

## The rise of digital in Indian education sector

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### Key takeaways:

- *The year 2021 saw adoption of technology and significant focus on skilling and upskilling in the education sector, which is on the cusp of transformation – guided by a forward-looking policy*

Last year started with a lot of hope and promise – with a brand-new National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 – which was widely acknowledged as a transformational move. Quite naturally, there was an expectation that many fundamental changes would be initiated by the government. In hindsight, perhaps it was not the year for the kind of far-reaching changes that were planned as part of the policy.

The pandemic, which was far from over in the year 2021, also did not help the cause. The disruptions caused by the pandemic left no sector untouched and the education and skill development sector in India was no exception. Faced with many unprecedented challenges – the only silver lining was the adoption of technology and emergence of newer ways of teaching and learning – close to a third of schools in India had successfully delivered classes on-line. But more than 2/3<sup>rds</sup> of the 1.5 million schools in India were shut during the lockdown.<sup>1</sup> So how did this affect Indian students?

- The learning loss due to the pandemic is staggering. A survey was released in 2021 to gauge the extent of learning loss for children from grade two to grade six in 44 districts across India. The results showed that over 82 per cent had forgotten their foundational capabilities in mathematics and over 92 per cent in languages.<sup>2</sup>
- School closures also affected the socio-emotional well-being of the students. Around 33 per cent of 5- to 13-year-old children and 14- to 18-year-old children were reported to

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have been affected by poor mental health.<sup>3</sup>

- The gender gap in learning got wider. Over 10 million girls in India are likely to drop out of schools due to pandemic.<sup>4</sup>
- Apart from learning, 250 million students suffered from lack of nutrition which was made available to children through the mid-day meal schemes, due to closure of schools.<sup>5</sup>

It is with this background that NEP, for the first time perhaps, laid down a framework, that took a holistic approach to education and skill development. A change of this magnitude would need active and continuous involvement of all stakeholders which was not possible due to the near complete shutdown, during most parts of the year. Nevertheless, a slew of initiatives was launched towards the achievement of the NEP objectives. Key initiatives highlighted are as follows:

- The second phase of National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement (NISHTHA), an integrated programme for teacher training
- National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN) Bharat Mission to create an enabling environment for universal acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy, in which every child achieves the desired learning competencies in reading, writing and numeracy by the end of grade three, by 2026-27
- National Digital Educational Architecture (NDEAR) to facilitate the use of digital architecture in teaching and learning activities as well as educational planning, governance and administrative activities of the Centre and the States/Union Territories
- Structured Assessment for Analysing Learning levels (SAFAL) to focus on testing core concepts, application-based questions and higher order thinking skills
- A fundamental shift in the assessment of Class XII board examinations - the final year in school education, with the introduction of multiple-choice questions (MCQ) for the first time and the mid-year assessments. The aim was to replace the practice of having 'final' examination at the end of the year, bringing down the 'examination fear' in students without compromising on quality

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- Vidya Pravesh, a three-month play-based school preparation module for Grade one students
- Indian sign language introduced as a subject at secondary level.

Along with these, the National Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research Act Amendment Bill 2021 was successfully tabled in parliament this year.<sup>6</sup> Soon we can expect the Ministry of Education to move ahead with the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) bill, which is slated to be the single regulator for higher education.

Many of these announcements and initiatives were well-intentioned but not quite supported by a budget for their implementation. Quite surprisingly, last year's Union Budget saw a 6 per cent reduction for the education sector.

The pandemic also accelerated the rise of EdTech companies, thanks to the adoption of technology for teaching and learning. They continued to grow in 2021, with some interesting developments. The growth of EdTech companies this year was also propelled by the changing need for skills by industries among its workforces. Let us look at some of the highlights in the EdTech space:

- With hybrid or online teaching and learning becoming the norm, 2021 saw a lot of educational institutions in tier II and III cities embracing digital technologies for content generation and as a channel for instruction.
- Another trend that has beset the Indian EdTech space is 'personalisation' of learning. Mass customisation through "Personalised Adaptive Learning (PAL)" technologies was attempted by government as well as private schools.
- Indian EdTech players also quickly realised the need to make vernacular content to target a wider pool of students and consumers from tier II and tier III cities.
- In higher education too, EdTech made a significant presence. According to a survey in 2021, 31 per cent of respondents said they felt stuck due to the effect of the pandemic and 65 per cent of respondents said they enrolled in upskilling in the past year to strengthen their career. Most popular courses were - Data & AI (48 per cent), Project Management and Scrum (34 per cent), Cloud Computing/DevOps (32 per cent), and Digital Marketing (21 per cent).<sup>7</sup>

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In summary, 2021 did present its fair share of challenges, but due to and despite the pandemic, it also created several opportunities in the sector for government and private institutions. Service providers, particularly EdTech players - infrastructure, hardware and application providers, saw high revenues coming their way. It also saw many Unicorns and 'Soonicorns' emerging in this space – fuelling a frenzy of investment activities. From catalysing the adoption of technology to focussing on skilling and upskilling, education sector is on the cusp of transformation – guided by a forward-looking policy. This could well be the roots of truly establishing [India as a knowledge economy](#) in the coming years.

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<sup>1</sup> Central Square Foundation/UNICEF, 2021

<sup>2</sup> Unprecedented Disruption of School Education, Central Square Foundation, accessed on 3 January 2022

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, 2021

<sup>4</sup> CRY, 2020

<sup>5</sup> Unprecedented Disruption of School Education, Central Square Foundation, accessed on 3 January 2022

<sup>6</sup> Bill to enhance status of 6 institutes of pharma edu, research gets Parl OK, Business Standard, 9 December 2021

<sup>7</sup> Upskilling Is Crucial In Career Growth Plan; 65% Of Learners Upskilled To Strengthen Career Prospects, BW Businessworld, 3 January 2022

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