iJRASET
International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 13 **Issue:** X **Month of publication:** October 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2025.74505

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International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 13 Issue X Oct 2025- Available at www.ijraset.com

A Holistic and Transformative Approach to Higher Education in India: Bridging Global Perspectives with Local Realities

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Abstract: ***Higher education in India is undergoing a profound transformation shaped by global influences, national aspirations, and the pressing demands of the twenty-first century. Traditional models, often centered on rote learning and discipline-based silos, are proving inadequate for preparing students to thrive in a rapidly changing, knowledge-driven, and interconnected world. This article explores the scope of holistic and transformative approaches in Indian higher education by drawing from global best practices, national policy reforms, and empirical evidence. Using a mixed-methods framework, the study combines surveys, interviews, and document analysis to examine how holistic pedagogy—emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, and ethical reasoning—can enhance graduate outcomes. The findings reveal widespread recognition of the importance of interdisciplinary learning, soft skills, and experiential education, but also highlight systemic barriers such as rigid curricula, resource constraints, and uneven institutional quality. The article concludes with actionable suggestions for policymakers, institutions, and educators, underscoring the need for context-sensitive innovations that balance India's rich cultural-educational heritage with contemporary global demands.***

Keywords: ***Higher education, holistic learning, transformative education, NEP 2020, India, interdisciplinary learning, employability.***

I. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century presents unprecedented challenges and opportunities for higher education globally. Rapid technological advances, globalization, climate change, and shifting labour markets are reshaping what it means to be educated. Institutions are no longer evaluated solely on the technical knowledge they impart but also on their ability to nurture adaptable, ethical, and creative graduates who can address complex social and economic problems. Within this context, the call for holistic and transformative education has gained urgency.

A. Historical and Philosophical Context

India has a long-standing tradition of education that has emphasized the integration of intellectual, moral, and spiritual development. Ancient models such as the Gurukul system were not limited to academic knowledge but included training in values, physical well-being, and life skills. Later, thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jiddu Krishnamurti envisioned education as a process of self-realization and societal transformation. These visions resonate strongly with contemporary debates about rethinking education to meet modern demands. Globally, educational philosophers such as John Dewey and Paulo Freire argued for student-centered, experiential, and dialogical forms of learning. Dewey's emphasis on education as a means of democratic participation and Freire's insistence on critical consciousness provide theoretical underpinnings for today's discussions of holistic learning. Similarly, humanistic psychologists like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers advanced the idea of self-actualization and learner autonomy, which remain central to transformative education models.

B. The Current Higher Education Landscape in India

India's higher education system is one of the largest in the world, with over 1,000 universities and 40 million students. While this expansion is commendable, concerns persist regarding quality, employability, and equity. Reports by the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) and the World Economic Forum highlight skill mismatches: many graduates excel in theoretical knowledge but lack critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and adaptability. These gaps not only affect employability but also hinder India's aspirations of becoming a global knowledge hub.

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The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 attempts to address these challenges by calling for a paradigm shift toward holistic, multidisciplinary, and flexible education. The policy emphasizes reducing rigid silos, introducing four-year undergraduate programs with exit options, integrating vocational and academic streams, and focusing on research, creativity, and ethics. Such reforms echo global practices while also aligning with India's civilizational ethos.

C. Defining Holistic and Transformative Education

The terms "holistic" and "transformative" are often used interchangeably, but they have distinct emphases.

1) Holistic education views the learner as a whole person—integrating intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and ethical dimensions. It seeks balance between knowledge acquisition and personal growth.

2) Transformative education, as advanced by Mezirow (1991), involves a deep structural shift in thought and behaviour. It empowers learners to critically examine assumptions, embrace multiple perspectives, and become active agents of social change.

Together, these approaches highlight that higher education should not merely transmit disciplinary knowledge but cultivate resilient, ethical, and innovative graduates capable of lifelong learning.

D. Rationale for the Study

Despite the NEP's vision, the practical implementation of holistic and transformative approaches in India remains uneven. Institutions often face challenges such as outdated curricula, faculty unprepared for learner-centered pedagogy, resource inequalities, and rigid assessment systems. At the same time, students themselves often prioritize job security over holistic development due to economic pressures.

This article therefore explores the following guiding questions:

1) How do stakeholders—students, faculty, and employers—perceive the scope of holistic and transformative education in India?

2) What institutional and systemic barriers hinder its adoption?

3) What best practices and policy directions can bridge global frameworks with local realities?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to both academic debates and policy discourses, offering insights into how India can reimagine higher education for the twenty-first century.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The discourse on holistic and transformative education is rich and multidimensional, drawing insights from philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, and policy. This section reviews global perspectives, Indian contributions, and contemporary challenges to contextualize the study.

A. Global Perspectives on Holistic Education

Holistic education has deep roots in progressive educational thought. John Dewey (1938) emphasized experiential learning, where students engage with real-world problems and develop reflective capacities. Dewey argued that education must connect to lived experience rather than remain confined to abstract theory. Similarly, Maria Montessori's child-centered approach promoted independence, creativity, and the cultivation of intrinsic motivation—principles relevant even in higher education.

Paulo Freire's (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed advanced the notion of critical pedagogy, where learners are not passive recipients of knowledge but co-creators who challenge oppressive structures. Freire's ideas highlight the emancipatory potential of transformative education, enabling students to develop critical consciousness (conscientização).

More recent contributions emphasize emotional, ethical, and ecological dimensions of education. Miller (2007) defines holistic education as one that nurtures connections—between mind and body, self and community, humanity and nature. Noddings (2013) highlights the ethic of care, stressing that education should foster compassion and social responsibility alongside intellectual development.

International organizations have also endorsed holistic frameworks. The UNESCO Delors Report (1996) proposed the "four pillars of learning"—to know, to do, to be, and to live together—as guiding principles for education in the twenty-first century. These remain influential in framing global discourses.

B. Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning, articulated by Jack Mezirow (1991), focuses on how adults revise their "frames of reference" through critical reflection. According to Mezirow, transformative learning occurs when individuals question long-held assumptions, engage in dialogue, and adopt new worldviews. This framework has been widely applied in adult and higher education, particularly in contexts that demand adaptability and ethical decision-making.

Scholars have extended Mezirow's theory by incorporating cultural and emotional dimensions. Taylor (2009) emphasized the role of relationships and affective experiences, while Cranton (2016) argued for authenticity and creativity as integral to transformation. In the global South, transformative learning has been linked with social justice, community empowerment, and decolonizing knowledge systems.

C. Indian Perspectives on Education

India's intellectual and cultural traditions provide a fertile ground for holistic approaches. The Gurukul model embodied an integrative philosophy where learning extended beyond cognitive skills to physical training, spiritual growth, and values education. Ancient universities such as Nalanda and Takshashila emphasized interdisciplinarity, attracting scholars from diverse regions.

Modern Indian thinkers reinforced these traditions. Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati University sought to combine Eastern and Western knowledge traditions in a natural setting that fostered creativity and humanistic values. Mahatma Gandhi's Nai Talim (Basic Education) emphasized "learning by doing," self-reliance, and the integration of manual and intellectual labour. Sri Aurobindo and Jiddu Krishnamurti envisioned education as a means for inner transformation, creativity, and liberation from conformity. These perspectives resonate strongly with the current emphasis in NEP 2020 on integrating vocational and academic education, promoting experiential learning, and fostering values alongside knowledge.

D. Challenges in the Current Indian Context

Despite philosophical richness, Indian higher education often struggles to translate holistic ideals into practice. Key challenges include:

1) Curricular rigidity: Most universities follow discipline-based structures with limited scope for interdisciplinarity or student choice.
2) Assessment practices: Examinations prioritize rote memorization over critical thinking, creativity, or problem-solving.
3) Faculty preparedness: Many instructors have limited exposure to learner-centered pedagogy and often rely on traditional lecture-based methods.
4) Infrastructure and resources: Public institutions in particular face funding shortages, large class sizes, and uneven quality.
5) Employability pressures: Students and families often prioritize immediate job prospects, which can lead institutions to emphasize vocational training at the expense of holistic development.

These systemic barriers hinder the realization of NEP 2020's vision and underscore the need for structural reforms.

E. Emerging Trends and Best Practices

Nevertheless, innovative practices are gaining ground both globally and in India. Universities worldwide are adopting interdisciplinary programs, service-learning projects, and experiential modules to enhance student engagement. Institutions like Harvard's General Education Program or Stanford's d. school exemplify integrative, creativity-driven approaches.

In India, select private and public institutions are experimenting with holistic models. Ashoka University and OP Jindal Global University emphasize liberal arts education, critical thinking, and cross-disciplinary exploration. Public universities such as Banaras Hindu University and Jawaharlal Nehru University are exploring interdisciplinarity and community engagement in specific programs. The use of digital platforms, blended learning, and skill-focused add-on courses is also expanding the scope of holistic education.

F. Research Gap

Existing studies provide valuable insights into the philosophy and benefits of holistic education, but empirical research on its implementation in India remains limited. While NEP 2020 sets an ambitious vision, there is a paucity of evidence regarding how institutions, faculty, and students perceive and practice holistic and transformative education.

This gap justifies the present study, which seeks to bridge theory and practice by examining stakeholder perceptions, barriers, and best practices in the Indian context.

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III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A rigorous and well-structured methodology is essential to explore how holistic and transformative education is conceptualized and implemented in Indian higher education. This section outlines the research design, objectives, sampling, data collection methods, and analysis strategies.

A. Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Mixed methods were chosen to capture both breadth and depth:

1) Quantitative surveys provided measurable data on perceptions and experiences across a wide sample.
2) Qualitative interviews and focus groups enabled a deeper exploration of meanings, practices, and contextual nuances.

This design was informed by Creswell and Plano Clark's (2017) recommendation that educational research benefits from methodological pluralism, ensuring robust and triangulated findings.

B. Research Objectives

The main objectives guiding this study were:

1) To examine how stakeholders (students, faculty, administrators) perceive the concept of holistic and transformative education.
2) To identify the extent to which such practices are currently integrated into curricula, pedagogy, and assessment in Indian universities.
3) To analyze institutional and systemic barriers that hinder implementation.
4) To highlight best practices and innovative models that align with NEP 2020.
5) To provide policy-relevant recommendations for enhancing holistic learning.

C. Sampling and Participants

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation across types of institutions (public, private, autonomous) and disciplines (arts, sciences, commerce, engineering, professional studies).

1) Quantitative survey sample: 450 respondents (300 undergraduate students, 100 postgraduate students, 30 faculty members, 20 administrators).
2) Qualitative sample: 30 participants (20 in-depth interviews with faculty and administrators; 2 focus groups with students involving 10 participants).

Participants were drawn from five universities located in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Delhi to capture regional variation.

D. Data Collection Methods

1) Survey Instrument

The survey included closed-ended and Likert-scale questions on:

a) Awareness of holistic education concepts.
b) Experiences with interdisciplinary courses, experiential learning, and value-based education.
c) Perceptions of barriers and institutional support.

The instrument was pilot-tested with 30 students and revised for clarity and reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84).

2) Interviews and Focus Groups

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were guided by themes such as:

a) Faculty pedagogical practices and challenges.
b) Student experiences of transformative learning moments.
c) Administrator perspectives on NEP 2020 implementation.

These sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded.

E. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (percentages, means, standard deviations) captured overall trends. Inferential analyses (t-tests, ANOVA) explored variations across subgroups.

Qualitative data were analyze using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding identified recurring patterns, and themes were developed around opportunities, barriers, and innovations in holistic education. Triangulation of survey and interview findings enhanced validity.

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F. Limitations

The study's scope was limited by:

1) A non-random sample, which restricts generalizability.
2) Regional concentration in three states, leaving out significant parts of India.
3) Self-reported data, which may include biases.

Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach and diversity of perspectives provide a meaningful picture of the current landscape.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The data collected from surveys, interviews, and focus groups were analysed to gain insights into stakeholder perceptions, institutional practices, and barriers related to holistic and transformative education. This section presents both the quantitative findings (from surveys) and qualitative insights (from interviews and focus groups), followed by an integrated discussion.

A. Survey Findings

The survey, conducted with 450 participants, provided a quantitative overview of awareness, experiences, and barriers in implementing holistic education practices.

1) Awareness and Conceptual Understanding

a) 78% of students indicated they were familiar with the term "holistic education," though only 42% could provide a clear definition when prompted.
b) Among faculty, 85% agreed that holistic learning is essential for the 21st century, yet 60% admitted limited training on how to integrate it into classroom practice.
c) Administrators showed the highest conceptual clarity, with 90% citing NEP 2020 as a guiding framework for holistic reforms.

This suggests that while awareness is growing, conceptual depth and practical know-how remain uneven.

2) Pedagogical Practices

Students reported varying exposure to holistic approaches:

a) Experiential learning opportunities: 48% had participated in project-based or community-oriented learning.
b) Interdisciplinary exposure: 36% had taken courses outside their core discipline.
c) Soft skills training: 54% acknowledged structured programs in communication, teamwork, or problem-solving.
d) Ethics and value-based education: Only 28% felt their institutions adequately addressed these dimensions.

Faculty responses aligned with student views, emphasizing a stronger presence of soft-skill modules compared to interdisciplinary or ethics-based integration.

3) Barriers Identified by Students

a) Rigid curriculum structures (reported by 67%).
b) Overemphasis on examinations and rote learning (62%).
c) Faculty teaching style not conducive to creativity (54%).
d) Lack of institutional support for co-curricular activities (41%).

4) Institutional Support and Infrastructure

a) Only 40% of students believed their institutions provided sufficient infrastructure (labs, innovation centers, cultural spaces) to support holistic learning.
b) Faculty members highlighted constraints such as large class sizes (average of 70–100 students per lecture in public universities), limiting scope for interactive pedagogy.

B. Interview and Focus Group Findings

The qualitative phase explored deeper perspectives from 30 participants.

1) Faculty Insights

Faculty interviews revealed three recurring themes:

a) Pedagogical constraints: Many expressed willingness to adopt interactive methods but cited lack of institutional incentives, training, and time.
   - One professor remarked: "We are evaluated on research publications, not on how innovative our teaching is."

b) Positive practices: Some faculty shared success stories of integrating service-learning projects or interdisciplinary modules, often through personal initiative.

c) Assessment challenges: Faculty felt pressured to adhere to traditional exam formats, limiting creativity in student evaluation.

2) Student Voices

Students in focus groups emphasized the gap between vision and practice:

a) They valued activities such as community engagement, internships, and entrepreneurship cells, but noted these opportunities were not accessible to all.

b) Students from rural or economically weaker backgrounds felt marginalized, as they often lacked resources (laptops, internet access) to fully benefit.

c) A recurring theme was mental health: students felt academic pressure often overshadowed personal growth.

3) Administrator Perspectives

Administrators were optimistic about NEP 2020 but pragmatic about hurdles:

a) One dean stated: "We have the vision, but without financial investment and faculty development, implementation will remain patchy."

b) Administrators emphasized accreditation bodies (like NAAC and NBA) as key drivers: when holistic practices are tied to institutional rankings, change is more likely.

C. Thematic Integration

The mixed-methods analysis highlights five overarching themes:

1) Growing Awareness, Uneven Practice: Stakeholders recognize the importance of holistic education, yet its integration remains inconsistent.

2) Curricular Rigidity as the Primary Barrier: Outdated syllabi and rigid university structures limit innovation.

3) Pedagogical Gaps: Faculty often lack professional development opportunities to shift from lecture-centric methods to student-centered learning.

4) Socioeconomic Inequalities: Access to holistic opportunities (internships, technology, co-curriculars) varies by student background.

5) Systemic Incentive Structures: Unless holistic practices are linked to accreditation, employability, or funding, institutions show limited motivation to change.

D. Quantitative and Qualitative Synthesis

Bringing the survey and interviews together reveals convergence and divergence:

1) Both students and faculty emphasize rigid curricula and assessment pressures as key obstacles.

2) Administrators are more optimistic, citing policy reforms, but acknowledge implementation gaps.

3) Students highlight personal well-being and equity issues more strongly than faculty or administrators.

This suggests that while the NEP 2020 vision is inspiring, its ground-level realization requires systemic changes in policy, pedagogy, and institutional culture.

V. SUGGESTIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study reveal a wide gap between the aspirations of holistic and transformative education as envisioned in NEP 2020 and the current realities in higher education institutions. To bridge this gap, multi-layered interventions are required at the levels of policy, institutional governance, pedagogy, and student support systems. This section outlines practical suggestions and their policy implications.

A. Policy-Level Recommendations

1) Curriculum Flexibility

a) Modular course structures should be adopted across universities, allowing students to combine courses from different disciplines.
b) Credit transfer systems and multiple entry-exit options, as suggested by NEP 2020, must be implemented uniformly.
c) National bodies like UGC should mandate interdisciplinary offerings, with incentives for institutions that pioneer flexible curricula.

2) Faculty Development and Incentives
a) Large-scale faculty training programs must be established to familiarize educators with holistic pedagogies, such as project-based learning, service learning, and flipped classrooms.
b) Performance appraisal systems should value innovative pedagogy equally with research output, encouraging faculty to prioritize student-centered approaches.
c) A "National Teaching Innovation Fund" could be created to provide grants for faculty experimenting with transformative methods.

3) Equity and Inclusion Policies
a) Government and institutions must expand financial aid, digital infrastructure, and mental health support for marginalized groups.
b) Holistic education should be aligned with social justice goals, ensuring that students from rural or economically weaker sections have equal access to opportunities.
c) Policies should mandate inclusive practices such as bilingual instruction, peer mentoring, and affordable technology access.

B. Institutional-Level Strategies
1) Strengthening Co-Curricular Ecosystems
a) Institutions should integrate internships, community service, cultural programs, and entrepreneurship cells as credit-bearing activities.
b) Dedicated centers for innovation and creativity (such as "innovation hubs" or "maker spaces") should be established to encourage student-led projects.

2) Reforming Assessment Systems
a) Move from rote-based examinations to continuous and comprehensive evaluation that includes portfolios, group projects, and reflective essays.
b) Institutional examination boards should pilot alternative assessment frameworks and share best practices across universities.

3) Institutional Leadership
a) Leadership must actively champion holistic reforms, framing them not as optional add-ons but as core institutional goals.
b) Accreditation frameworks (NAAC, NBA) should include holistic education benchmarks, pushing institutions toward sustained change.

C. Pedagogical Innovations
1) Interdisciplinary Teaching Models
a) Encourage co-teaching arrangements where two faculty members from different disciplines lead a course together, fostering cross-disciplinary dialogue.
b) Introduce capstone projects requiring students to integrate knowledge across at least two fields of study.

2) Active and Experiential Learning
a) Replace lecture-heavy instruction with case studies, simulations, role-play, and service-learning.
b) Embed community engagement within the syllabus, allowing students to apply classroom knowledge to solve real-world problems.

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3) Digital Pedagogies

a) Use technology not just for online lectures but to promote blended learning models, adaptive assessments, and peer collaboration platforms.

b) Institutions should invest in low-bandwidth solutions to make digital learning accessible to students from resource-poor regions.

D. Student-Centered Support Systems

1) Mental Health and Well-Being

a) Establish campus-wide counseling centers with professional psychologists.

b) Integrate well-being modules (stress management, mindfulness, resilience training) into the academic calendar.

2) Career and Employability Support

a) Career services should expand to cover entrepreneurial skill-building, not just placement preparation.

b) Partnerships with industry can create applied learning modules and real-world exposure.

3) Equity in Participation

a) Institutions should track participation data in co-curricular programs to ensure inclusivity.

b) Special mentorship programs can be developed for **first-generation learners** and those from underrepresented groups.

E. Systemic Policy Implications

Implementing these recommendations has far-reaching implications:

1) Governance models will need to prioritize educational quality and equity over bureaucratic rigidity.

2) Funding frameworks must shift toward supporting teaching innovation, not only research outputs.

3) Public–private partnerships can be leveraged to expand access to technology, internships, and innovation hubs.

4) Ultimately, transforming Indian higher education requires aligning policy mandates, institutional leadership, and grassroots teaching practices.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the promise and challenges of holistic and transformative education in Indian higher education, particularly in light of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Across the research process—drawing on surveys, interviews, and focus groups—it became clear that while stakeholders strongly support the principles of holistic education, systemic and structural barriers hinder its widespread implementation. The findings revealed that students aspire for broader, more interdisciplinary, and experiential learning opportunities. Faculty members acknowledge the value of transformative approaches but struggle with rigid curricula, limited autonomy, and resource constraints. Administrators, while committed to NEP 2020 goals, remain cautious about implementation due to infrastructural and regulatory challenges.

Several key insights emerged:

1) Curriculum innovation is happening in pockets but lacks uniform adoption.

2) Pedagogical practices remain heavily lecture-oriented, though interest in active learning is growing.

3) Access and equity remain pressing issues, particularly for students from rural and marginalized communities.

4) Faculty development and institutional support systems are insufficient to meet the demands of transformative reforms.

The policy recommendations emphasize curricular flexibility, faculty empowerment, equity-driven inclusion, innovative pedagogy, and student-centered support. Implementing these measures requires alignment among policymakers, institutional leaders, and educators.

Ultimately, the study argues that holistic and transformative education is not merely an add-on to traditional academic learning but the core of what higher education should represent in the 21st century. If executed thoughtfully, NEP 2020 can provide India with a higher education system that cultivates critical thinkers, empathetic leaders, socially responsible citizens, and globally competitive professionals.

In conclusion, the pursuit of holistic and transformative education is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity. It is moral because education should empower individuals in their entirety—intellectually, socially, and emotionally. It is strategic because a rapidly changing global economy demands flexible, innovative, and empathetic graduates. By bridging the gap between policy vision and ground realities, Indian higher education can truly transform itself into a driver of equitable and sustainable national development.

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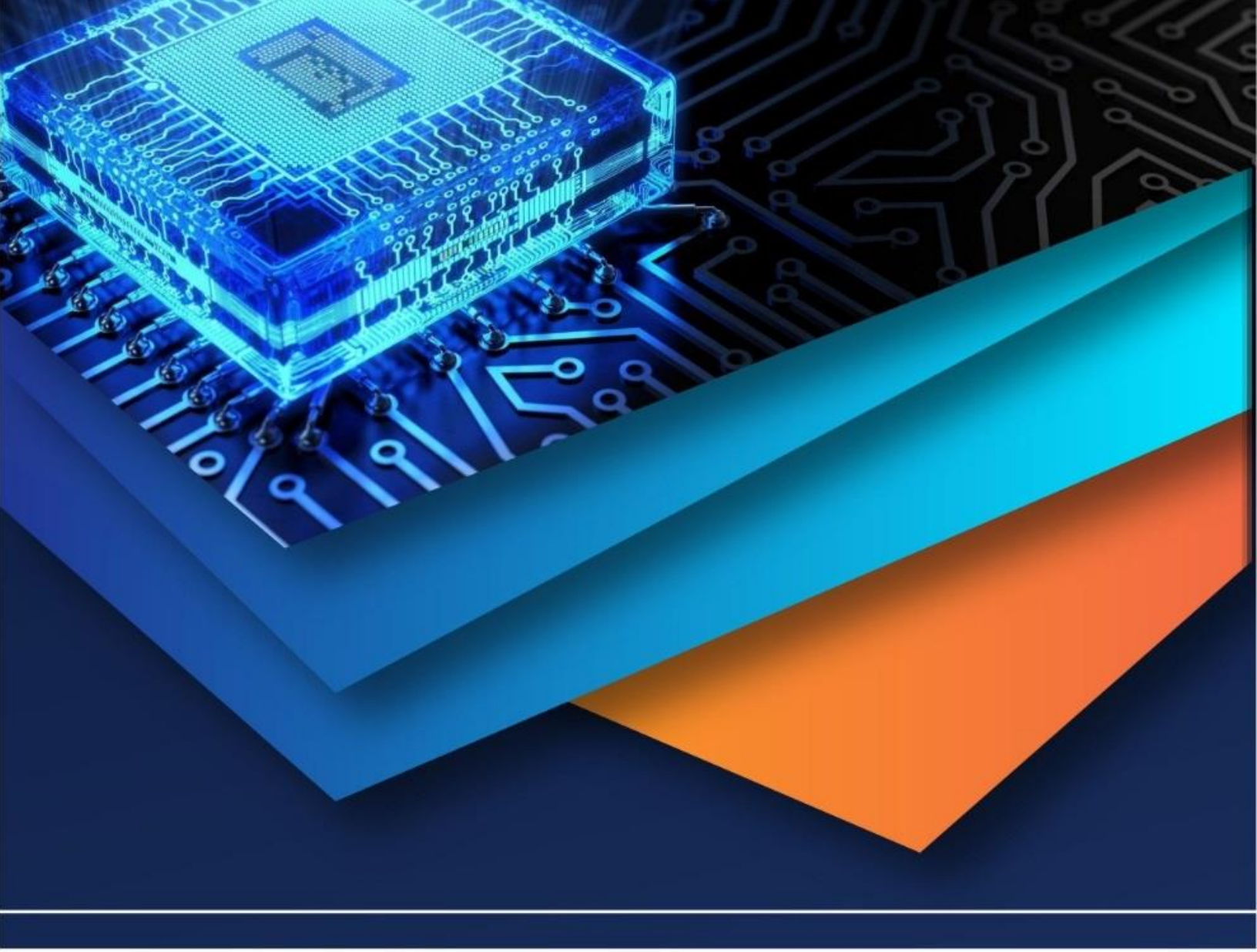

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