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# Ten Years of RTE Act: Revisiting Achievements and Examining Gaps

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**ABSTRACT** As India's landmark Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 completes its decadal anniversary, the country continues to grapple with the problem of poor learning outcomes in schools. This brief argues that the RTE Act must now move beyond "easy to measure" metrics and focus on the quality of learning. Moreover, since states across India have varying requirements, the law must work towards increasing the scope for decentralisation. The brief takes stock of the RTE Act's successes, while highlighting the challenges that confront it: streamlining the 25-percent reservation system; the implementation of the no-detention policy; the unreasonably stringent input norms; and the need to include early childhood care and education within the ambit of the Act. The brief also provides recommendations—both at the systemic and policy levels—on how to address these challenges in the next iteration of the Act.

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## INTRODUCTION

Providing universal education has been one of the main objectives of successive Indian governments since Independence. This has resulted in various policy and financial interventions over the last several decades. According to the recent Abidjan Directives[#], "States must respect, protect, and fulfil the right to education of everyone within their jurisdiction in accordance with the rights to equality and non-discrimination."

Almost a decade ago, India passed the Right to Education (RTE) Act, making

# The Abidjan Principles - a set of guiding principles on the human rights obligations on states to provide public education and regulate private involvement in the sector. https://bit.ly/2ynIZr5



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education a fundamental right, and ensuring free and compulsory schooling and education for children from the age of six to 14. The Act also mandates age-appropriate enrolment for children, infrastructure norms for schools, inclusivity, and provisions for community participation in the education process. Even in light of the Ministry of Human Resources Development's (MHRD) recently renewed focus on skilling and higher education, the RTE remains one of the most important catalysts for India to reap its much-anticipated "demographic dividend."

Since its enactment, the RTE Act has achieved success in overall enrolment rates but has faced criticism for administrative and structural lapses. Several provisions have fallen short of achieving their intended effect of significantly improving the quality of learning. While some provisions have failed due to implementation hurdles, others struggle due to a lack of coordination and the paucity of funds or delay in allocation. Moreover, the Act has since undergone certain amendments that tend to run contrary to the law's spirit.

## DISCUSSION: RTE ACT'S IMPACT

### 1. Increase in Enrolment

The RTE Act has caused increase in enrolment in the upper primary level (Class 6-8). Nationally, between 2009 – 2016, the number of students in the upper primary level increased by 19.4 percent (See Table 1). In rural India, only 3.3 percent of children in the 6-14 years of age were out of school in 2016.[1]

However, these national figures conceal massive state-wise discrepancies. For instance, in the age group of six to 10 years, the enrolment was more than 97 percent in Odisha but less than 80 percent in Andhra Pradesh.[2] While the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, for instance, have seen a steady increase in their enrolment numbers in the upper primary section, Madhya Pradesh, Assam and West Bengal saw a significant decrease in the same time period. (See Tables 2a and 2b)

**Table 1: Percentage increase in enrolment in the upper primary levels**

| Year | No. of students enrolled in class VI-VIII (upper primary) | Year-on-year increase (in %) |
|---|---|---|
| 2007-08 | 50,911,110 | NA |
| 2009-10 | 54,467,415 | 6.5 |
| 2011-12 | 61,955,154 | 12 |
| 2013-14 | 66,471,219 | 6.8 |
| 2015-16 | 67,593,727 | 1.7 |

*Source: District Information System of Education*

**Table 2a: Percentage Increase in Enrolment of Students in the Upper Primary Section (2014-2016, Top Three States)**

| State | Percentage Increase in Enrolment |
|---|---|
| Bihar | 6.5 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 1.1 |
| Rajasthan | 4.5 |

*Source: Enrolment in Institutions and Schools (All India and State Wise), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India*

**Table 2b: Percentage Decrease in Enrolment of Students in the Upper Primary Section (2014-2016, Bottom Three States)**

| State | Percentage Decrease in Enrolment |
|---|---|
| Madhya Pradesh | 2.7 |
| Assam | 5.1 |
| West Bengal | 1.5 |

*Source: Enrolment in Institutions and Schools (All India and State Wise), Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India*

To be sure, the RTE Act alone did not accomplish this feat. One of the most important contributors to higher enrolment is sanitation; there is a positive correlation between access to basic sanitation facilities and higher enrolment rates. This has led to an increase in female student enrolment as well as female teacher retention. As sanitation and hygiene improved, there was a decrease in sick days, and therefore, students and teachers stayed in school. While unisex latrines may suffice for the younger children, it is important to have clean toilets exclusively for older girls for reasons of privacy and safety. Female teachers are also more likely to be present in schools with clean toilets.[3] In this regard, government programmes such as "Clean India: Clean Schools" that focus on adequate water, sanitation facilities and the overall hygiene of a school have contributed to better implementation of the RTE.

## 2. Improved Infrastructure Norms

Qualitative norms specified under Section 19 of the RTE Act include a teacher–student ratio of 1:30, ramps for students with disabilities, office space for the principal, provision of drinking water, and availability of a playground. According to the District Information System of Education, only 13 percent of all schools in India have achieved full compliance with these RTE norms. The reasons include not only inept management

and lack of funds but also the failure to make the best use of available infrastructure. For instance, consider the inability of schools to incorporate a playground in their premises, especially in congested urban pockets. A possible solution is to use the municipal corporation ground as a collective, instead of ruling such a school out on grounds of non-compliance.

There are many schools in the country that do not meet the RTE norms but remain the only option for schooling for students in the vicinity. Thus, non-compliance must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. It is counterproductive to shut down an educational institution that fails to meet the infrastructure norms without evaluating the reasons and the quality of education being provided to the students. In evaluating the performance of schools, the RTE Act must focus less on "input" factors and more on the "output," i.e. the learning outcomes of students.

While all states are responsible for enforcing the Act, their capabilities to do so vary significantly. Therefore, it is difficult to set a national deadline for compliance, and states must be allowed to set their own timelines. The Centre must allocate budgets and incentivise adherence in accordance with these timelines.

## 3. The 25-percent Quota

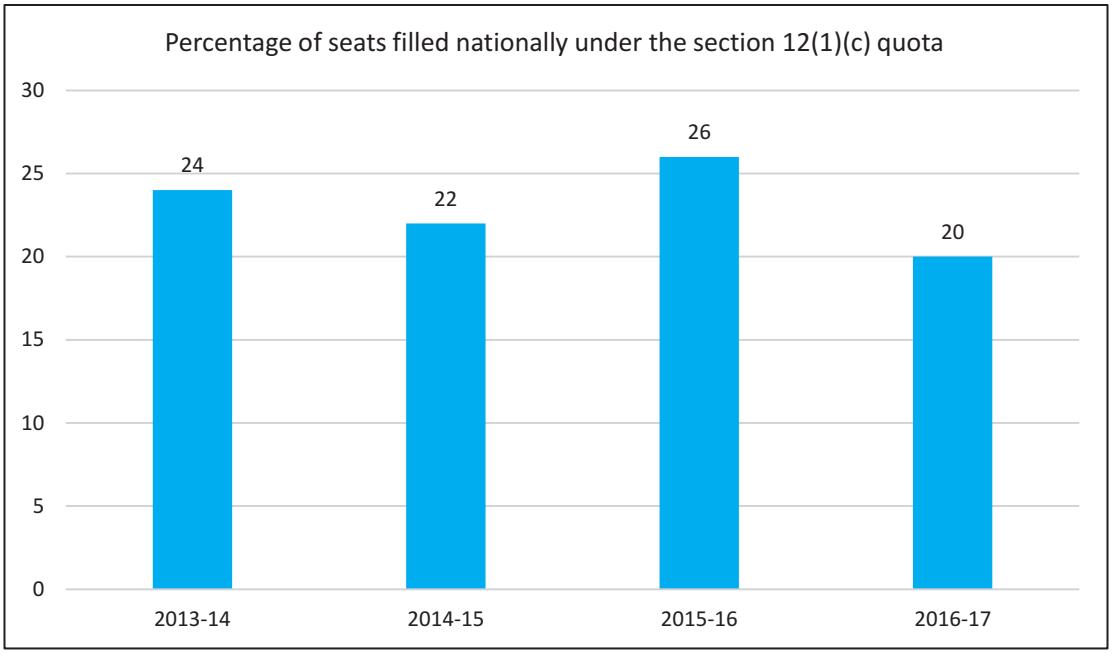
One of the most far-reaching and inclusive aspects of the RTE Act is its objective to ensure equal opportunity for basic education for all children, irrespective of their socioeconomic status. While previous attempts towards this goal were driven by policy-level decisions, the RTE Act has facilitated the creation of a legislative ecosystem that makes 'education for all' a fundamental right, and a legal and constitutional obligation.

Under Section 12(1)(c) of the RTE Act,[4] all schools—private, aided, unaided or special-category—must reserve at least 25 percent of their seats at the entry level (class one) for students from economically weaker sections (EWS) and disadvantaged groups (DG). In 2018–19, more than 3.3 million students secured admission under this provision.[5] States are allowed to frame their own rules with regards to the eligibility and income levels for the EWS and DG, further classification of the 25-percent reservation, level of entry, and the kind of documents required for admission. The essence of this provision goes beyond the ideal of 'education for all'. It strives for social integration: its constitutional mandate is to bring children "from different backgrounds to share interests and knowledge on a common platform."[6]

The resultant cost incurred by the schools is to be reimbursed by the central government. This reimbursement, according to the Act, will be equal to either the per-child expenditure borne by the state government or the fees charged by the private schools, whichever is lower.

In 2016-17, this provision resulted in the creation of more than 2.1 million seats for children from the EWS and DG.[7] However, due to implementation hurdles including financial allocations as well as varied state contexts, the fill rate of these seats has hovered only between 20-26 percent since 2013 (See Table 3).

**Table 3: Percentage of seats filled nationally under section 12(1)(c)**




*Source: The Bright Spots: Status of Social inclusion through RTE Section 12(1)(c) 2018, Indus Action*

As with enrolment numbers, there are massive state-wise variations when it comes to filling up these EWS and DG seats. For instance, in 2013-14, Madhya Pradesh had a fill rate of 88.2 percent and Rajasthan's stood at 69.3 percent. The performance of these two states was in stark contrast to that of Uttar Pradesh, for example, which had a fill rate of 3.62 percent, and Andhra Pradesh with 0.21 percent.[8] These variations occur across parameters, highlighting the need for state-specific budgetary and policy interventions.

Since India does not have a common schooling system, even without execution hurdles, the 25-percent quota system is susceptible to inequalities at different levels. Some of the criticisms levelled against this provision include discriminatory behaviour towards parents, difficulties experienced by students to blend in with a different socio-cultural environment, reliance on the private sector to provide quality education. In addition to social inclusion issues, there are other obstacles to the full implementation of the RTE law's quota provision.

## Implementation Hurdles

To implement the 25-percent provision, schools must release the number of seats available under the quota and publicise it through different avenues. Parents can then identify a nearby school and fill in the application for admission. (In some states, the admission process is online.) In the event of the number of applications exceeding the number of seats, the school conducts multiple rounds of lotteries to assign seats, until all the seats are filled.

Unfortunately, this process is fraught with problems at every stage. For one, most states have been unable to operationalise a mechanism wherein the local authority must maintain a record of all children from birth to 14 years of age within their jurisdiction. Such a

mechanism is imperative, since children from the EWS or DG are often first-generation learners and need to be sought out for admissions. Moreover, families from the EWS and/or DG often find it cumbersome to fill out forms. For example, in Gujarat, nearly 33 percent of the applications were found to be either incomplete or inaccurate.[9] Help desks set up by state governments have been either inadequate in number or concentrated only in certain areas. In some cases, parents have alleged that they have been asked to pay for the application form or help desk service—which is in direct violation of the RTE Act.[10]

Another recurring problem is the delay in the admission process. Unless all students in the first round get admission, it is not possible to begin round two and the process gets delayed further. Often, the number of students in the final admissions is significantly smaller than those participating in the lottery. In 2018, more than 44,000 students in Indore in the state of Madhya Pradesh were not granted admission in time. Such delays, even if rectified in a few months, can severely impact the academic progress of a student.[11]

## Calculation of Per-Child Cost

While the provision is applicable across India (except in Jammu and Kashmir, and Lakshadweep), as of January 2019, only 15 states and Union Territories have notified a 'per-child cost' to the central government, a mandatory requirement to claim reimbursements.[12] Even in these states, the methodology to determine this amount has come under scrutiny. For example, the state of Maharashtra's 'RTE Rules' state that the amount spent by the government (state, central or any other authority with government affiliations) on elementary education must be divided by the total number of children enrolled in such schools (unaided private schools excluded) to arrive at the per-child expenditure.[13] This is the government's expenditure formula. Other states, too, have similar provisions with minor variations. For instance, Tamil Nadu has an additional provision of using the fee fixed by the "Regulation of Collection of Fee Committee" as the per-child cost, if it is lower than the amount based on the expenditure formula.[14]

However, even if this formula were to be accepted as ideal, the per-student costs given by different states do not add up. A study calculated the per-child expenditure in Uttar Pradesh (UP) in 2018–19 using the government expenditure methodology and found the amount to be INR 3,064 per month. This figure was vastly different from the INR 450 declared by the UP government as the per-child cost for reimbursement. Moreover, the governments of UP, Himachal Pradesh and Bihar have not revised the per-student cost since 2014–15,[15] raising doubts on the accuracy of the costs presented, especially upon factoring in the increasing teacher salaries and the decline in enrolment of students in government schools.

Issues within the annual budget and expenditure plan have further resulted in several schools not receiving reimbursements for years.[16] A number of private schools across states also burden EWS students with additional costs such as transport and exam fees.[17] Due to a lack of clarity regarding grievance redressal mechanisms (which

function at the district level through courts and regulatory authorities), parents are pressured into paying substantial amounts to schools. Often, EWS families find such expenses unaffordable. This has led to a decline in the number of unaided private schools participating in the 25-percent reservation endeavour, from 49 percent to 46 percent between 2013 and 2017, despite an increase in the number of private schools in the same period.[18]

As the first cohort of EWS students complete class eight this year, there is no clarity about who pays for students from class nine onwards, since the 25-percent quota ceases to be mandatory after 14 years of age.[19] There is thus a real risk of creating a pool of 15-year-old students rendered ineligible to attend any school and falling out of the education system completely. The RTE Act must find a way to address these issues. Technology should be utilised for the mapping of schools at the district and state levels, to create a state- or district-wise database of schools for the seat allotment as well as for monitoring purposes.

## 4. No Detention ≠ No Assessment

A January 2019 amendment to the RTE Act modified the erstwhile policy of "not detaining" students from classes one to eight that intended to prevent them from having to bear the social stigma of failing.[20] Students in classes five and eight must now appear for regular annual examinations. In case of failure, a student must be provided additional training and a re-examination is conducted within two months. If the student fails for a second time, they can be detained. This amendment came after several states argued that children cannot be assessed adequately without exams, and learning levels were frequently found to be wanting after class eight.[21]

Only six states in India were against the amendment, viz. Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Goa, Maharashtra and Telangana. These states have significantly higher learning outcomes amongst students as compared to the national average,[22] because of their relatively successful implementation of the Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) mandated in the RTE Act. Nationally, only 58.46 percent of secondary schools have implemented the CCE.[23] Therefore, in the last decade, both exams and assessment were eliminated, which is contrary to the intentions of the RTE Act. The CCE is a pedagogical tool to ensure learning, with measurable outcomes. It entails a year-long evaluation of students on various parameters without the burden of exams. However, since current education administrations across states are structured to ensure schooling and not learning, most states—with the teachers' cadre accustomed to certain methods—found it difficult to make the transition to the CCE form of assessment. This is a direct result of the lack of adequate orientation and teacher training. However, the blame was assigned to the no-detention policy, and consequently it was toned down to its current form. Going forward, the RTE must codify certain norms for assessment. These must be overarching in nature, and its specific design and implementation procedures must be decentralised as much as possible.

Due to various economic and social conditions, India's primary section students are not always admitted to an age-appropriate class. Often, children follow a non-linear path

of schooling, at least in their initial years, which adversely affects learning outcomes. The Act must ensure that assessments are based on learning outcomes, instead of age or completion of syllabus. It is acceptable to have students in lower classes relative to their age, as long as their learning levels are commensurate to that class. The RTE Act must guard against the stigma of failing children, while also ensuring their learning at appropriate levels and effective measuring of the same.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

1. While enrolment rates have increased, keeping students in school for the requisite number of hours each academic year remains a challenge. There is no national database to track student attendance, as enrolment figures are mostly calculated based on names on the register, which is often an unreliable source. The focus of the RTE Act must therefore shift from enrolment to attendance. This has a direct bearing on the retention rate of students. The Unified District Information System for Education (U-DISE) data suggest that government-managed schools have poor retention rates compared to other managements. India needs to urgently develop a student-tracking system to facilitate appropriate teaching or remedial measures. The local authority, as designated by the RTE, must maintain a database of student attendance within its jurisdiction.

2. Parents are the most important cog in the RTE wheel. They must be made aware of processes and provided with assistance for activities such as online filling of forms and lodging complaints. School Management Committees (SMCs), which the RTE mandates for every school, must be empowered to be the nodal monitoring agency in this regard. The Delhi government has taken a number of initiatives to this end, including the creation of a fund to empower the SMCs.[24] Issues such as late/no applications for reimbursements or non-payment of dues are bureaucratic hurdles that must be removed. It is impossible for funds to percolate in a timely manner from the central government to different schools via the state government, considering the sheer magnitude of coordination and logistics involved. Thus, decentralisation, combined with the digitisation of processes to eliminate delay and pilferage, is the only operationally viable option for the disbursement of funds.

**Table 4: Retention Rates in Schools**

| YEAR | All Management | | Government Management | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Primary* | *Upper Primary* | *Primary* | *Upper Primary* |
| 2015–16 | 84.21 | 70.70 | 77.59 | 52.00 |
| 2014–15 | 83.74 | 67.38 | 73.75 | 48.46 |

*Note: This table does not contain data from Chandigarh, Daman & Diu, Delhi, Kerala, Puducherry and Tamil Nadu.*

Source: Unified District Information System for Education

3. The methodology and frequency of per-child cost calculation must be revisited. Considering the socioeconomic diversity of India as well as the different types of school management, it is impossible for all states to agree on the same amount. Designing normative frameworks to arrive at realistic costs is a more suitable option in this regard.[25] The methodology followed must be in the public domain and updated annually, without fail.

4. If public funding and private provisions have created more hurdles than successes over the past decade, their viability must be reassessed. There is a case to be made for private schools shouldering the responsibility of providing free education in areas where there are no government schools in proximity. However, declining enrolments in government schools against increasing enrolment in private institutions points to a larger malaise, i.e. the deterioration of the quality of education in government schools. India's public education system has been in the doldrums for many years now. While their private counterparts have not fared much better, the eroding faith in public schools is a matter of concern. The quota systems in private schools cannot be a panacea for the ills that plague India's education system.

## CONCLUSION

The draft National Education Policy of India recommends the inclusion of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) within the ambit of the RTE Act.[26] India has more than 164.47 million children aged six or below,[27] the age bracket within which scientists say neurological advancement is relatively faster.[28] This is a compelling argument to increase the ambit of the RTE Act to include ECCE. The RTE cannot continue to ignore the latter's foundational tenets and the cascading effect it has on students' lives.

India's flagship Integrated Child Development Services Programme (ICDS), which includes ECCE as a component, currently falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Women and Child Development. Since all RTE-related matters are handled by the MHRD, implementing the Act for children ages zero to six requires consistent inter-ministry coordination. Considering India's bureaucratic web, such coordination at the ground level can be fraught with complications.

Extensive consultations must be conducted at every level to devise a pathway that ensures an optimal level of preparedness before the child enters the formal schooling system. Under current circumstances, it is neither fiscally nor operationally prudent to include ECCE within the RTE. Similar to the 'no-detention' policy, it is a principally sound idea but needs careful deliberation before codification.

It took India 62 years after Independence to guarantee school education as a fundamental right for its young children. The RTE Act must now focus on improving the quality of education. It must also be ensured that any further amendments to the Act are well thought out to avoid complexities in implementation. Most of the challenges facing the Act can be overcome by its next decadal anniversary. Its current lacunae notwithstanding, the RTE Act remains one of

the most important reforms in India's school education, and its future may yet determine how India overcomes its most fundamental problems of poverty and exclusion.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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- India Matters
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# Increasing enrolment in higher education: A quantitative and qualitative challenge

- Sanchayan Bhattacharjee

- enrolment
- Higher Education

One of the key objectives of India's draft National Education Policy is to increase the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education to at least 50 percent by 2035. Since the current GER stands at just 26.3 percent, doubling it in the next 15 years will entail significant planning, reform and sustained implementation. In this light, the recently released All India Survey for Higher Education (AISHE) report 2018 assumes importance. It not only gives an overview of the current higher education landscape but is also indicative of areas that need urgent attention if the 2035 goal is to be achieved.

## Gender parity

Overall, as of 2018-19, 37.4 million students are part of the higher education system of which 18.2 million are female. This accounts for more than 48 percent of the total enrolment, an increase of a percentage point from the

previous year. In retrospect, this number was just 1.2 million in 2010-11. While this improvement is noteworthy, it is not consistent across different streams. Since almost 80 percent of the total enrolment in higher education is at the undergraduate level, a gender split across five major streams including arts, science, commerce, engineering & technology, medical science and law presents a more nuanced picture.

While female students comprise more than half of the total enrolment in arts and science courses, the corresponding share for engineering students remains low at just 29 percent. This is important since engineering includes electronics, computers, mechanical and information technology—sectors that are relatively more job-lucrative. Similarly, women constitute less than 40 percent of total enrolment in management as well as law streams. Conversely, women make up more than 60 percent of total enrolment in the medical sciences. These preferences contribute to gendered effects on labour markets as well as wage structures.

To ensure diversified and equitable gender participation in engineering and other technical courses, a number of factors have to be tackled. In 2018, the IIT-JEE (India's flagship engineering entrance exam) had less than 30 percent female applicants. Even among them, only 12 percent made it to the top 25,000. For these numbers to improve, it is essential to address implicit biases that exist throughout the education system. It includes addressing the problem of stereotypes associated with engineering related domains right from the school level. In addition, structural issues like equal access to quality coaching for exams, inclusive university/college environments, geography, changing employer attitudes towards hiring women across technical job roles etc., have a bearing on enrolment rates. As a first step, it is imperative to understand the scope and extent of these issues before addressing them.

## Concentration of HEIs

Six Indian states—Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Karnataka—account for more than 54 percent of the total student enrollment in higher education. Of the 39,931 colleges across the country, 50 districts (out of 731) account for more than 32 percent. As a result, although the college density (per lakh eligible population) is 28 nationally, it varies from seven in Bihar to 53 in Karnataka. Such spatial disparity is an impediment towards increasing the GER at a brisk pace. For disadvantaged sections of society, the opportunity cost of higher education (commute, hostel fees etc.), is often too high and hinders the education process. It can even be the determining factor for choosing a higher education institution or opting to forgo the same. Since market forces have played a major role in the higher education landscape, geographical equity has been elusive. While urban centres in India have performed reasonably well in terms of access to higher education, policy interventions for access to HEIs in hinterlands will be essential to match increasing social aspirations and increasing the GER.

## Low number of international students

The number of international students is generally a reliable indicator of the quality and robustness of a higher education system. As of 2018-19, only 47,427 foreign students were enrolled in the Indian higher education system, which is not enough for a country with more than 950 universities. This number stands at more than 4,00,000 international students in China, more than 3,00,000 in Germany and 75,000 in Singapore. Globally, India caters to less than one percent of all international students.

Prospective international students tend to select HEIs based on international rankings as well as the ease and cost of living in host countries. Indian institutes have failed to feature in the top 100 of world university rankings published by reputed ranking frameworks. The outflow of Indian students for education abroad is itself more than 15 times the inflow of international students to India. It clearly states the need for more quality HEIs in India across disciplines. While the Ministry of Human Resource Development has rolled out the 'Study in India' initiative in 2018 that attempts to increase the number of international students to 2,00,000 by 2024, scholarships and bursaries cannot be a substitute for institutes that can provide quality education.

Currently, in addition to India's neighbouring countries, African countries like Sudan and Nigeria account for almost eight percent of the international student received by the nation. While improving the quality of HEIs is a long term measure, ensuring seamless transition and acclimatisation of students from African countries will yield relatively quicker results. This includes easing visa approval processes, ensuring accommodation of students in culturally sensitive environments and effective grievance redressal mechanisms.

## The PhD conundrum

Only 0.5 percent of the total student enrolment in higher education are currently pursuing PhDs. A major reason for this abysmally low number is the saturated job market for PhDs. Apart from academia, PhDs in non-engineering sectors have very limited opportunities. However, more than the quantity, the quality of PhDs in India is a greater concern. Depending on the HEI, a successful PhD candidate does not necessarily possess research rigour. Indian academia has been plagued with issues such as fake journals, plagiarism etc. for a while now. Academicians holding positions of repute have been questioned on their research integrity. These are some of the main aversions that the corporate sector harbours when it comes to hiring PhDs, which ultimately aggravates the problem of limited jobs. In May 2019, the University Grants Commission announced its plan to conduct an investigation on 'The Quality of PhD thesis in Indian Universities' over the last decade. If executed well, this will help identify departments and institutions that are producing quality research and also weed out the sub-standard and bogus ones.

PhD candidates are the forbearers of the research identity of a higher education system. Going forward, while there must be focus on improving the PhD ecosystem in general, there is a need to reorient the skill set to problem solving in the entrepreneurial sector.

In addition to the above mentioned issues, it is essential that the next AISHE report delves into the quality of higher education. 'Unemployable graduates' is a frequent lament from a number of Indian employers. A number of industries expend considerable time and resources to skill new employees who are not 'job-ready' despite their degrees. Thus, subsequent reports must also look at linkages between HEIs and skill development institutes (public and private). In school education, India has achieved a GER close to 100, yet major issues of quality remain. The higher education ecosystem must not fall into the same trap. Ensuring quality higher education must be as much of a priority as doubling the enrolment rate in the next decade.

- Education and Skilling
- Education in India
- India

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- India Matters
- May 25 2018

# A roadmap for skills universities in India

- Sanchayan Bhattacharjee

Setting up skills universities across the country is an ambitious and expansive initiative. It cannot afford to fall prey to the ignorance of the political class, bureaucratic red tape or ministerial turf wars.

- Demographic Dividend
- Fourth Industrial Revolution
- Skills University

The Government of India's initiatives to create employment opportunities en masse and provide skilled human resource to cater to diverse job roles has been well documented. By 2022, the strength of the Indian workforce is expected to rise to around 600 million. It is essential that this workforce receives adequate and relevant training in an evolving jobs and skills market. In addition to jobs within the country, as developed economies age, India can be in a prime position to utilise its surplus skilled manpower to address the global shortage, which is expected to be more than 50 million by 2020.

Taking cognisance of this opportunity, a plethora of well-intentioned, but often poorly planned skill development programmes have engulfed the country, at the Central as well as State levels. Several institutional mechanisms have been put in place for effective implementation of the schemes, albeit often in a disjointed manner. Although 'skills' and 'education' are handled by separate ministries, a skilling initiative cannot be isolated from India's current formal education system. In this regard, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship's (MSDE) thrust on creation of skills

universities across the country assumes importance. This will need to be planned well, as depending on their administrative, financial and operational structure, these universities can either become primary skilling hubs and/or facilitators in different geographic pockets of India, or turn into money-guzzling white elephants.

**Although 'skills' and 'education' are handled by separate ministries, a skilling initiative cannot be isolated from India's current formal education system.**

Plans to establish skills universities have been underway since the last three years. In March 2015, a Parliamentary Working Group was set up to draft a road map for setting up a skills university. One of the main recommendations of the group was to delegate setting up of such universities to State governments. Accordingly, several skills universities have been established in different States, including Rajasthan, Haryana, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Odisha. The Rajasthan Institute of Leadership Development, Jaipur, was the one of the first such universities to be set up along with the Vishwakarma Skills University, Haryana. The Parliamentary group also identified a number of challenges to establish skills universities, including different operational models, importance of autonomy as well as the need for creating a brand for such universities.

The Sharada Prasad Committee, which was set up to review the functioning of the Sector Skill Councils in 2016, also recommended the creation of a National Vocational University to "conduct research, train the trainers/professors for the higher vocational education and training system of the country and become affiliating university for all vocational education training centres."

Both these expert groups recognised the need for creating skills universities that would function differently from conventional universities to fulfil their primary objective of imparting quality and relevant skills education.

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**Since a skills university will fall under the purview of respective State Skill Development Ministries, the UGC will have to make special provisions for its establishment as well as functioning. If this is not done as a non-negotiable precondition, the proposed skills universities face the real danger of getting tangled by governance, administrative and political red tape that a vast majority of state public universities in the country suffer from.**

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One of the most important objectives of setting up skills universities is to address the challenge of student mobilisation. Several studies have pointed out that skilling is generally perceived to be inferior to the conventional education system and students are often reluctant to opt for vocational education as a choice. The tag of a 'university' attached to a vocational institution is expected to negate this problem. However, in the current governance ecosystem of India, using the 'university' tag needs the approval of the University Grants Commission (UGC), a statutory body set up by the Government of India under the Ministry of Human Resource and Development (MHRD). Since a skills university will fall under the purview of respective State Skill Development Ministries, the UGC will have to make special provisions for its establishment as well as functioning. If this is not done as a non-negotiable precondition, the proposed skills universities face the real danger of getting tangled by governance, administrative and political red tape that a vast majority of state public universities in the country suffer from.

As the world braces for the full impact of the impending Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the current economies will have to account for the fast-changing nature of jobs. In the Indian context, new and evolved job roles will gradually emerge as a consequence of globalisation, its demographic dividend as well the impact of 4IR. As a result, it is essential for a skills university to conduct and/or outsource regular demand-assessment studies (preferably every five years) within its jurisdiction as well as refer to similar studies carried out in other parts of the country. Accordingly, different courses must be started, modified or even discontinued as per market demands. These efforts must be supplemented by state as well as central governments with periodic studies on skill-gaps in different sectors, future projections etc. A skills university must have the dynamism to follow such a demand-driven model or risk becoming irrelevant institutions churning out certified, yet unemployable, students.

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In order to successfully cater to demands within a State or province or even nationally, a skills university must be allowed to operate on a much wider territorial jurisdiction than conventional universities. For example, a Nagpur Skills University, Maharashtra, must be allowed to deliver courses as per demand across the jurisdiction of Maharashtra. In addition, the university must not be obligated to follow the traditional system of college affiliations. Instead, it must have the autonomy to have course and/or sector-specific collaborations with existing industry training facilities and skill providers. This is not to say that skills universities must not provide region-specific courses. However, given the evolving skills need scenario, its mandate cannot be restricted to only offering certain kinds of courses indefinitely.

In terms of curriculum structure for different courses, a skills university must focus on general education, work-integration as well as lifelong training. While a minimum entry level of class 12 (or its equivalent) can be the approach, a long-term integration of aptitude tests to advice candidates needs to be evolved too. In terms of the courses, as per the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF), there must be "multiple entry and exit between vocational education, skills training, general education, technical education and job markets". For example, a student completing the first year of a three-year degree course must be awarded a diploma at the end of the first year and be allowed to enroll in the second year after a gap. Ideally, all content must conform to the NSQF. However, considering its current status, universities must be allowed to determine their own norms. Unlike its conventional counterparts, classroom training cannot be a major component of skills universities. It must augment the larger narrative of work-based training that involves multiple stakeholders.

Industry expertise and partnerships form the fulcrum of any skills development/education project. A skills university must ensure that relevant industry partners become important stakeholders. Different operational models can be explored to make this happen. For example, demand mapping, course design, training, work integration as well as subsequent employment are different areas where industry partnerships can be formalised. While the skills university must retain the right to approvals as well as certification, it need not always intricately involve itself in every facet of training that can be carried out by industry partners. It must, however, have a robust mechanism of checks and balances that ensures accountability from every partner. The idea is to create an ecosystem wherein every player has some skin in the game, and as a result, is obliged to deliver.

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In order to facilitate this, the UGC must allow these universities to follow a distinctive organisational and governance structure. A skills university must be allowed to deviate from hiring professors and assistant professors in the conventional hierarchical structure with set qualifications. Instead, sector-specific norms that focus on domain knowledge rather than academic qualifications must become the yardstick of choosing instructors either on a permanent or contractual basis. A skills university can follow the work-integrated training model or the institutional model or a combination of both depending on factors like seed capital, available land, objectives of the university etc. While an institutional model would mirror a conventional university in many ways, a work-integrated training model would involve the university working largely as a facilitator, assessor and certifier. In terms of research, skills universities must have the wherewithal to accommodate scholars who can study new methods of pedagogies, evaluate existing programmes, suggest policy interventions etc. An alternative model of first incubating a smaller centre for vocational education and gradually expanding it to form a university can also be explored to achieve scale in a cost-effective and sustainable way.

The establishment of Universities under skill development ministries and outside the ambit of the education ministries threatens a turf war which might derail the initiative. A similar situation had developed in 2014 when the MSDE was established. Its mandate clashed with that of the Ministry of Labour and Employment (which used to handle skill initiatives before Nov 2014). A fracas ensued at various levels and as a result, the entire 'Skill India' magnum opus just couldn't take off in spirit for almost a year. Thus, the proposed skills universities must have their mandate clearly charted out so as to distinguish them from other universities under the all-pervasive ambit of the UGC.

Currently, state public universities across the country are suffering from mismanagement and paucity of funds. The administrative rot is so deep, that despite pumping in funds year after year, many of them are struggling to manage their

affairs. Amidst all the chaos, lakhs of students suffer collateral damage every year. It is imperative that a similar situation is not allowed to fester in skills universities.

Since there is ample scope to partner with industries, skills universities must not be funded by their respective State governments after a certain gestation period. Financial autonomy must work in tandem with financial responsibility. A board of governors, including representatives from the respective governments as well as industry experts, must oversee the functioning of each university. Setting up skills universities across the country is an ambitious and expansive initiative. It cannot afford to fall prey to the ignorance of the political class, bureaucratic red tape or ministerial turf wars. Else, India risks creating a second university system with all the dysfunctional elements of the first.

- Development
- Economy and Growth
- Education
- Education and Skilling
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INDIA MATTERS | JUN 20 2019

# Media literacy – A need for the hour

SANCHAYAN BHATTACHARJEE


Photo: Getty Images/Jose Az

INFORMATION SOCIAL MEDIA

In a society where information is ubiquitous and terms like “post-truth” are increasingl becoming part of our narratives, consumers’ awareness and understanding in terms of ‘information’ per se needs to evolve. While it is not uncommon for information creation and propagation to be laced with certain agendas, the ascent of fake news in this digital world across political, ideological, economic and social spectrums has become a matter of concern.

Armed with social media as well as other omniscient messaging networks, where large scale information dissemination is not the domain of elites or media outlets alone, it is impossible to stem the flow of information. In such an environment, it is essential to equip consumers with tools to filter, analyse and even reject information. This practice must match the timelines of information bombardment, which begins at a young age. Thus, it is imperative for curriculum, pedagogy and learning ecosystems to keep up an devise methods to differentiate between fact and fiction.

The proliferation of smartphones and tablets means that the current generation of students have more access to information than ever before. A 2016 study conducted by the Stanford History Education Group found that although students were proficien on different social media platforms, more than 80% could not distinguish between native advertising (“sponsored content”) and news stories. Simply put, students canno objectively navigate the barrage of information coming their way. Some nations were quick to diagnose this issue and have been honing their response over the last few years.

For instance, 2014 onwards, Finland (which has one of the best public education systems in the world) launched an anti-fake news drive that majorly focused on developing critical thinking and discerning abilities among students. As per a 2016 IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education study, 82% of teachers in Finland picked “promoting student’s critical and independent thinking” as their most important goal. Through different modules developed in collaboration with fact-checking organisations and/or external experts, Finland has attempted to develop critical thinking skills among students to counter disinformation. This includes discussing current thematic issues with students, building a culture wherein questioning and

cross-checking is inculcated not just as an attitude, but as a practice. Similarly, in September 2018, a bill to encourage media literacy in American public schools was approved by Governor Jerry Brown, Governor of California. The bill, proposed by state senator Bill Dodd, mandates the department of education in the state to provide instructional resources to instill media literacy and train teachers accordingly.

**In India, where the veracity of information is fast becoming elusive, there is still scant conversation about structured media literacy modules at the school level.**

In India, where the veracity of information is fast becoming elusive, there is still scant conversation about structured media literacy modules at the school level. While ICT continues to make inroads in different spheres of the education space, functional technology skills cannot be conflated with literacy. Since the flow of information easily transcends geographical boundaries, ethical as well as contextual considerations while consuming content is critical.

India's school education system that largely depends on completion of syllabus and rote learning is not geared to take on this dynamic mantle. To begin with, there is still limited cognition of the magnitude of this problem at the administrative level. In addition, since most teachers are not digital natives, familiarity with technology is often a major hurdle. Also, the prevalent community culture of blindly trusting the printed word in newspapers or spoken word on television or even WhatsApp forwards largely goes unchallenged. In order to change this social conditioning, reform must occur at different levels.

**Firstly**, state education departments must recognise the need to incorporate media literacy as an integral part of the curriculum. In this regard, a central government directive will also be useful. This must be promptly followed up with the setting up expert committees to prepare modules for teacher trainings in the subject. Such committees must include existing practitioners and as well as representatives from fact-checking organisations who have developed mechanisms to verify information. It is important that such committees are state and if possible, even region specific, so as

to ensure relevant and contextual modules for their respective students. The training modules must be exhaustive and conducted on an annual and evolving basis.

**Secondly**, parents and immediate elders are at least as pivotal (if not more) to a student's development. It is impossible to instill an analytical culture within students if the converse is prevalent in their homes. Despite the increasing prevalence of the internet among children, studies have found that families remain their most trustworthy source of information. So in addition to teacher training, parents must be sensitised to the possibility of skepticism towards circulated information. Parent-teacher meetings, school management committee events, annual days, sports days etc., are some of the platforms to initiate discussions about the same.

**Thirdly**, there is a case to be made for not having a formal curriculum in this regard. Since the medium of information flow is almost never consistent, it is essential that any training in this domain keeps pace with whatever is the current information paradigm. For example, it is pointless to devote too much time to teach students how to spot paid content in newspapers, if most of their news consumption is through Twitter or WhatsApp. Instead, it behooves such modules to use as recent information as possible (both true and false) in the local, national as well as international context while teaching students how to think and analyse.

**Lastly**, while skepticism towards information must be encouraged, care must be taken that it does not morph into cynicism. For all the dangerous implications of unrestricted information flow, the increasing prevalence of different media has greatly democratised information and increased its scope, access and diversity. The fear of being duped should not overtake the curiosity to learn or be informed. In fact, developing a propensity towards information is a precursor towards anaylsing it. It is essential to understand that media literacy does not mean media control. Under no circumstances should students be instructed to depend on certain sources of information and avoid the rest. The objective is to instill the ability to make such decisions in an informed manner. In an era where misinformation and disinformation campaigns are already having an impact of societal issues and even national elections,

it is imperative to equip students with tools to assemble, assimilate and analyse information.

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