

The education sector in India: dawn of a digital era

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By Narayanan Ramaswamy, Partner and Sector Head, Education and Skill Development, KPMG in India

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The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the education sector, accelerating the shift to digital-learning models as educational institutes remain closed in the wake of the virus outbreak.

While other sectors are now going through an 'unlock' and restart of activity, schools, colleges and universities could be amongst the last to return to 'normalcy'. It is likely, they may never return completely.

Globally, while some countries such as Norway, Denmark, Poland and France have reopened schools, it is a significantly altered reality. Closed playgrounds, spacing of desks in classrooms to allow for six-foot distance, temperature checks of students at the entrance and masks during all times are constant reminders to children of the prevailing uncertainty.¹

The homeroom becomes the classroom

Educational institutions by their nature are set up for large gatherings – usually with minimal provisions for social distancing – and, therefore, are particularly vulnerable and unsafe for students at this time. Learning, however, lends itself easily to online formats and this trend had been quietly permeating even before the COVID-19 outbreak. The global pandemic has accelerated the switch to digital learning.

As classroom sessions were no longer feasible during the lockdown, educational institutions had to quickly innovate and augment their digital capabilities to make up for lost teaching hours. Most private schools in urban India started to offer online classes that supported student-teacher interaction on a real-time basis.² Unfortunately, government-aided schools and low-fee category educational institutions have limited resources and could not offer the same quality of digital-learning options.³

The lockdown also brought attention to some of India's leading educational technology start-ups that began providing free access to their learning platforms. Top ed-tech start-ups witnessed steep surges in demand for their content with a leading ed-tech app from India becoming one of the world's top 10 education apps by number of downloads during the lockdown phase.⁴ DIKSHA, a digital platform for school education launched by the Government of India, registered over six million views during the first three weeks of lockdown.⁵

Current trends indicate that digital formats will be an integral part of educational institutions in the post COVID-19 world. With some meticulous planning and access to research tools, digital formats can help achieve the three vital aspects of education: reach, equity and quality.

The digital shift

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- **Infrastructure:** the focus on education is likely to shift from physical to digital assets, which may ease some of the pressure on the already stretched physical infrastructure in India. At the same time, however, this also implies that large parts of rural India, financially and socially marginalised sections and, especially, underprivileged women and children will be at a disadvantage. To overcome this problem, a few state governments have started exploring the use of low-cost digital platforms for dissemination of learning content to the masses. For example, the Government of Kerala has announced setting up neighbourhood study centres for students who do not have access to a television, smartphone or the internet. These centres will be provided televisions at a subsidised cost.⁶
- **Upskilling of teachers:** while the focus is expectedly on students to ensure their learning is not disrupted by the pandemic, it is equally important to invest in teacher training and upskilling so that they can respond to the changing medium of teaching and learning.
- **Content:** to ensure efficacy, pedagogy and content will need to be revised to adapt to digital models of learning. As many states are also using television and radio, there needs to be a structured plan to impart learning in a multi-modal environment.
- **Role of peer groups:** learning at schools and universities does not only take place within the confines of a classroom but almost equally outside of it from peers and cohorts. Many lifestyle and behavioural lessons are lost with the switch to digital learning unless there is a concerted attempt to address these issues. It could, for example, be through digital teaming or a mixed mode of combining the now truncated (both in frequency and length) face-to-face meetings alongside digital lessons to achieve this objective. A detailed plan with inputs from experts in the field of education as well as from teachers, students, parents and psychologists needs to be developed to incorporate the holistic purpose of learning.
- **Socialisation:** the risk of social alienation is real with the emergence of digital-learning models. It is important to ensure adequate opportunities for social bonding and invest in the emotional well-being of students, which is largely compromised due to the siloed nature of digital lessons.

Conclusion

The popularity of tech-enabled learning solutions in the Indian education system is only going to accelerate further as educational institutions, teachers, parents and governments become increasingly willing to adopt technology in this domain. We are likely to see heightened activity in innovation, new ventures, investments and mergers and acquisitions (M&A) in the ed-tech sector.

In summary, during this global pandemic, schools and universities across countries switched to digital or online models to allow students to continue their learning. This has the potential to disrupt the well-established models in school (K-12) education and university formats permanently. While we embrace this new online model for education, it is crucial to be mindful of the gaps in the digital experience, especially for impressionable young minds that thrive on social learning. The human element in the process of education will, hopefully, continue to play an integral role as we tentatively explore our changed world.

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¹ How 6 countries are opening up schools again, with temperature checks, outdoor classes, and spaced out desks, INSIDER, accessed on June 10, 2020

² COVID-19: Education system's big shift from classrooms to computers, India Today, accessed on June 10, 2020

³ Indian education can't go online – only 8% of homes with young members have computer with net link, Scroll.in, accessed on June 10, 2020

⁴ Byju's among world's top 10 education apps downloaded during lockdown, Livemint, accessed on June 10, 2020

⁵ Govt expands digital literacy project – Diksha, Indian Express, accessed on June 10, 2020

⁶ Kerala govt's education plan for students with no TV, internet or smartphone, Huffpost, accessed on June 10, 2020

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