de Estrada (2023) situates *Vishwaguru* within broader civilisational imaginaries and global hierarchies, arguing that such discourse often reflects deeper struggles over recognition in international order, shaped by historical experiences of colonialism and postcolonial assertion. In this framing, *Vishwaguru* is not just rhetorical nostalgia, it embodies a claim to transform global hierarchies through pedagogical influence.

Vishwaguru in Policy: NEP 2020 and Educational Reform

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is central to contemporary articulations of *Vishwaguru* in Indian education policy. The NEP marks a comprehensive restoration of the education system, with specific attention to higher education. Its proponents portray the policy as a vehicle for restoring India's intellectual leadership, enhancing quality, and making Indian education globally competitive. According to policy advocates, NEP 2020 aims to transition higher education institutions into multidisciplinary, research-oriented universities with autonomy, enhanced governance, and greater international engagement.

The NEP's higher education reforms include:

- Restructuring institutions into categories such as research universities and teaching universities.
- Replacing existing regulatory bodies with a single Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to streamline quality assurance and autonomy.
- Promoting flexible credit systems and multidisciplinary learning.
- Encouraging Indian institutions to attract international students and collaborations.

Policy documents explicitly connect these reforms to the *Vishwaguru* vision. For instance, endorsed analyses and implementational frameworks state that the "restoring Indias status as VishwaGuru," arguing that education must align with ancient knowledge traditions while meeting global demands for innovation and competitiveness.

Internationalisation and Soft Power

A key dimension of the *Vishwaguru* narrative is the internationalisation of Indian higher education. This includes increasing foreign student enrolment, building global partnerships, and promoting Indian campuses abroad. The *Study in India* initiative and proposals for Indian universities to establish international campuses exemplify this strategy. Advocates argue that such measures will position India as an alternative global education hub, challenging long-dominant Western institutions.

Beyond conventional academic measures, internationalisation is framed as a soft-power tool. Education, in this view, becomes a vehicle for sharing cultural values, fostering cross-cultural dialogue, and reinforcing India's global influence. This resonates with broader diplomatic strategies that foreground India's civilisational heritage and pluralistic ethos.

Critical Perspectives

Despite the ideological appeal of *Vishwaguru*, critics raise several substantive concerns regarding both policy substance and implementation:

1. Structural Challenges and Quality Gaps

Critiques point out that India's higher education system continues to grapple with deep-seated structural problems limited research capacity, faculty shortages, and inadequate funding that constrain global competitiveness. India's research output, for example, remains below that of major competitors, with low investment in research and development. The shortage of qualified faculty and bureaucratic hiring processes further impede progress.

The systemic research culture, or lack thereof, raises questions about the feasibility of transforming Indian institutions into world leaders without substantial reform in funding mechanisms, faculty development, and institutional incentives for research excellence.

2. Implementation Gaps and Policy Ambiguity

While NEP 2020 outlines an ambitious agenda, actual implementation has been uneven. Critics note that policy frameworks often lack of intelligibility on timelines, resources, and accountability mechanisms. The transition to multidisciplinary institutions and the reform of regulatory bodies like UGC and AICTE require robust political will and capacity at state and institutional levels areas fraught with complexity.

Moreover, while revised visa norms and student attraction strategies are discussed, improvements in campus infrastructure, safety, and support systems for international students are still works in progress, which undermines the global appeal of Indian universities.

3. Socio-Economic Inequities and Accessibility

An enduring critique relates to the socio-economic divide within Indian higher education. Aspirations to global leadership co-exist with persistent disparities in access and quality across regions, caste groups, and income levels. Research highlights significant digital divides and educational inequalities, with historically disadvantaged groups facing barriers to both access and learning outcomes. Without addressing these inequities, the *Vishwaguru* rhetoric risks accentuating elite institutions' advancements while leaving systemic marginalisation unaddressed.

4. Ideological Shifts and Cultural Contention

The *Vishwaguru* discourse is entangled with broader cultural and political narratives. For some critics, it reflects a civilisational nationalism that foregrounds certain knowledge traditions at the expense of pluralistic academic inquiry. While

NEP 2020 emphasises Indian knowledge systems, detractors caution against an uncritical elevation of tradition over critical, evidence-based education, arguing that global leadership also requires openness to diverse epistemologies.

Some scholars question whether invoking civilisational grandeur distracts from practical, ground-level investments in quality education infrastructure and global academic standards. The Oxford Academic analysis suggests that how *Vishwaguru* is constructed whether as cooperative or exclusionary matters for its global pedagogic project.

5. Rhetoric vs. Reality: Realistic Appraisal

Popular discourse outside formal policy often reflects a tension between aspiration and reality. Commentators and public debates oscillate between pride in India's potential and scepticism about current capabilities. Some argue that India's global standing in research, innovation, infrastructure, and economic strength remains aspirational rather than concrete point that resonates with broader assessments of India's international economic and political influence. (Public opinion forums and social commentary frequently underline this dichotomy between projected image and empirical capacity.

Policy and Practice: Examples and Emerging Trends

In practice, efforts to operationalise *Vishwaguru* include:

Industry–Academia Linkages: Calls for stronger synergy between education and industry are seen as critical to making Indian graduates employable and institutions globally respected. This aligns with NEP's emphasis on vocational integration and industry engagement.

Digitisation and MOOCs: Expansion of digital platforms like SWAYAM, Virtual Labs, and MOOCs provides scalable models for wider access and could enhance international reach, especially for lifelong learners and global audiences. These initiatives reflect India's potential to innovate in digital education.

Soft Power Diplomacy: Educational exchanges, cultural promotion, and strategic international partnerships are increasingly integrated into diplomatic engagements, linking higher education with global cultural outreach.

The narrative of *Vishwaguru* in Indian higher education represents both an aspirational vision and a contested policy terrain. On one hand, it inspires bold reform agendas, encourages global engagement, and calls for a reimagined role for India in knowledge leadership. The NEP 2020 and related initiatives provide an unprecedented policy framework capable of transforming institutional structures, pedagogy, and internationalisation. If effectively implemented, these reforms could enhance India's global academic footprint.

On the other hand, without systemic change in funding, quality assurance, equity, and research culture, the *Vishwaguru* aspiration risks remaining symbolic rather than substantive. Critical voices highlight the gaps between rhetoric and practice, the need to foreground inclusivity, and the dangers of ideological instrumentalization of education. These perspectives underscore that global leadership in education is not achieved by narrative alone; it requires sustained investment in human capital, institutional capacity, and a commitment to pluralistic, evidence-based scholarship.

Conclusion

The aspiration to achieve India as a *Vishwaguru*a or global teacher and leader in knowledge production has become a narrative in contemporary higher education policy and discourse. It rooted in civilizational reminiscence and articulated through the modern reform frameworks such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, this vision seeks to restore India's historical role as a centre of learning while responding to the demands of a globalised, knowledge-driven economy. This paper found that the *Vishwaguru* ideal offers both a compelling aspirational horizon and a complex aspects of policy and practice challenges that demand critical engagement.

On the one hand, the *Vishwaguru* discourse has generated renewed momentum for reform in Indian higher education. Policy initiatives promoting institutional autonomy, multidisciplinary learning, research orientation, digital innovation, and

internationalisation reflect a serious attempt to align Indian universities with global academic standards. The emphasis on Indian Knowledge Systems and cultural self-confidence also signs a departure from postcolonial dependency models, seeking instead to contribute distinct epistemic perspectives to global scholarship. The *Vishwaguru* aspiration purposes as a catalytic narrative mobilising political will, public imagination, and institutional ambition toward systemic transformation. Moreover, critical perspectives underscore the significant gap between rhetorical ambition and structural capacity. Persistent challenges including uneven quality across institutions, underfunded research ecosystems, faculty shortages, bureaucratic governance, and deep socio-economic inequalities continue to constrain India's higher education system. Without addressing these foundational issues, the pursuit of global leadership risks privileging elite institutions while marginalising large sections of the academic population. Moreover, the uneven implementation of NEP reforms across states and institutions raises questions about policy coherence, accountability, and sustainability.

Similarly, the ideological dimension of the *Vishwaguru* narrative. While the recovery of indigenous knowledge traditions can enrich academic plurality, there is a risk that civilisational rhetoric may overshadow critical inquiry, academic freedom, and methodological rigor if not carefully balanced. Global academic leadership requires openness to diverse epistemologies, robust peer review, and sustained engagement with international scholarly communities. A narrow or exclusionary interpretation of *Vishwaguru* may therefore undermine, rather than enhance, India's credibility as a global knowledge leader.

Eventually, becoming a *Vishwaguru* in higher education cannot be achieved through symbolism or policy proclamations alone. It requires long-term investment in human capital, equitable access to quality education, a vibrant research culture, and governance structures that support innovation and accountability. More fundamentally, it demands a reimagining of global leadership not as dominance or cultural assertion, but as collaborative knowledge production grounded in inclusivity, critical thinking, and social responsibility.

Finally, the aspiration to *Vishwaguru* represents a significant moment of self-reflection and strategic ambition within Indian higher education. Its realization will depend on the extent to which policy and practice move beyond idealized narratives to address material and structural realities, reconcile tradition with modern academic frameworks, and ensure that global engagement remains both intellectually rigorous and socially unbiased. Only through such critical alignment can India transform this aspiration from a symbolic ideal into enduring educational leadership.

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