

Bridging Policy and Practice: Feasibility of Open and Distance Mode for Teacher Education in Uttar Pradesh in Light of NEP 2020

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ABSTRACT

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The state of Uttar Pradesh in India is the most populated state, with both the highest teacher shortage and the highest enrolment in higher education institutions (HEIs), but it has a teacher preparation system that is still overwhelmingly campus-based. It explores the possibility of open and distance mode teacher education to overcome that gap in the context of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It poses two questions: Do the demand and supply situation in the state warrant distance-mode expansion, and what is the extent to which distance-mode expansion is constrained in practice by regulatory and quality-assurance factors? It is a secondary data and policy document-based design where it brings together official data, collected by AISHE, UDISE+, and NCTE norms, and then analyzes two propositions based on the data. On the demand side, findings reveal an acute shortage of over 1.9 lakh vacant school-teaching posts and a distance-education base, which serves millions of people, making it feasible. Optimism is tempered, however, by the fact that distance education is mostly used for in-service upgrading, as required by regulatory limits. The paper suggests a calibrated, in-service-first expansion with a more robust accreditation system to best balance the policy's desire with realities on the ground.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

India's teacher education system is in a limbo. The need for trained teachers in schools continues to grow, and the system for producing teachers continues to be confined to physical institutions with few spots available. This is accentuated by the state of Uttar Pradesh. It is the most populous state in the country, has the highest higher-education enrollment and the greatest teacher shortage. The delivery mode question is more than just academic. The debate was reframed by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It had set an ambitious target of 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio by 2035 and had put technology-enabled ODL as a key tool in achieving the goal of under-served learners (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020). This policy is interpreted as a structural reset, not merely an incremental adjustment, to

Indian education, which attempts to expand access but does not necessarily lower quality, as indicated by the fact that more people are expected to take flexible pathways (Aithal & Aithal, 2020; Kumar, 2021). Practically speaking, this opens another possibility in teacher education: could the open and distance mode be used to produce and upgrade the needed teachers for the school system?

Policy intent is not enough to decide on feasibility. A common theme in NEP scholarship is that the expectations of the document do not align with what the institutions are actually able to provide (Benny, Lakshmi, & Sonny, 2026). The implementation of a good idea is influenced by regulatory norms, capacity of faculty, the digital infrastructure, and the practical aspects of teacher training. While distance mode has long been touted as a way to vocational and professional access (Pathak, 2020), the practicum requirement in teacher preparation, which is hard to meet through distance education, has been a challenge. This paper takes Uttar Pradesh as a test case. It questions the necessity of increasing the scale of distance education teacher training in the states as per the vision of NEP 2020 and what is the extent of limitations that prevent this expansion. It is not a principled argument, but rather, it is a synthesis of official secondary data read against the policy's stated direction to give a grounded and not aspirational answer.

2. Literature Review

Research is rapidly developing, but mainly descriptive, on NEP 2020. A significant portion states the purpose of the policy, its multidisciplinary nature, flexibility and its extension to digital (Chawla, 2024; Mishra & Singh, 2024; Nirmal, 2024) without testing against field conditions. In this body of work, online and distance education is given consistent focus. Mondal, Kamila, Sarkar and Mondal (2023) outline the components of curricular and pedagogical reform that the policy calls for in digital and online learning, and Panda (2020) considers how curriculum and pedagogy in higher education will need to shift to accommodate flexible modes. The discussion on institutional enablers, by Sutar (2024) has been extended to the systems of library and information and Panditrao and Panditrao (2020) read the policy from the mixed perspective of the students, the parents, and the institutions. Two themes recur. Firstly, some authors see technology as the key to achieving equity and reach; the gross enrolment ratio could be boosted if the digital divide is overcome, using distance and blended learning (Shinde, Pasa, Waghmare, & Saikia, 2024; Maharaj, Ahuja, & Malhotra, 2021). Second, a more conservative line tracks a gap between paper and practice in implementation of inclusion, with it being realised to varying degrees (Gupta et al., 2025). Educator preparation does not need to be the first to face this warning. Prior to NEP 2020, Goel and Goel (2012) catalogued chronic issues in teacher preparation in India which included the lack of institutional quality, poor practicum and supply-side school demand mismatch. The following thoughts on these are revisited in the NEP context by Dixit (2020) who wrote that it affords opportunities but also poses unanswered issues for teacher educators.

None of this literature, however, focuses on the regulatory frame. In India, teacher education is regulated by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) whose norms allow some programmes to be offered using the open and distance learning approach, and prohibit others that rely on supervised classroom practice (NCTE, 2014). It is a regulatory boundary that is rarely mentioned in the wide range of NEP commentary, but it is the point where policy ambition meets institutional limit. This, the present study aims to fill, by basing a feasibility assessment for one state on official enrolment, vacancy, and regulatory data, not just on the policy text alone.

3. Objectives

1. To assess, from official secondary data, whether demand-side and supply-side conditions in Uttar Pradesh justify expanding open and distance mode teacher education under NEP 2020.

2. To examine the regulatory, structural, and digital-access constraints that mediate the gap between this policy possibility and its practical adoption.

4. Hypotheses

H1: The scale of teacher shortage and higher-education demand in Uttar Pradesh establishes a strong demand-side case for expanding open and distance mode teacher education.

H2: Regulatory restrictions together with quality-assurance and digital-access gaps constrain full-scale adoption, confining feasible expansion largely to in-service upgrade pathways.

5. Methodology

The type of study method in this study is a non-empirical study with a type of secondary data and policy documents. It does not measure the outcomes of learning; it is based on available official statistics and texts rather than primary data. There were no human subjects involved and the propositions were evaluated along the lines of evidence-weighted judgements rather than on inferential significance testing. The analysis is carried out in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, which is the most populous state and accounts for 21% of enrolment in higher education. Uttar Pradesh, India, was selected because it is the largest state in terms of enrolment in higher education, and at the same time is very challenging due to the teacher shortage. Official data was summed and cross checked in three categories. All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22 and 2023-24 were used to find data on enrolment, institutional, and gross-enrolment-ratio. The school-level teacher vacancy data were obtained from UDISE+ and minutes from the Project Approval Board up to 2025. The norms of the National Council for Teacher Education were adapted for distance-mode teacher education. The benchmark used in the policy is the text of the National Education Policy 2020. Compiled figures were presented in descriptive comparison tables and read using simple ratios, shares and trend comparisons rather than in the form of modelled statistics. Each table was explained and interpreted as regards its meaning in terms of demand, supply or regulatory limits. Both propositions were then evaluated in light of the facts that were presented and a summary table was prepared to indicate whether the facts support a proposition, partially support it or do not support it. This ensures that all claims are linked to a public source by name.

6. Results

Table 1. Higher-Education Profile: Uttar Pradesh vs. All-India

Indicator	Uttar Pradesh	All-India
Total HE enrolment (2023–24)	~72.7 lakh (largest state)	~4.50 crore
Number of colleges (2023–24)	8,625 (highest)	~52,000+
GER, 18–23 yrs	31.9% (2023–24)	28.4% (2021–22) → ~32.5% (2025)
Share of national HE enrolment	~15.2%	100%

Source: Ministry of Education, AISHE 2021–22 and 2023–24.

As per Table 1, Uttar Pradesh is the backbone of the national Higher Education system with approximately 15.2% of the enrolment and the greatest number of colleges (8,625). Its Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has now improved to 31.9%, which is higher than the all-India figure, a significant improvement for a lagging state. Feasibility here is important because a distance-mode teacher-education channel would recruit from an unusually large and already-mobilised pool of higher-education learners.

Table 2. Government-School Teacher Vacancies: UP vs. National

Level / Year	Uttar Pradesh	National
Elementary vacancies (2021–22)	~1,26,028	~5,67,979 (15 states)
Total sanctioned posts vacant (2025)	1,93,862 (highest)	3,57,862 (18 states/UTs)
Rank among states (2025)	1st	—

Source: UDISE+ and PAB minutes, 2021–2025 (Ministry of Education).

The demand side is quantified in Table 2. In 2025, Uttar Pradesh has a sanctioned teaching post vacancy of 1.93 lakh (more than half of 3.57 lakh sanctioned vacancies across 18 states and territories), which is the highest among all states. The 2021-22 gap was more than 1.26 lakh even in the elementary level only. A chronic lag means that traditional preparation that takes place on campus is not keeping up, further justifying the need for other, flexible, training pathways.

Table 3. Distance/ODL Enrolment in Indian Higher Education (AISHE 2021–22)

Indicator	Value
Distance-mode enrolment (2021–22)	~45.73 lakh (F: 20.06 lakh; M: 25.67 lakh)
Distance share of total HE enrolment (approx.)	~10.6%
Open universities' share of university enrolment	31.8%

Source: Ministry of Education, AISHE 2021–22.

Based on the data presented in Table 3, a base has been established for distance education. In 2021–22, the number of learners taking distance education was around 45.7 lakh, with open universities enrolling nearly a third of all learners in universities. Women represented a significant proportion, highlighting the mode's appeal to those with mobility or time restrictions. Scaling flexible teacher preparation is not an empty shell, it already has millions of dollars behind it.

Table 4. Teacher-Training Institutions and Enrolment (Stand-Alone, AISHE)

Indicator	Value
Teacher-training institutions listed (2021–22)	3,301 (2,882 responded)
Enrolment in responded institutions	~2.33 lakh (10.7% of stand-alone enrolment)
UP share of national teacher-training enrolment (2013–14)	Highest; 80,510 students

Source: Ministry of Education, AISHE (2013–14; 2021–22).

Table 4 reveals the supply blockage. The total number of students enrolled in the approximately 3300 stand-alone teacher training institutes in the country is about 2.33 lakh with a vacancy of nearly two lakhs in Uttar Pradesh alone. Historically, the state has been the first to enroll teacher trainees, but even at the top position, the state is unable to meet replacement demand by enrolling trainees on campus. Everything else is considered together when we look at the arithmetics of Tables 2 and 4.

Table 5. NCTE Regulatory Position on ODL Teacher-Education Programmes

Programme	Open & Distance Mode
D.El.Ed (elementary diploma)	Permitted (mainly untrained in-service teachers)
B.Ed	Permitted only for trained/in-service teachers with prior face-to-face teacher education
B.El.Ed and 4-year Integrated (ITEP)	Not permitted (mandatory supervised practicum)
M.Ed	Not permitted in distance mode

Source: National Council for Teacher Education norms (2014) and subsequent regulations.

Table 5 represents the maximum value set by the rules. In-service B. and Elementary diplomas are available in the Distance mode. Although Ed upgrading courses are open to it, pre-service and integrated teacher-education courses are closed to it due to the requirement for supervised-practicum. Flexibility is the essence of the policy-practice disconnect, with NEP 2020 promoting flexibility in delivery, while teacher-preparation rules limit flexibility to those already teaching. Feasibility is therefore not open-ended, but is summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of Proposition Assessment Against Secondary Evidence

Proposition	Evidence base	Verdict
H1: Shortage and demand justify ODL expansion	Tables 1–4	Supported
H2: Regulatory/quality/digital gaps confine expansion to in-service pathways	Tables 3, 5	Supported (partial expansion only)

The assessment is summarized in Table 6. The Case for Support: The data in Tables 1–4 on demand across each of the four categories scale of enrolment, magnitude of vacancies, and limited number of training spaces at campus sites strongly suggest the feasibility of H1. Regulatory limits and access gaps do not, however, preclude feasibility in-service and blended routes are feasible, as are distance pre-service training ones, but only under specific conditions in the boundary conditions (see tables 3 and 5). Feasibility is a possibility, but not a certainty.

7. Discussion

The First objective questioned whether it is justified to expand distance mode teacher education in Uttar Pradesh. The evidence points a different direction, but not definitely. A state with the highest enrolment in higher education (Ministry of Education, 2025) and therewith the highest number of vacant teaching positions provides a textbook example of a mismatch between higher-education enrolment and vacant teaching positions. As per Table 4 campus-based capacity of teacher training is too small and cannot take the load of the vacancy which is close to two lakhs. If the training track does not physically enlarge quickly enough, the flexible mode is no longer a question of choice but of numbers. This reading is in accordance with the very fact that open and distance learning is being presented as a key method of access to learning in NEP 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). However, feasibility studies which simply address demand can over promise. The second goal (Constraints) adds to the complexity of the picture. Distance teacher education is restricted largely to in-service upgrading and elementary diplomas, leaving the pre-service and integrated programmes confined to campuses due to the need for practicum (NCTE, 2014). This is the tangible nature of the policy-practice gap that scholarship has been pointing to in recent years: Reform intent ahead of institutional and regulatory readiness (Benny, Lakshmi, & Sonny, 2026; Gupta et al., 2025). This gap does not constitute evidence that the policy is wrong, but rather evidence that the mode of delivery must be a part of what the training involves.

The other two restrictions are also important. First, quality assurance. The problems of uneven standards have been an issue in teacher preparation even in the traditional setting (Goel & Goel, 2012), and shifting the focus to the online environment without adequate support during the practicum runs the risk of exacerbating those issues at scale. Second, digital access. A hopeful argument for distance mode is that connectivity or device availability is not uniform in a large and rural state such as Uttar Pradesh and several authors caution that the equity promise of distance learning breaks down when the digital divide persists (Shinde, Pasa, Waghmare, & Saikia, 2024). Deliberate strengthening of institutional supports (learning platforms, library systems, mentoring), not taking them for granted (Sutar, 2024). The distance mode is possible in Uttar Pradesh primarily as an in-service and blended mode: upgrading serving teachers and para-teachers using flexible theory delivery; and blending with supervised practice in school that is embedded. To view

it as an alternative to pre-service training would run counter to the regulation and the pedagogy. The distance mode should be read as a stepping stone to the campus, not a substitute for it. While it's a more limited assertion than the policy's rhetoric sometimes suggests (Aithal & Aithal, 2020; Mondal, Kamila, Sarkar, & Mondal, 2023).

8. Conclusion

The feasibility question is answered in a qualified but a most unusual manner in Uttar Pradesh. The need for teachers and the extent of learner participation in the state indicate the need to develop open and distance learning in this field and the regulatory and infrastructural realities set limits. The successful model is not wholesale adoption, but a flexible approach to theory delivery, a blended practicum requirement, and enhanced accreditation and digital support through an in-service-first model. Bridge policy and practice, in this instance, means tuning into the vision of the NEP 2020 and aligning it with what teacher preparation actually needs: supervised, practice-rich training, and not just a change of mode. Here, however, feasibility is conditional, active and, in that sense, attainable.

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