



Kerala's higher education system: Its impact on socially excluded groups

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Abstract

This research explores the essential requirements for empowering female faculty, particularly those from socially excluded groups, within Kerala's higher education system in the context of National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The study also examines key factors influencing faculty participation in decision-making processes. The researchers collected data through an online survey from female faculty members across various Arts and Science colleges in Thrissur district, Kerala. The researchers used One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Multiple Linear Regression to identify significant determinants of faculty empowerment. The findings highlight that faculty development programs enhance career growth and professional advancement. Additionally, the study reveals that better career opportunities and professional development initiatives enable faculty members to participate more effectively in work-related decision-making. Implementing NEP 2020 is expected to enhance career development opportunities for female faculty members, fostering greater empowerment in the academic workspace.

Keywords: NEP 2020, faculty, Kerala, empowerment, higher education

Introduction

Kerala's higher education system is a model of accessibility, inclusivity, and quality in India. The state's strong emphasis on education, backed by government and private institutions, guarantees that students from all backgrounds, especially rural ones, can access higher and technical education. One of the most significant aspects of Kerala's higher education system is the presence of multiple institutions throughout the state, ensuring that students from rural areas do not have to travel far to pursue their academic goals. Government-funded universities provide high-quality education at a low cost, lowering financial obstacles and fostering social fairness in higher education. Kerala has effectively established strategies to keep education expenses low in government and aided institutions, making higher education affordable to students from all socioeconomic levels. The relatively little difference in educational spending between rural and urban households demonstrates the state's commitment to equal access to education. The survey results show that Kerala students actively seek additional learning possibilities through private tuition and coaching, particularly in rural regions, demonstrating a strong dedication to academic success and ongoing learning. Unlike many other states, where rural communities may struggle with extra education, Kerala's rural students demonstrate a great desire to expand their knowledge base. Kerala, known worldwide for its extraordinary achievements in providing social services, including education, shows great promise for recruiting international students due to its rich culture, unique location, and comfortable atmosphere, but this potential is mostly unexplored. Despite the global trend towards international higher education, a lack of political will and funding restricts expansion. While satisfied with their academics, international students experience difficulties with housing, bureaucracy, and support services (Belousova, 2019) [2].

The outstanding involvement of women in teaching is a significant strength of Kerala's education system. The state has fostered an empowering academic climate with over 70% female teachers in schools and nearly 50% in arts and science institutions. This strong presence of women in education promotes gender equality and encourages more female students to pursue advanced degrees and academic careers (Kumar & George, 2009) [10].

Colleges in some regions of Kerala face numerous challenges. Student migration to other countries for higher education is increasing, and many institutions struggle with staffing, often relying on temporary teachers with low salaries. Faculty-related concerns have a substantial impact on fair access to higher education. Remote colleges may have fewer resources, limited access to professional development opportunities, and a smaller network of colleagues, limiting job advancement and professional development. Teachers frequently oppose postings to nearby colleges, seeking transfers to other universities. Because of this unwillingness to work in remote places, some universities rely on temporary faculty, who typically lack the experience of their permanent colleagues. As a result, the quality of education at these institutions may decline, and students in such areas may be disadvantaged (Tripathi, 2019) [20]. The full implementation of the new education policy in Kerala can resolve many issues. The school education sector has already adopted measures for teachers' professional development. However, higher education faculties have not given much importance in NEP 2020. Despite global advancements in technology and education, Kerala's higher education sector has not improved sufficiently to compete internationally. This limitation has directly impacted students, leading to increased migration to other countries. These issues indirectly affect faculties in higher education institutions. They need job security, career advancement, professional development, and empowerment

through decision-making opportunities. This research focuses on the practical implementation of NEP to address the challenges female faculty faces in the higher education sector. It emphasises the need for professional development, career advancement, and work-life balance to achieve empowerment through autonomy in decision-making, at least in their own work.

Review of Literature

Higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of any society. It is the backbone of economic growth, social development, and cultural advancement. Higher education directly influences the quality of human resources within a country, as it equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving global landscape. Kerala has made significant strides in higher education over the years. Kerala's higher education system has historically focused on academic excellence, social equality, and community-oriented development.

New Education Policy

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to enhance the quality of education. With this new policy, both schools and higher education will see significant changes. However, there are challenges in implementing the policy. These include introducing new technologies in education, changing the current system, adopting new teaching methods, and training teachers to keep up with these upgrades (Kumar *et al.*, 2021) ^[9]. NEP 2020 introduced policies on high-quality education with equity, autonomy to innovate curriculum and pedagogy, and suitable faculty training and development (Panditrao & Panditrao, 2020) ^[12]. Although the policy introduces several new elements, some have already been implemented in different contexts. The real challenge lies in expanding and fully implementing these practices across the entire education system to make a significant difference (Yenugu, 2022) ^[22].

Faculty Development

The role of a teacher is to guide and shape young minds with passion, motivation, and proper qualifications. Teachers must be skilled in their subjects, teaching methods, and classroom practices. Besides teaching, they create a positive environment, help students learn, and track their progress, playing many important roles in students' growth

(Dar & GanaieNasir, 2021) ^[4]. Faculty members in colleges are encountering numerous challenges. Besides teaching, extensive paperwork consumes a significant portion of their working hours. (Sankaran & Joshi, 2016) ^[16]. Teaching in higher education has become more complex, with faculty often holding onto traditional methods, while the younger generation, full of enthusiasm, demands a more dynamic approach. The challenge lies not in acquiring knowledge but in effectively delivering and utilising it (Jesa *et al.*, 2017) ^[8]. Equipping teachers with innovative and inclusive teaching methods is key to improving education quality. These methods actively engage students and meet the diverse needs of all learners, creating more inclusive classrooms. We build a skilled and motivated teaching workforce by training educators with these skills. It ensures the successful implementation of NEP 2020, driving a more student-centred and equitable education system (Radha & Arumugam, 2023) ^[14]. Teachers and learners should be empowered to lead the education system towards success. Researchers should properly decentralise and delegate work while granting more autonomy to teachers and learners. When teachers gain autonomy, they can implement innovative teaching methods, enabling students to enhance their academic performance and achieve better learning outcomes.

Furthermore, transparency by updated information and automated report generation for easy documentation help the faculties to optimise time and reduce effort, which are crucial recommendations for maintaining institutional autonomy (Gupta & Choubey, 2021) ^[5]. Kerala has introduced competency-based assessments to support the National Education Policy (NEP) goals. These assessments focus on how students can use their knowledge, think critically, and apply their skills in real-life situations. This change moves away from rote memorisation, often leading to shallow understanding, and encourages deeper learning through problem-solving. By updating its assessment methods, Kerala shows other regions the importance of matching evaluation practices with the overall aims of the education policy, helping students gain the skills they need for real-world challenges (Priyanka, 2024) ^[13].

The National Education Policy (NEP) offers solutions to address these issues. Notably, policy changes in higher education and measures to enhance teacher empowerment can play a vital role in revitalising the education sector.

Table 1: NEP 2020 - Faculty Development and Empowerment Initiatives

No	Policy Initiative	Details
1	Basic Infrastructure	HEIs will be equipped with essentials like clean water, toilets, blackboards, offices, teaching supplies, libraries, labs, and pleasant spaces.
2	Balanced Teaching Load	Ensure reasonable teaching duties and student-teacher ratios to allow time for research and interaction with students.
3	Faculty Empowerment	Freedom to design curriculum and teaching methods within approved frameworks, encouraging innovation in teaching, research, and service.
4	Incentivising Excellence	Promotions, rewards, and recognitions for high performance; accountability for not meeting basic standards.
5	Transparent Recruitment and Tenure Track	Independent processes for recruitment, a tenure-track system with probation, and fast-track promotions for impactful research.
6	Multiple Performance Metrics	Evaluation based on peer and student reviews, teaching innovation, research quality, professional development, and community service.
7	Leadership Development	Early identification and training of faculty with leadership potential; overlapping transitions for smooth institutional leadership.

Source: NEP 2020

NEP 2020 empowers faculties in Kerala by fostering continuous professional development, granting greater autonomy for innovative teaching, and promoting active research and career advancement. The policy also encourages faculty development programs that improve their skill and abilities and enhance gender equality among faculties. Together, these initiatives help teachers adapt to evolving educational needs, enrich the curriculum, and enhance students' employability, positioning Kerala's higher education system to meet current and future economic demands.

Faculty Empowerment

Faculty empowerment is explained in terms of faculty involvement in decision-making, interest, and expertise in decision-related problems, as well as their improvement of job satisfaction when they can make decisions (Rice & Schneider, 1994) [15]. Decision theory is developed in every field, giving importance to the focus area. Organisational decision-making is rational; however, psychological decision-making affects an individual's values and beliefs. Decision-making is crucial in our complex world, and while experts develop sophisticated tools, psychologists must address the human factor, particularly biases, in their application and communication (Slovic, Fischhoff, & Lichtenstein, 1977) [17]. Effective decision-making requires adequate support and training. Specifically, faculty decision-making benefits from professional development programs to refine decision-making skills, and career advancement opportunities can empower faculty to assume decision-making authority confidently. Both professional development and career advancement are crucial for sound decision-making (Avidov-Ungar & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2018; Bendtsen, Forsman, & Björklund, 2022) [1,3].

Objectives

While implementing NEP 2020 in colleges, the study's primary objective is to enhance employee empowerment by participating in institutional decision-making opportunities for faculties. NEP supports faculties professional development, career advancement, and equality in the work environment. The study also identifies the influence of curriculum and pedagogical reforms, gender equity, and faculty development programs towards professional development, career advancement, work-life balance, and decision-making opportunities.

Material and Methods

Thrissur district comprises almost 20 arts and science colleges under the University of Calicut. Data were collected from female faculties of various arts and science colleges, including government, aided, and self-financing colleges. The researchers created Google Forms to collect data online and gathered both primary and secondary data for analysis. The questionnaire includes demographic data and data on different variables related to faculties empowerment. The questionnaire includes four variables related to faculty empowerment and work-life balance.

The work-life balance (WLB) variable includes three items from the study by Taşdelen-Karçkay & Bakalim, 2017 [19]. Items include flexible work policies that support women faculty's work-life balance, my institution supports maternity leave and childcare, my institution values women faculty's well-being. Career Advancement, professional

development, and institutional decision-making of faculties are the critical factors that affect employee empowerment. Career advancement opportunities for faculties (CAF) are measured using the scale developed by Otoo & Mishra, 2018 [11]. Items consist of promotion opportunities, equal access, and institutional encouragement for challenging roles for female faculty members. Professional Development of faculties (PDF) determined by modifying the scale developed by Hıdıroğlu & Tanrıöğen, 2020 [7]. The scale consists of institutional support for skill-development programs and training sessions, participation in research programs, and other mentoring programmes, especially for female faculties. The researchers evaluated faculty participation in Institutional Decision-Making (IDM) using a scale formulated by Van Assen (2020) [21]. The researchers revised all the scales based on institutional policies and the recommendations outlined in NEP 2020.

Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant difference in the mean scores of professional developments of faculties among Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms, Gender Equity, and Faculty Development Programs.

H2: There is a significant difference in the mean scores of career advancement of faculties among Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms, Gender Equity, and Faculty Development Programs.

H3: There is a significant difference in the mean scores of work-life balances of faculties among Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms, Gender Equity, and Faculty Development Programs.

H4: There is a significant difference in the mean scores of decision-making opportunities of faculties among Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms, Gender Equity, and Faculty Development Programs.

H5: Career advancement of faculties has a significant influence on their decision-making opportunities.

H6: Professional development of faculties has a significant influence on their decision-making opportunities

Results

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Age		
	Frequency	Percent
Up to 30	48	23.4
31-40	57	27.8
41-50	56	27.3
51 above	44	21.5
Gender		
	Frequency	Percent
Male	89	43.4
Female	116	56.6
Institution		
	Frequency	Percent
Government	24	11.7
Aided	65	31.7
Autonomous	36	17.6
Self-financing	80	39.0

Source: Authors own

The total number of respondents was 205. Table 2 includes the percentage distribution of age categories, gender, and the type of institution where the participants work. The majority of respondents were in the age groups of 31–40 (57 respondents, 27.8%) and 41–50 (56 respondents, 27.3%). Among the faculties, 56.6% are females. While considering the institutions where faculties work, a more significant number of respondents are from self-financing colleges.

Table 3 represents the reliability analysis of the scale. Cronbach's alpha measures the reliability or internal consistency of items in a factor. A value of 0.7 and above is considered acceptable. The Cronbach's alpha value for all the variables is between 0.732 (work-life balance) and 0.874 (career advancement opportunities), and the scale has adequate internal consistency.

Table 3: Reliability Analysis

Factors	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Professional Development	I benefit from skill development programs and training sessions.	0.78
	My institution supports women's conference/research participation.	
	Institutional mentoring programs have improved my teaching and research.	
Career Advancement Opportunities	I'm satisfied with the promotion opportunities for women faculty.	0.874
	Women have equal access to administrative roles.	
	My institution encourages women's career growth through challenging roles.	
Work-Life Balance	Flexible work policies support women faculty's work-life balance.	0.732
	My institution supports maternity leave and childcare.	
	My institution values women faculty's well-being.	
Institutional Decision-Making	I actively participate in institutional decisions.	0.864
	Women faculty are well-represented on committees.	
	My input is valued in institutional planning.	

Data Source: Author's Analysis

The researchers used a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to measure the specific NEP 2020 policy focused on by most institutions and its impact on faculty career advancement, professional development, decision-making, and work-life balance. Implementing NEP transforms institutions primarily by focusing on curriculum and pedagogical reforms, gender equity, and faculty development programs. The mean results in Table 4 show significance across three groups for each dependent variable like Professional development of faculties ($F = 62.84, p <$

$.01$), Career advancement of faculties ($F = 45.56, p < .01$), work-life balance ($F = 15.00, p < .01$) and Institutional decision-making opportunities ($F = 36.36, p < .01$). As the P values of all variables are less than $.001$, they are highly significant. We can accept all the four hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, H4). Faculty Development Programs are consistently rated highest for career advancement, professional development, work-life balance and institutional decision-making, indicating their strong influence on faculty growth.

Table 4: Results of ANOVA

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	F	Sig.
PDF	Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms	61	9.42	2.36	62.84	0.001**
	Gender Equity	96	11.75	1.56		
	Faculty Development Programs	48	13.16	1.22		
CAF	Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms	61	8.16	2.93	45.56	0.001**
	Gender Equity	96	10.54	2.47		
	Faculty Development Programs	48	12.66	1.61		
WLB	Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms	61	10.70	2.69	15.00	0.001**
	Gender Equity	96	12.25	1.67		
	Faculty Development Programs	48	12.66	1.81		
IDM	Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms	61	8.57	3.32	36.36	0.001**
	Gender Equity	96	10.79	2.73		
	Faculty Development Programs	48	12.91	0.96		

Note: Significance $p < 0.001^{**}$. PDF - Professional development, CAF- Career advancement, WLB- Work-life balance, IDM- Institutional decision-making

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation

N= 205							
		Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1.	PDF	11.39	2.26	1.00			
2.	CAF	10.33	2.95	0.51*	1.00		
3.	WLB	11.89	2.19	0.62*	0.46*	1.00	
4.	IDM	10.63	3.08	0.59*	0.63*	0.46*	1.00

Note: *Significance Level $p < 0.05$. PDF - Professional development, CAF- Career advancement, WLB- Work-life balance, IDM- Institutional decision-making

Table 5 displays the descriptive statistics and inter-item correlations for four variables: Professional development, career advancement, Work-life balance, and institutional decision-making in faculties. WLB has the highest mean

(11.8878), whereas IDM has the most variability (SD = 3.07729). All correlations are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The researchers observed the strongest correlation between CAF and IDM ($r = 0.627, p < 0.001$).

Table 6: Results of Multiple Linear Regression Predicting IDM

R= 0.699, R ² = 0.489, SE = 2.21039, F-value = 96.698						
Predictor	B (Unstandardized)	Std. Error	Beta (Standardised)	t	Sig.	VIF
(Constant)	0.265	0.812	—	0.326	0.745	—
PDF	0.493	0.08	0.362	6.175	0.01	1.357
CAF	0.46	0.061	0.441	7.531	0.01	1.357

Note: Significance level $p < 0.01$, PDF – Professional Development of Faculty, CAF – Career Advancement of faculty, IDM - Institutional Decision-Making, VIF - Variance Inflation Factor

The regression analysis in Table 6 displays value of R is 0.699, and R² is 0.489. Standard Error of the Estimate = 2.21039. The R value represents the correlation between variables. It shows a better correlation. R² value predicts the percentage change for a dependent variable with the effect of independent variables. These values predict the employee's participation in institutional decision-making with the effect of professional development and career advancement activities.

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is a critical metric in regression analysis that detects multicollinearity among predictor variables. PDF and CAF have VIF values of 1.357, significantly below the typical threshold of 5. It suggests that there is no significant multicollinearity between these two variables.

The F-value is 96.698, and the p-value is 0.001. The F-value indicates that the variance across groups is much more significant than within groups. The findings suggest that professional development and career advancement of faculties significantly influence IDM. Given the above values, the regression model is very significant ($p < 0.001$). It implies that PDF and CAF combined have a significant predictive value for institutional decision-making possibilities. Unstandardised coefficients reflect the direct impact of a one-unit change in each predictor on IDM, whereas standardised coefficients (beta) allow comparison of their relative relevance, revealing that CAF is a more significant predictor of IDM than PDF.

Regression Equation

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \epsilon$$

$$\text{Institutional Decision Making} = 0.265 + 0.493 \times \text{Professional development of faculty} + 0.460 \times \text{Career advancement of faculty} + \epsilon$$

Y represents the dependent variable in the regression equation, and ϵ represents the error term. The multiple linear regression equation examines the changes in institutional decision-making opportunities with the effect of change in faculties' professional development and career advancement possibilities. The equation implies PDF makes 0.493-unit changes and CAF makes 0.460-unit changes in the dependent variable.

The findings show that CAF and PDF significantly affect IDM, supporting hypotheses H5 and H6. The positive coefficient (B = 0.460) and the standardised beta coefficient of 0.441 for H1 show that CAF strongly predicts IDM ($p < 0.001$), which reveals that CAF has a substantial and statistically significant impact on IDM since rising CAF values also raise IDM scores. For H6, the standardised beta

coefficient of 0.362 and the positive coefficient (B = 0.493) demonstrate that PDF also significantly predicts IDM ($p < 0.001$), which suggests that greater PDF values are related to higher IDM values. However, CAF has a more significant influence on IDM than PDF, as evidenced by its higher beta value.

Discussion

The study analyses the impact of Curriculum and Pedagogical Reforms, Gender Equity Initiatives, and Faculty Development Programs on four key aspects: professional development, career advancement, work-life balance and decision-making opportunities of faculties. The findings of ANOVA suggest that faculty development programs (FDPs) have the most substantial impact across all four areas, followed by gender equity initiatives, while curriculum and pedagogical reforms consistently show lower mean scores. It impacts faculty development programs conducted by institutions. Faculties prefer more training and research opportunities to enhance their ability and skills. Faculty development programmes are essential to innovative curriculums and help the overall development of the institution (Steinert *et al.*, 2005; Guraya & Chen, 2019) [6, 18]. Institutions should invest more in faculty development programs to enhance performance and satisfaction. In addition to faculty development programs, gender equity initiatives help the faculties to improve work-life balance. However, curriculum and pedagogical reforms will not have much impact on the work-life balance of faculties.

The analysis provides the importance of faculty development programs in higher education institutions. The researchers conducted this study among female faculty members across various institutions, focusing on self-financing institutions. The number of self-financing institutions is higher in many areas, including more female faculties. University Grants Commission (UGC) offers faculty development programs to improve their skill and ability. Participating in these programs also helps the faculty promote themselves. Faculties appointed regularly will follow these programs; however, faculties from self-financing colleges did not benefit from these programs. It will create a significant impact among the faculties as well as colleges. In such situations, institutions should take the initiative to provide adequate training programs even though they cannot achieve the same results.

Faculties' empowerment should begin with enhancing faculties' participation in decision-making regarding work-related matters. Regression analysis provides two significant factors that affect the decision-making of faculties. It

indicates that both career advancement opportunities and professional development programs have a significant influence on faculties participation in decision-making. The R^2 value indicates that 48.9% of the variance in decision-making is explained by both variables. The value explains that institutions should focus on supporting faculties' professional development programs and career advancement opportunities.

Enhancing faculties skills and abilities is crucial for improving educational quality. Professional development programs, ongoing training, and opportunities for advanced study can equip faculty with updated knowledge and teaching methods. Investing in faculty development boosts their capabilities and enhances overall institutional performance, leading to better educational outcomes and helping institutions remain competitive and relevant in the evolving academic landscape. NEP 2020 significantly contributes to faculty empowerment by advancing professional development, encouraging innovative teaching practices and gender equity initiatives, and strengthening research and industry collaboration. These initiatives enhance faculty expertise and elevate the educational experience, positioning the sector as more attractive to students and better aligned with evolving industry demands.

Conclusion

The research mainly focuses on the impact of NEP 2020 policies on faculty members' professional development, career advancement opportunities, work-life balance, and participation in decision-making. The analysis found that institutions should focus on faculties development programs to enhance their skills and abilities. The study also focuses on the importance of faculties professional development and career advancement opportunities to enhance employee participation in decision-making.

The implementation of NEP 2020 offers a strategic solution to the current challenges within Kerala's education sector, supporting the advancement of both educators and students. NEP 2020 is a critical catalyst for revitalising and aligning the education system with industry demands by prioritising faculty development, fostering innovative teaching practices, and enhancing career advancement opportunities.

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