

# Equity in education matters

The shift towards digital education throws up new challenges for policy

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**T**HE EDUCATION LANDSCAPE in India has lately brightened up because of the new National Education Policy (NEP) as well as other factors. The rise of education technology (ed-tech) incorporating VR, AR, 'gamification,' 3d immersive learning, etc, is contributing to the knowledge economy's potential for large market size, calling for requisite policy support.

But some serious and unique barriers on equity and inclusiveness remain in India that need urgent attention. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines two dimensions of equity in education. First is "fairness", which means ensuring that personal and social circumstances do not prevent students from achieving their academic potential. The second is "inclusion", which means setting a basic minimum standard for education that is shared by all students regardless of economic and social background and status, personal characteristic, or location.

To ensure achievement of these standards, we need to look at equity from several aspects like monetary resources, academic standards, academic content and support; the barriers that make equity difficult to foster in India are varied and complex. Apart from inequality in internet access and access to devices, even the quality of connection and related services and subscription fees exacerbate the digital divide. For education to be availed as a social good, access at an affordable cost and reasonable quality is a precondition. The availability of content in vernacular languages is yet another issue.

Apart from the demand side issues facing digital education, there are crucial supply-side issues that need fixing, such as training of teachers in ICT, new learning devices and handling the evolved curriculum. In a virtual world, a teacher's role in building capabilities of critical thinking and reflection and cultivating the virtue of empathy in student are key.

If educational content not right, there would be little gain from the knowledge and skills being imparted to students. Teachers and academic institutions need to ensure that the content they are using is lucid, appropriate, fact-based and relevant.

Access to education loans from banks and financial institutions are a great support in the cause of education, particularly higher education. However, the segment is generally not favoured by the lenders due to high delinquencies and absence of collaterals. Non-standardisation of course and certification, especially in the evolving digital education landscape, and non-employability are some other issues.

Education is on the Concurrent List. All the states, therefore, have an equal say on the subject. A cooperative and collaborative spirit will thus be critical to realise the goals. The centre has a task well cut for building consensus on NEP 2020.

The latest Annual State of Education Report (ASER) reveals that 20% of rural students lacked textbooks, and only one in ten students had access to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Survey provides a glimpse into the levels of learning loss that students in rural India, particularly in states like Bihar, West Bengal, UP, and Rajasthan, are suffering, resulting in sharp digital divides in education. Unless remedied with urgency, the digital split may disrupt learning, and jeopardise our hard-won gains resulting in large scale school drop-outs, particularly of adolescent girls. With strong corporate commitment, states' support, backed by strong policy push and intent by the Centre, and value addition by other stakeholders, the road blocks on the path of equity and inclusiveness in education, through daunting, could be addressed.