

Will Budget 2019 bring a renewed focus on India's education sector?

A big push in education requires a strong budgetary impetus and faster reforms towards education quality



The Indian education sector has an impending task to fulfil. It has not delivered fully on its promise as a driver of economic success. At least, not yet. At 13.5 per cent, youth unemployment remains one of the biggest challenges facing the nation today. As we fasten our seatbelts for Modi 2.0, we will need safeguards of a strong education system that is learning-focused, value-driven, and quality-robust to achieve our employment targets and unleash our much-discussed demographic dividends.

Imitating on decades of attention to enrolment in more advanced countries has led India to undertake rapid expansion of access and school attainment. For example, consider the enactment of the Right to Education Act (2009). The Act endeavoured to make education a fundamental right, free and compulsory for every child between six to 14 years of age. While this was a strong step in theory, in implementation it faced some nagging challenges.

First, India differs from other nations in the world in myriad ways. The size of the school education system in India is larger than most nations across the world. Our large quantity requirement is in constant trade-off with quality delivery of educational services. Thus, an average student in India is unlikely to gain the same amount of knowledge in any year of schooling as an average student in, say, Finland even if we adopt the same schemes. Our context is different.

Second, India has so far expanded access to schooling without closing the gap in economic wellbeing. Infrastructure outside schools, for instance, parental support or transport for girls varies by state with large regional level gaps. Further, infrastructure inside schools has delivered poorly in terms of building practicable and analytical thinking capabilities of students. A decade of ASER reports reflect poor learning levels and a widening gap in teaching quality

between private and public schools, with the latter getting worse —indicator of a sore wound that has been bandaged on the surface but not treated from within.

Finally, the Indian assessment and accountability systems need a thorough reform. Perhaps, they need to be re-imagined as we enter the most technologically-infused epoch till date. Here, Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be a game-changer for the education sector. AI can be leveraged to measure learning levels of students, gauge cognitive and non-cognitive skill sets, provide personalised feedback for student growth, and contribute to preparing a 21st century workforce. Of course, AI can also create fairer and unbiased assessment systems (and we do know the value of that after the CBSE paper leak row of 2018), which can be graded faster and more efficiently.

One of the initial reports undertaken by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in its second term has been to release the draft National Education Policy (NEP). Discussions on the NEP have been in fervour since the BJP's previous term with an open house debate on privatisation, commercialisation and communalisation. As the draft policy is released and makes a prodigal return in 2019, what does it imply for education in India in the next five years?

In a quest for comprehensiveness, the policy covers a lot — it moves from fundamental recommendations around semantics (such as renaming ministry of human resource development **as ministry of education**) to massive overhauls, such as closing down sub-standard teacher education institutions and restructuring the teacher labour market. It talks about a 21st century education and then, also emphasises on sustaining the values of Indian culture. In a world with limited resources, these multiple policy objectives are likely to compete with each other.

In the interim budget, the government has allocated 3.3 per cent of the total budget expenditure for the education sector, an over Rs 10,000 crore hike from the revised estimates of last year.

Nevertheless, are these increments enough? A big push in education requires a strong budgetary impetus and faster reforms towards education quality. The timing of reform is important in the case of education. Relatively faster reforms are likely to have larger impacts on the economy as better workers become a dominant part of the workforce sooner. The government will need to increase its investment in initiatives for quality school education sooner than later if it is to reap a higher present value of long-term economic success.

Moreover, India will also be participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2020, which is a test for secondary school students from across 80 countries. It assesses students in science, mathematics, reading and collaborative problem solving and its outcome is considered as an indicator of the overall quality levels of the education system of a nation. PISA will provide us with the cognitive metrics to determine, soon enough, where we stand compared to our global peers in terms of education quality.

Till then, let's hope that education policy that had lost focus in the near past, finds its way back in the upcoming budget.

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