

Budget 2019 needs to have a holistic view on where education in India needs to go

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New Delhi | Updated: July 3, 2019 11:20:25 am



While the 2009 Right to Education Act (RTE) in India had correct sentiments in universalising education, it lacked sufficient focus on quality of education. *Image source: pixabay.com*

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Rabindranath Tagore, who was the first non-European and Indian to win the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913, once noted, “Don’t limit a child to your own learning, for he was born in another time”. Economists would agree, given the established relationship between education and both individual success and long run economic growth. Past work has shown how education, and in particular mathematics and reading skills, are robust predictors of a country’s long run growth.

Is India doing enough with its vision for education for the masses (and not just for the elite) to realise its full potential? This question is even more critical in the face of a skills gap and a jobs crisis in India, given the modern economy’s rapid adoption of industrial automation, robots and AI. With the new Indian government shortly coming up with its first full federal budget and with education sector outlays being actively discussed, it is time to take a broader, holistic view of where Indian education needs to go.

We fear that education could become a political instrument such that India never realises its true potential. Some people, pointing to the success of its elite universities, are in fact largely satisfied with Indian education. India is a key supplier of human capital at global innovation hotspots like in the Silicon Valley or Boston, exporters of some of the best business leaders, policy makers, doctors, economists and scientists to the world and has a rich heritage in human capital development for itself domestically and for the global economy. Yet, India’s brain drain, itself a formidable issue, distracts attention from a more fundamental set of challenges.



actions on two key educational fronts. First, while the 2009 Right to Education Act (RTE) in India had correct sentiments in universalising education, it lacked sufficient focus on the quality of education. Recent policy discussions have bounced between just letting RTE go to recasting it into a Right to Learning Act to moving it up to higher-primary and secondary level. We would argue that the most crucial current need is a shift in focus toward student outcomes. In simplest terms, education policy should move towards RTQE (or a Right to Quality Education) from just a RTE.

In focusing on a RTQE, there can be, as past research has shown, no substitute for quality teachers. The new Indian government would do well in planning outlays to monitor what teachers are teaching, to establish teacher performance measures and to create incentives (and disincentives) for

performance. Moreover, in thinking about spending on education, the research is clear that technology will not substitute for quality teachers. Recent reports on Indian outcomes of students from the ASER surveys are unacceptable to say the least. India's performance on PISA from the limited participation of two states in 2009 was so low that no Indian students have participated since. The planned participation in 2021 is an overdue action, but policy changes cannot wait until those results are in.

A key reason for the huge performance problems is the lack of focus on quality teachers, a problem exacerbated by slavishly clinging to an outdated colonial model of teaching pedagogy that does not adjust to student progress or teacher capacities. Indeed, one wonders why the country does not have yet a No Child Left Behind act to go with a RTE (or RTQE as we propose). The 2019 New Education Policy of India seems to be making thoughtful suggestions, including a movement towards a focus on educational outcomes and usage of vouchers – but the follow through will be important.

A last point is worth emphasising: While there have been stated goals about the education of the girl child and of the less privileged, they have been far from realised. A new emphasis on this will be consistent with Prime Minister Modi's recent emphasis on Sabka Vishwas (or everyone's trust). Countries cannot grow in the long run if discrimination handicaps large portions of the population on the basis of gender, ethnicity, religion or caste. India's current finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman is a trained economist, herself reputed to consistently break glass ceilings. The country can hope that she will be a model for the government's long-run vision for education starting with the upcoming Indian 2019 federal budget.

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