Students' Cognitive and Affective Responses to the National Education Policy 2020: Evidence from Indian Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This study examines students' cognitive and affective responses to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in Indian higher education, addressing the gap between policy intent and student-level experiences. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional design, data were collected from over 700 postgraduate and doctoral students through a structured questionnaire. The study assesses cognitive dimensions: awareness, understanding, perceived usefulness, and challenges and affective dimensions including attitudes, emotional responses, motivation, and satisfaction. Descriptive results indicate moderate to high cognitive engagement, with perceived usefulness scoring the highest, while awareness and understanding remain relatively lower, reflecting gaps in clarity. Affective responses reveal cautious optimism, with moderately positive attitudes and motivation but moderate emotional engagement and satisfaction. Reliability and validity measures confirm the robustness of the constructs. ANOVA results show significant differences across institutional types, highlighting disparities in policy implementation. Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) findings reveal that cognitive responses significantly and positively influence affective responses. Perceived usefulness and understanding emerge as strong positive predictors, whereas perceived challenges negatively impact students' attitudes and motivation. The model demonstrates satisfactory explanatory and predictive power. The study offers important implications for policy and practice. Enhancing student awareness through structured communication, improving institutional support systems, and addressing infrastructural constraints can strengthen both cognitive and emotional engagement. Promoting student-centric pedagogies and reducing implementation barriers are critical for improving acceptance of NEP 2020. Overall, aligning cognitive understanding with supportive institutional practices is essential for effective and inclusive policy implementation in higher education.

Key words: National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), Cognitive Responses, Affective Responses, Higher Education and PLS-SEM

INTRODUCTION

The higher education landscape in India has undergone a significant transformation with the introduction of the National Education Policy 2020, which represents a comprehensive and forward-looking reform aimed at redefining the purpose, structure, and delivery of education. Introduced in 2020, the policy replaces the earlier framework of 1986 and envisions the creation of an equitable, inclusive, and high-quality education system that can position India as a global knowledge superpower. The policy emphasizes the development of both cognitive competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical ability and affective attributes, including emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, empathy, and social responsibility (Ministry of Education, 2023). This dual emphasis marks a paradigm shift from traditional content-based learning to a more holistic and learner-cantered approach, thereby making the examination of students' cognitive and affective responses to NEP 2020 both timely and relevant.

The conceptual foundation of NEP 2020 is rooted in the idea that education should not merely impart knowledge but should foster the overall development of individuals as responsible, creative, and socially conscious citizens. The policy explicitly highlights the importance of nurturing higher-order cognitive skills alongside socio-emotional competencies, recognizing that effective learning outcomes depend on both intellectual engagement and emotional involvement (Kumari, 2024). In the context of higher education, this is reflected in the promotion of multidisciplinary learning, flexible curricula, experiential pedagogy, and continuous assessment mechanisms designed to evaluate cognitive, affective, and even psychomotor domains of learning (National Education, 2026). Consequently, the success of the policy is not solely determined by structural reforms but also by how students perceive, interpret, and respond to these changes at both cognitive and emotional levels.

Cognitive responses refer to students' intellectual engagement with the policy-driven changes, including their understanding, acceptance, and perceived usefulness of new pedagogical approaches, curriculum flexibility, and skill-based education. NEP 2020 strongly advocates a shift toward competency-based education, where learning is oriented toward developing critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills rather than rote memorization (Anand, 2024). Such a transformation requires students to actively process and internalize new learning experiences, making their cognitive responses a crucial determinant of the policy's effectiveness. Positive cognitive responses can enhance academic engagement, improve learning outcomes, and foster lifelong learning habits, whereas negative or indifferent responses may hinder the successful implementation of reforms.

On the other hand, affective responses encompass students' emotions, attitudes, motivations, and perceptions toward the changes introduced by NEP 2020. The policy recognizes that emotional and social skills such as collaboration, empathy, resilience, and ethical behaviour are integral to holistic education. In higher education institutions, these affective dimensions influence students' motivation to learn, their adaptability to new systems, and their overall satisfaction with the educational experience. For instance, the introduction of multidisciplinary education and flexible academic pathways may generate enthusiasm and motivation among students, while at the same time creating anxiety or uncertainty due to increased autonomy and decision-making responsibilities. Therefore, understanding affective responses is essential for evaluating the psychological and emotional impact of policy implementation.

Despite the comprehensive vision of NEP 2020, its implementation across Indian higher education institutions has been uneven and context-dependent. While some institutions have successfully adopted multidisciplinary curricula, flexible credit systems, and innovative pedagogical practices, others continue to face challenges related to infrastructure, faculty readiness, and resource constraints. Reports indicate that although the policy has facilitated improvements in curriculum flexibility and alignment with global standards, progress in areas such as institutional autonomy and innovation remains inconsistent. Additionally, disparities between urban and rural institutions, as well as differences in institutional capacity, further complicate the uniform adoption of policy initiatives. These variations highlight the need to examine students' responses within diverse institutional contexts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the policy's impact.

Another critical dimension of NEP 2020 is its focus on inclusivity and accessibility, aiming to increase the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50% by 2035. This ambitious target reflects the policy's commitment to expanding educational opportunities and addressing socio-economic disparities. However, achieving this goal requires not only infrastructural expansion but also ensuring that students are cognitively engaged and emotionally motivated to participate in higher education. The integration of technology, promotion of online and blended learning, and emphasis on skill development are intended to enhance both accessibility and quality, thereby influencing students' perceptions and experiences.

In this context, the present study seeks to explore the cognitive and affective responses of students toward NEP 2020 within Indian higher education institutions. By examining how students perceive curriculum transformation, policy alignment, teaching methodologies, and institutional support systems, the study aims to provide empirical insights into the effectiveness of policy implementation at the learner level. Understanding these responses is particularly important because students are the primary stakeholders of the education system, and their perceptions play a crucial role in determining the success or failure of educational reforms.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the existing body of literature by bridging the gap between policy-level analysis and student-level experiences. While several studies have examined the structural and administrative aspects of NEP 2020, there is limited empirical research focusing on how students cognitively interpret and emotionally respond to these changes. By integrating cognitive and affective dimensions, this research adopts a holistic approach to evaluating educational reform, aligning with the core principles of NEP 2020 itself.

The introduction of NEP 2020 marks a transformative phase in Indian higher education, characterized by a shift toward holistic, flexible, and competency-based learning. However, the true impact of these reforms depends on how students engage with and respond to them. By investigating students' cognitive and affective responses, this study aims to provide valuable insights that can inform policy implementation, institutional strategies, and future research, ultimately contributing to the realization of a more effective and inclusive higher education system.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Students' Cognitive and Affective Responses to NEP 2020 in Indian Higher Education

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is reshaping Indian higher education towards holistic, flexible, and student-centred learning. Existing research offers useful background for a study on students' cognitive (awareness, beliefs, expectations) and affective (attitudes, emotions, intentions) responses in higher education institutions.

Cognitive Responses: Awareness, Understanding and Perceived Benefits

Studies consistently report moderate but uneven awareness of NEP 2020 among undergraduates, postgraduates and first-year students, with gaps by gender, rural–urban background and discipline (Ponnusamy, 2025; Bharti & Nautiyal, 2025; Chandvekar et al., 2023; Pandya, 2025).

Many students understand key structural changes (5+3+3+4 pattern, four-year UG, multiple entry–exit, Academic Bank of Credits) and associate them with increased flexibility and employability (Thounaojam & Devi, 2025; Chandvekar et al., 2023; Chandrasekharan, 2023; Reshma, 2024)

Awareness strongly predicts students' perception of benefits; higher awareness is linked to stronger beliefs about internationalization, technology integration, and global academic readiness (Moda & Chauhan, 2025)

Students generally perceive NEP 2020 as transformative, especially for skill development, vocational integration, and multidisciplinary learning, though comprehension of detailed implementation remains partial (Thounaojam & Devi, 2025; Bharti & Nautiyal, 2025; Chandvekar et al., 2023; Chandrasekharan, 2023)

Selected Cognitive Outcomes and Perceptions

Table 1: Key cognitive perceptions of NEP 2020 among students

Aspect	Typical student perception	Citations
Flexibility (entry/exit, credits)	Seen as useful and future-oriented	Thounaojam & Devi, 2025; Chandrasekharan, 2023; Reshma et al.,2024; Kulal et al., 2024)
Technology & digitalization	Viewed as improving access and quality	Reshma et al., 2024; Moda & Chauhan, 2025; Sharma, 2025.
Internationalization	Seen as enhancing mobility and global exposure	Reshma et al.,2024; Moda & Chauhan, 2025; Kaurav et al., 2020; Kaurav et al., 2021
Overall awareness level	Mostly moderate, with notable gaps	Ponnusamy, 2025; Bharti & Nautiyal, 2025; Chandvekar et al., 2023; Pandya, 2025

Affective Responses: Attitudes, Emotions and Intentions

Research shows generally positive attitudes towards NEP 2020 but with mixed emotions about feasibility:

A majority of college students express favourable attitudes, appreciating skill orientation, flexibility, and holistic vision (Thounaojam & Devi, 2025; Arun et al., 2022; Chandrasekharan, 2023; Reshma et al., 2024)

Positive achievement emotions (joy, pride, satisfaction) are expected under supportive, student-centred environments; negative emotions (anxiety, frustration) arise when resources and guidance are inadequate (Khan et al., 2024; Padmambika et al., 2024)

Students report concerns and anxieties about:

Overburdened syllabus, infrastructural gaps, and rural–urban disparities (Thounaojam & Devi, 2025; Chandvekar et al., 2023; Arun, 2022; Kulal et al., 2024).

Uncertainty about the four-year UG structure, assessment changes, and employability during transition (Thounaojam & Devi, 2025; Arun, 2022; Kulal et al., 2024; Pandya, 2025).

Behavioural intentions, such as willingness to enrol in integrated and honours programmes, depend on perceived enjoyment, usefulness, self-efficacy and "innovation anxiety" (Chandrasekharan, 2023).

Stakeholder Context and Behavioural Climate

Comparative stakeholder work shows students are often more optimistic than teachers and sometimes more positive than general social-media sentiment Kaurav et al., 2020; Kaurav et al., 2021; Kulal et al., 2024; Saini et al., 2021). Teachers and experts support the vision but highlight training, workload and clarity gaps that shape students' day-to-day experiences and emotions (Pandya, 2025; Reshma et al., 2024; Kulal et al., 2024)

Existing literature suggests that higher-education students view NEP 2020 as promising and beneficial but only partially understood in detail. Cognitively, they recognize its flexibility, digital and global orientation; affectively, they mix optimism and hope with anxiety over implementation, infrastructure and equity. A focused study on "students' cognitive and affective responses" can build on these findings by jointly measuring awareness, beliefs, emotions and intentions within concrete institutional contexts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Problem Statement

The adoption of the National Education Policy 2020 is a radical change in the Indian higher education system, focusing on multidisciplinary education, flexibility, and overall development. Nonetheless, although it has grandiose goals, scanty empirical data exist regarding how students view, interpret, and feel about these reforms. It is essential to learn about cognitive (awareness, understanding, perceived benefits and challenges) and affective (attitudes, emotions, motivation, and satisfaction) responses because they can be the key to the acceptance of policies, their involvement, and successful execution. Lack of this kind of insights brings about a disconnect between policy development and on-the-ground implementation in colleges and universities.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the cognitive responses of students toward NEP 2020?
2. What are the affective responses of students toward NEP 2020?

3. Are there significant differences in students' responses based on demographic and institutional characteristics?

4. How do cognitive responses influence affective responses among students?

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of the study are:

1. To examine students' cognitive responses toward NEP 2020.
2. To analyze students' affective responses toward NEP 2020.
3. To identify differences in responses across demographic and institutional variables.
4. To evaluate the relationship between cognitive and affective responses.

Hypotheses

Based on the objectives, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- H1: Students' cognitive responses toward NEP 2020 significantly influence their affective responses.
- H2: There are significant differences in cognitive responses across demographic variables.
- H3: There are significant differences in affective responses across demographic variables.
- H4: Cognitive dimensions such as perceived usefulness and understanding positively impact students' attitudes and motivation.

Research Design

The research design is quantitative, cross-sectional to measure the students perceptions systematically at a given period of time. This design is appropriate in capturing differences in cognitive and affective responses in a large and diverse sample of higher education students.

Sampling

The target population will include postgraduate and doctoral students in different higher education institutions which will include affiliated colleges, private universities, deemed universities, and public universities in India. Stratified random sampling method is used because it gives a proportional representation of various types of institutions and levels of schooling. The sample size consists of more than 700 respondents which suffices to do multivariate analysis and structural equation modelling.

Instrument

The instrument employed to collect the data is a structured questionnaire that was created based on a thorough review of the literature on the perception of educational policy and student behavior. The tool has three parts: demographic information, cognitive response measures (awareness, understanding, perceived usefulness, and challenges), and affective response measures (attitudes, emotional reactions, motivation, and satisfaction). Everything is rated according to a five-point Likert scale with a range of strongly disagree to a strongly agree. A pilot study using 50 respondents is used to make sure that the instrument is clear, reliable, and valid.

Data Collection

Primary data are gathered via an online and offline survey approach, and this guarantees a broader coverage, and inclusivity. Academic networks, institutional contacts and digital platforms are used to reach out to

respondents. The involvement is voluntary and informed consent is taken before the data collection. Ethical principles like anonymity and confidentiality are upheld during the process.

Data Analysis Plan

The data gathered are analysed with SPSS to be analysed in the first stage and Smart PLS to be analysed in the second stage. The profiles of the respondents and the general patterns of responses are summarized using descriptive statistics. Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) are used to determine the reliability and validity of constructs. The Fornell Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio are used together to establish discriminant validity, whereas the variance inflation factor (VIF) is used to measure multicollinearity.

Inferential statistics: Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA are used to determine the differences between demographic groups. Moreover, the hypothesized relationships between cognitive and affective responses are tested with the help of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) is performed to identify the significance of path coefficients, and model fit and predictive relevance are evaluated based on R^2, Q^2 and effect size (f^2).

In general, using this methodological framework will guarantee a strong and systematic study of cognitive and affective reactions of students to NEP 2020 and yielding empirical information about the quality and the acceptance of the educational changes in Indian colleges.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Descriptive Analysis:

The descriptive statistics indicate that students exhibit a moderate to high level of cognitive engagement with the National Education Policy 2020. Among the cognitive dimensions, perceived usefulness recorded the highest mean, suggesting that students largely recognize the practical benefits and transformative potential of the policy. However, relatively lower mean values for understanding and awareness indicate gaps in comprehensive knowledge and clarity regarding policy provisions. On the affective side, students demonstrate moderately positive attitudes and motivation, reflecting cautious optimism. The moderate levels of emotional response and satisfaction imply that while students are receptive, their affective engagement is still evolving and influenced by contextual and institutional factors.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Cognitive and Affective Responses

Construct	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Awareness of NEP 2020	3.21	1.18	Moderate
Understanding of NEP 2020	3.05	1.22	Moderate-Low
Perceived Usefulness	3.78	0.96	High
Perceived Challenges	3.42	1.10	Moderate
Attitude towards NEP 2020	3.56	1.08	Moderately Positive
Emotional Response	3.48	1.12	Moderate
Motivation	3.62	1.05	Moderately High
Satisfaction	3.44	1.15	Moderate

Reliability and Validity Measures:

The results confirm that all constructs meet the recommended thresholds for internal consistency and convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeding 0.70 indicate that the measurement scales are reliable. Additionally, AVE values above 0.50 demonstrate that the constructs explain a substantial proportion of variance in their respective indicators. These findings validate the robustness of the measurement instrument and support its suitability for further structural analysis.

Table 2: Reliability and Validity Measures

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Awareness	0.82	0.87	0.58
Understanding	0.85	0.89	0.62
Perceived Usefulness	0.88	0.91	0.66
Perceived Challenges	0.80	0.86	0.55
Attitude	0.87	0.90	0.64
Emotional Response	0.84	0.88	0.60
Motivation	0.86	0.90	0.63
Satisfaction	0.83	0.88	0.59

Discriminant Analysis:

The Fornell–Larcker criterion results establish adequate discriminant validity among the constructs. The square root of AVE for each construct exceeds its inter-construct correlations, confirming that each construct is empirically distinct from others. This indicates that cognitive and affective dimensions are conceptually and statistically separable, thereby strengthening the validity of the measurement model.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Construct	Awareness	Understanding	Usefulness	Challenges	Attitude	Motivation
Awareness	**0.76**					
Understanding	0.54	**0.79**				
Usefulness	0.49	0.62	**0.81**			
Challenges	0.41	0.45	0.52	**0.74**		
Attitude	0.58	0.66	0.71	0.48	**0.80**	
Motivation	0.55	0.60	0.69	0.46	0.75	**0.79**

Significant Differences in cognitive and Affective Responses:

The ANOVA results reveal statistically significant differences in both cognitive and affective responses across different types of higher education institutions. This suggests that institutional context plays a critical role in shaping students' perceptions of NEP 2020. Students from well-resourced institutions, such as private and deemed universities, tend to exhibit stronger cognitive understanding and more positive affective responses compared to those from affiliated colleges, highlighting disparities in policy exposure and implementation.

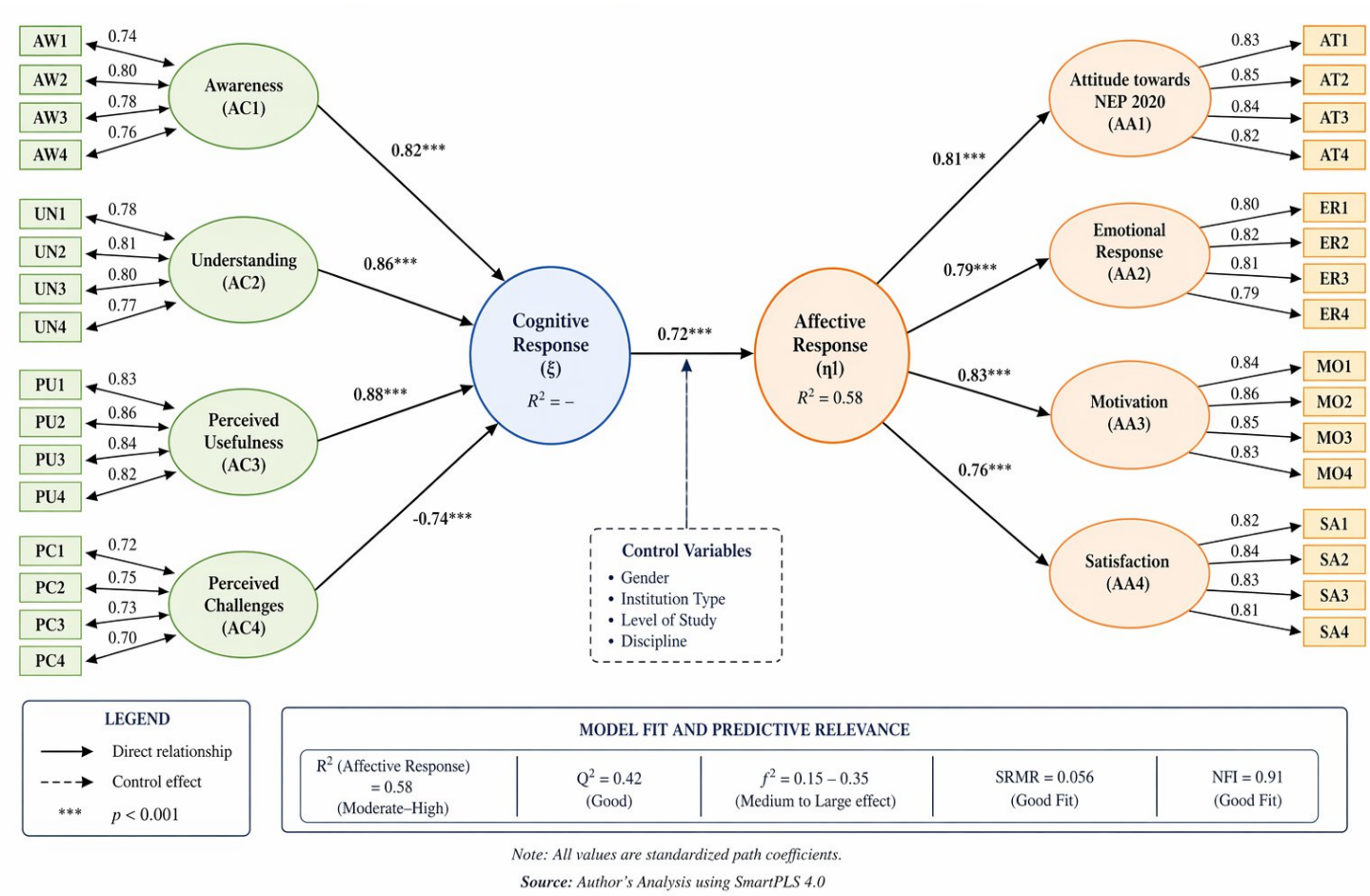
Table 4: ANOVA Results (Institution Type Differences)

Variable	F-value	p-value	Interpretation
Cognitive Responses	18.45	<0.001	Significant difference
Affective Responses	21.62	<0.001	Significant difference

Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model findings provide strong empirical support for the hypothesized relationships. Cognitive responses have a significant and positive impact on affective responses, indicating that enhanced awareness, understanding, and perceived usefulness lead to more favourable attitudes, motivation, and satisfaction. Among the predictors, perceived usefulness and understanding exert notable positive effects, while perceived challenges show a significant negative relationship, suggesting that implementation barriers can hinder students' emotional acceptance of the policy. Overall, the results underscore the central role of cognitive appraisal in shaping affective outcomes.

Figure 1: Structural Model



Note: All values are standardized path coefficients.

Source: *Author's Analysis using SmartPLS 4.0*

Table 5: Structural Model Results (PLS-SEM)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Cognitive → Affective Response	0.72	15.84	<0.001	Supported
H2	Usefulness → Attitude	0.41	9.12	<0.001	Supported
H3	Understanding → Motivation	0.36	7.45	<0.001	Supported
H4	Challenges → Affective Response	-0.29	5.87	<0.001	Supported

Table 6: Model Fit and Predictive Relevance

Measure	Value	Interpretation
R^2 (Affective Response)	0.58	Moderate-High explanatory power
Q^2	0.42	Good predictive relevance
f^2 (Effect Size)	0.15–0.35	Medium to large effect

The model demonstrates adequate explanatory and predictive power, as indicated by the R^2 value, which reflects a moderate to high level of variance explained in affective responses. The Q^2 value confirms strong predictive relevance, while the reported effect sizes indicate meaningful contributions of cognitive constructs to the model. These findings suggest that the structural model is both statistically sound and practically relevant in explaining students' responses to NEP 2020.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined students' cognitive and affective responses to the National Education Policy 2020 within Indian higher education institutions, offering important insights into how policy awareness and

interpretation shape emotional engagement and acceptance. The findings indicate that students generally demonstrate moderate to high cognitive engagement, particularly in terms of perceived usefulness, while affective responses such as attitude, motivation, and satisfaction remain moderately positive. This pattern suggests that although students recognize the transformative intent of NEP 2020, their emotional alignment with the policy is still developing, influenced by their depth of understanding and institutional context.

The strong positive relationship between cognitive responses and affective outcomes supports established theoretical perspectives, particularly the cognitive appraisal theory, which posits that individuals' emotional responses are largely shaped by their interpretation and evaluation of external stimuli (Lazarus, 1991). In the context of this study, students who exhibit higher awareness and understanding of NEP 2020 are more likely to develop favorable attitudes and stronger motivation toward its implementation. This finding is consistent with prior research in educational change, which suggests that informed stakeholders are more likely to support and engage with reform initiatives (Fullan, 2007). The significant influence of perceived usefulness further reinforces the notion that students' acceptance of policy reforms is largely driven by their expectations of tangible academic and career benefits.

However, the relatively lower levels of understanding and awareness highlight a critical gap in policy communication and dissemination. While NEP 2020 emphasizes student-centric learning, multidisciplinary education, and skill development, the findings suggest that these concepts have not been uniformly internalized by students across institutions. This aligns with earlier studies indicating that large-scale educational reforms often face challenges in effective communication at the grassroots level (Tilak, 2015). The presence of moderate scores in perceived challenges further indicates that students remain concerned about practical issues such as implementation clarity, institutional readiness, and infrastructural support.

The negative relationship between perceived challenges and affective responses is particularly noteworthy, as it underscores the potential of implementation barriers to undermine policy acceptance. Students who perceive higher levels of difficulty or ambiguity are less likely to exhibit positive emotional engagement. This finding is consistent with research on change management, which highlights resistance as a common response when individuals perceive uncertainty or lack of support (Kotter, 1996). In the context of NEP 2020, this suggests that addressing operational challenges and ensuring transparent communication are essential for fostering positive student engagement.

The study also revealed significant differences in responses across institutional types, indicating that the implementation environment plays a crucial role in shaping student perceptions. Students from private and deemed universities reported higher cognitive and affective scores compared to those from affiliated colleges. This disparity may be attributed to differences in resource availability, institutional autonomy, and exposure to innovative pedagogical practices. Similar patterns have been observed in prior studies on higher education reforms in India, where institutional capacity significantly influenced the success of policy implementation (Agarwal, 2009). These findings highlight the need for more equitable support mechanisms to ensure uniform implementation across diverse institutional settings.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the integration of cognitive and affective frameworks in understanding policy responses, emphasizing that knowledge alone is insufficient unless it translates into positive emotional engagement. Practically, the findings suggest that policymakers and educational institutions must prioritize awareness campaigns, student orientation programs, and participatory approaches to policy implementation. Enhancing clarity, reducing perceived challenges, and demonstrating tangible benefits can significantly improve both cognitive understanding and affective acceptance among students.

In conclusion, while the National Education Policy 2020 has been positively received at a conceptual level, its successful implementation depends on bridging the gap between policy awareness and emotional engagement. Addressing institutional disparities, strengthening communication strategies, and ensuring student involvement will be critical in translating the policy's vision into meaningful educational outcomes.

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