

Blueprint for the New Year

In 2016, we should focus on outcome-based learning models in elementary education and engagement with industry to link education with employability

Good quality education is the foundation of innovation and entrepreneurship that can trigger growth and prosperity of individuals as well as that of a nation. It should be implemented across the full learning curve, and more so at school and higher education levels, to build a framework for lifelong learning.

There are three fundamental work areas important for a country's education system—improving 'access' to good quality education; promoting 'equity' to offer equivalent learning opportunities to populace from all sections of the society; and infusing 'excellence' in education to deliver desired learning outcomes. Over the last decade, the government prioritised its energies to make significant progress in the first two areas and, with this, the need to focus on 'excellence' or better learning outcomes is higher than ever before.

Aligned to this, 2015 started on an optimistic note, with a number of initiatives from the state and the private sector, which reflected a shift towards a more progressive environment for the education sector. These included, at the school level, improving the quality of teachers in science and technical communities; credit transfer system for students; more practical and industry-focused learning; and Shala Darpan, the smart app that provides e-tutorials and offers parents of government and government-aided school students to get updates of their children's school attendance, assignments and achievements on their mobile phones.

At the higher education level, digitisation and advancements changed the face of the sector to accommodate newer formats and trends which are reflective of an all-inclusive, advanced and globally-relevant education. Credit transfers reached up to the PhD level, so that those who enter the workplace can get back to education at any time. Global universities came to India in more numbers. From introduction of digital tools to inclusion of international curriculum to even exploring opportunities of introducing joint courses, there was a significant movement in the higher education system.

Fertile ground for a new landscape

It was in the given backdrop that the government initiated a consultative process to formulate a New Education Policy to support the country's growing economic aspirations. The National Policy on

Education in India was initiated in 1986 and modified in 1992. Since then, the education environment has evolved so much that the policy revision is now required, especially keeping in mind the global landscape. Indian education sector requires both a long-term vision and short-term answers.

For the past 30 years, the state has spent about 3% of GDP on education—a figure that should see a rise in the future. With a sizeable gap between demand for education and the state's ability to provide it—and with as many as 35% of children at the junior level going to private schools instead of government schools—the role of the private sector should be enhanced.

The ministry of human resource development's New Education Policy proposes to overcome the deep-rooted challenges of the Indian education system. Of the ongoing consultations around 33 pre-defined themes, five focus areas are most important for the country and could form the pillars for education sector growth in 2016.

* Outcome-based learning model in elementary education: With increased access and equity, having a qualitative, outcome-focused learning framework takes centre-stage. As per Pearson Voice of Teacher Survey 2014, teachers feel that half of the students (50%) entering a class or grade lack the skills (academic, cognitive and vocational) required for that level, signifying low orientation of the system on skill development. In fact, parents are increasingly shifting their children to institutes offering better learning outcomes. Therefore, there is a need to foster a shift from an input-centric pedagogical approach to a learner-centric approach to impart holistic learning in early years.

* Engagement with industry to link education with employability: A lot of recent studies indicate that the students passing out from the current higher education system are not adequately prepared for employment. There is a huge gap between the supply of skilled manpower and its demand in the labour market. There is a need for Indian higher education institutions to collaborate with the industry to understand and impart relevant skills among learners to make them 'job-ready'.

The government has worked with the big picture in mind, developing a holistic and integrated view. Two visionary initiatives are [Digital India](#) and Skill India, the latter with a mandate to train and skill 500 million youth in the next seven years. Combine that with the flagship [Make in India](#) initiative and we have the making of an economy where technologically skilled manpower is made ready for a manufacturing focused growth agenda.

But for adequate implementation of the skill agenda, it is important to marry higher and vocational education. For that, it is equally important to raise the image of vocational education to bring it at par with higher education. This can be achieved by ruthlessly adopting and provisioning the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) as the only national standard. This will help align vocational with conventional education, and give flexibility to learners to move between the two streams.

Apprenticeships is another neglected area. Our 53-year-old apprenticeship law, if revisited, can supplement in addressing these employability gaps.

* Promotion of ICT systems in school and adult education: Information and communication technology (ICT) systems can potentially make a significant difference in improving the quality of education. Integrated learning solutions like MyPedia could change the way education is delivered in Indian schools.

* Promoting open and distance learning (ODL) and online courses: Conventional education alone can't meet the needs and aspirations of higher education. ODL is accepted as an important mode of ensuring access, developing skills, capacity building, training and employability. Global players in India could form many more alliances to get the best names in international education space to offer customised courses for Indian learners.

* Internationalisation of higher education: Globalisation has resulted in greater cross-border higher education.

However, there has to be a better policy that encourages collaboration and student-faculty mobility. Work-related qualifications offer lateral entry to a lot of prestigious universities.

Unfinished agenda, outlook 2016

As challenges continue, there is greater potential in the integration of technology into the schooling system. A number of studies show that children learn best at their own pace, and personalised learning platforms in local Indian languages would be great.

There is a need for greater planned development, including expanding access and improving quality of educational institutions throughout the country. Promotion of gender equity and social inclusion of disadvantaged groups, including those with special needs, would be a laudable next stage.

India must transform its education system so that it focuses on outcomes. The complexity of Indian education challenge calls for greater involvement of private sector capital and expertise, especially global leaders, so that best practices reach our schools and colleges.

Just as India successfully leapfrogged from fixed telephony to a mobile internet phase, it has the potential of converting the challenge of unskilled workforce to become the “net exporter of talent” to the world. However, drastic interventions are required at political as well as policy level to realise this long-term goal.

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