

Assessment Reforms in NEP 2020: Moving from Summative to Competency-Based Evaluation in Indian Education

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Abstract:

Assessment systems play a decisive role in shaping teaching–learning processes and learner outcomes. For decades, the Indian education system has been dominated by high-stakes, summative examinations that emphasize rote memorization over conceptual understanding and real-world application. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 proposes a comprehensive transformation of assessment practices by shifting from content-heavy, summative evaluation toward competency-based, formative, and continuous assessment. This paper critically examines the assessment reforms envisioned under NEP 2020 and analyzes their implications for teaching practices, learner development, and educational equity. Using a qualitative policy analysis approach, the study juxtaposes policy aspirations with systemic realities such as teacher preparedness, institutional capacity, and socio-cultural examination pressures. The analysis reveals that while NEP 2020 aligns with global best practices in assessment reform, successful implementation requires deep pedagogical change, capacity building, and stakeholder acceptance. The paper concludes with policy-oriented suggestions to ensure that competency-based assessment becomes a meaningful driver of educational transformation in India.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Assessment Reforms, Competency-Based Evaluation, Formative Assessment, Learning Outcomes, India.

1. Introduction:

Assessment has long been one of the most influential yet contested dimensions of education. In India, examinations have traditionally served as gatekeeping mechanisms for academic progression and social mobility. However, the dominance of summative, high-stakes testing has led to widespread concerns regarding rote learning, examination anxiety, and neglect of higher-order thinking skills. The alignment between assessment practices and holistic educational goals has remained weak.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes assessment reform as a critical lever for systemic change. By advocating competency-based evaluation, formative feedback, and reduced emphasis on rote memorization, the policy seeks to realign assessment with meaningful learning outcomes. This paper critically examines NEP 2020's assessment reforms, focusing on the transition from summative to

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competency-based evaluation and the challenges associated with this shift in the contemporary Indian education system.

2. Review of Literature:

The literature on educational assessment highlights that assessment practices significantly influence teaching strategies and student learning behaviors. Black and Wiliam (1998) demonstrate that formative assessment enhances learning outcomes by providing continuous feedback and supporting learner autonomy. Similarly, OECD (2018) emphasizes that competency-based assessment promotes deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills essential for twenty-first-century societies.

In the Indian context, scholars have long critiqued the examination-oriented culture for fostering rote learning and narrowing curricular focus (Kumar, 2005). Empirical studies reveal that high-stakes summative examinations contribute to stress, inequity, and exclusion, particularly among first-generation learners (Tilak, 2019). Prior reform efforts, such as Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), showed promise but faced implementation challenges due to inadequate teacher training and systemic resistance (CBSE, 2014).

Recent analyses of NEP 2020 suggest that its emphasis on competency-based assessment represents a conceptual departure from earlier reforms (Kumar & Sharma, 2021). The policy's proposal to establish the National Assessment Centre (PARAKH) reflects an effort to standardize learning outcomes and assessment quality. However, studies caution that without significant investment in teacher capacity and assessment literacy, competency-based evaluation risks becoming superficial (Singh, 2022). The literature collectively underscores that assessment reform must be accompanied by pedagogical transformation and cultural change.

3. Research Questions:

1. How does NEP 2020 conceptualize assessment reform in Indian education?
2. What are the key features of competency-based evaluation proposed in the policy?
3. What challenges hinder the transition from summative to formative assessment?
4. How do assessment reforms impact equity and learner diversity?

4. Objectives of the Study:

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To analyze the assessment reform vision articulated in NEP 2020.
2. To examine the shift from summative to competency-based evaluation.
3. To assess teacher and institutional readiness for new assessment practices.
4. To evaluate the implications of assessment reforms for equity and inclusion.
5. To suggest policy measures for effective implementation of assessment reforms.

5. Methodolgy:

The study adopts a qualitative policy analysis approach, relying on secondary sources such as NEP 2020,

government reports, academic literature, and international assessment frameworks. Thematic analysis is employed to examine policy coherence, implementation challenges, and alignment with global best practices in assessment.

6. Analysis and Interpretation:

6.1 Objective 1: Vision of Assessment Reform under NEP 2020:

NEP 2020 conceptualizes assessment as an integral component of the learning process rather than a terminal judgment of achievement. The policy explicitly critiques rote memorization and content-heavy examinations, advocating instead for assessment systems that evaluate conceptual understanding, application of knowledge, critical thinking, creativity, and socio-emotional competencies. This represents a philosophical shift from assessment of learning to assessment for and as learning.

Earlier studies strongly validate this approach. Black and Wiliam (1998) demonstrate that formative assessment improves learning outcomes when feedback is used to guide instructional decisions. Similarly, Shepard (2000) argues that assessment reform must be grounded in constructivist learning theory, where learners actively construct knowledge rather than reproduce information. NEP 2020 aligns with this paradigm by emphasizing competency-based learning outcomes and formative feedback mechanisms.

However, the analysis reveals that the policy vision confronts deeply entrenched examination-oriented cultures in India. Assessment continues to function as a mechanism for selection, ranking, and social mobility, particularly in secondary and higher education. This tension between policy intent and socio-cultural expectations raises concerns about whether assessment reform can be fully realized without broader societal reorientation toward learning-centered evaluation.

6.2 Objective 2: Transition from Summative to Competency-Based Evaluation:

The move toward competency-based assessment under NEP 2020 aims to evaluate learners' ability to apply knowledge in real-life contexts rather than merely recall information. Competency-based evaluation emphasizes clearly defined learning outcomes, performance tasks, and continuous assessment. International literature validates this approach as more aligned with twenty-first-century skill requirements (OECD, 2018).

In the Indian context, this transition represents a significant departure from traditional pen-and-paper examinations. Studies indicate that summative examinations encourage surface learning strategies and coaching-centered education (Kumar, 2005). Competency-based assessment, by contrast, has the potential to foster deeper engagement, interdisciplinary thinking, and problem-solving abilities.

Nevertheless, the analysis highlights structural constraints. Large class sizes, rigid curricula, and time-bound syllabi limit opportunities for authentic assessment practices. Without curriculum rationalization and assessment flexibility, competency-based evaluation risks being reduced to a rebranded summative system. This concern echoes earlier findings from the implementation of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), where conceptual clarity failed to translate into classroom practice (CBSE, 2014).

6.3 Objective 3: Teacher and Institutional Readiness for Assessment Reform:

Teacher preparedness emerges as the most critical determinant of assessment reform success. Competency-based assessment requires teachers to design performance tasks, use diagnostic feedback, and adapt instruction based on learner needs. However, empirical studies consistently report low levels of assessment literacy among teachers in India (Singh, 2022).

The NEP 2020 acknowledges this gap and emphasizes continuous professional development, yet implementation remains uneven. Earlier research validates that reforms imposed without adequate teacher capacity often lead to mechanical compliance rather than pedagogical transformation (Shepard, 2000). Institutional readiness is further constrained by administrative pressures, lack of assessment resources, and limited autonomy at the school level.

This analysis confirms that assessment reform cannot succeed as a standalone policy initiative. It must be embedded within broader reforms in teacher education, school leadership, and academic governance. Without systemic support, competency-based assessment risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive.

6.4 Objective 4: Implications for Equity, Inclusion, and Learner Diversity:

One of the most promising aspects of NEP 2020's assessment reform is its potential to enhance equity. Formative and competency-based assessments can recognize diverse learning styles, reduce examination stress, and provide multiple opportunities for demonstrating learning. Literature strongly supports this claim, indicating that formative assessment particularly benefits first-generation learners and students from marginalized backgrounds (Tilak, 2019).

However, the analysis reveals that inequities in school resources, teacher quality, and digital access may undermine these benefits. Schools with limited infrastructure may struggle to implement innovative assessment practices, leading to uneven reform outcomes. This finding validates concerns raised by UNESCO (2017) that assessment reforms can unintentionally widen disparities if contextual inequalities are ignored.

Thus, while NEP 2020's assessment vision is equity-oriented in principle, its realization requires targeted support mechanisms, especially for under-resourced schools and regions.

Objective 5: Sustainability and Systemic Integration of Assessment Reform

The sustainability of assessment reform depends on its alignment with curriculum design, pedagogy, governance, and accountability structures. NEP 2020's proposal to establish the National Assessment Centre (PARAKH) reflects an effort to institutionalize quality standards and coherence across boards and states.

Earlier studies validate that systemic coherence is essential for sustainable reform (OECD, 2018). Fragmented assessment policies often fail to influence classroom practices meaningfully. The analysis indicates that NEP 2020's integrated approach is conceptually strong, but operational clarity, capacity building, and continuous monitoring are crucial for long-term impact.

7. Discussion and Validation with Earlier Studies:

The findings strongly validate global and national scholarship advocating a shift toward competency-based and formative assessment. NEP 2020's assessment reforms resonate with Black and Wiliam's (1998) formative assessment framework and Shepard's (2000) constructivist assessment model. At the same time, the challenges identified in this study echo earlier reform experiences in India, particularly the limitations of CCE implementation (CBSE, 2014).

The discussion confirms that assessment reform is not merely a technical change but a cultural transformation. Without redefining success, merit, and accountability in education, the dominance of summative evaluation is likely to persist. Thus, NEP 2020's assessment reforms must be accompanied by sustained professional development, stakeholder engagement, and public trust-building.

8. Policy Suggestions

- Strengthen teacher training programs focused on assessment literacy.
- Align curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment frameworks coherently.
- Reduce examination load to allow meaningful formative assessment.
- Ensure equity through targeted support for under-resourced schools.
- Develop robust monitoring systems to evaluate assessment outcomes.

9. Conclusion:

Assessment reform under NEP 2020 represents a transformative opportunity to reshape learning in Indian education. By shifting from summative to competency-based evaluation, the policy aims to promote deeper learning and holistic development. However, bridging the gap between policy vision and classroom practice requires sustained investment, cultural change, and professional capacity building. If effectively implemented, assessment reforms can serve as a catalyst for systemic educational transformation.

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