

# Positive initiatives seen in Education Budget

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The Indian education system is facing a variety of challenges at all levels. Problems of infrastructure, shortage of teachers, access, equity, quality and relevance are the major challenges that the education system is facing. We cannot expect miracles from the Finance Minister for solving all these problems, but at least, more financial allocation may lead to solutions to these problems to a large extent and the Government can spend 6 per cent of the GDP on education as promised. India's Union Budget 2022-23, presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1, has received mixed reactions from academicians, economists and intellectuals. Education experts say the Budget may score good points in some parts but there are also disappointments as far as the education sector is concerned. Some educationists have criticized the poor allocation of fund in the education sector and neglecting of the key issues.

The Union Budget this year has emphasized on strengthening digital learning by establishing a 'Digital University' to provide access to students for world-class quality education in virtual mode. The Finance Minister in her Budget speech said, "One Class, One TV channel programme of PM eVIDYA will be expanded from 12 to 200 TV channels. This will enable all States to provide supplementary education in regional languages for classes 1 to 12 to make up for the loss of formal education due to the Covid-19 pandemic." Teachers will be encouraged to develop quality e-content in regional languages. It is appreciable to establish a Digital University and 'One Class One TV chan-

nel programme' and it indicates that the Government has highlighted digitization to boost online education and access to education across the country. Due to the pandemic situation in the last two years, millions of children were unable to attend school and also lacked smartphone, computer and internet connectivity to continue online education. Under this situation, it is equally important to expand speedy internet connectivity in rural India. Many schools lack computers and internet. However, as per the Budget, digital infrastructure in rural areas will be improved, especially through the announcement of the Vibrant Villages Programme. This year, the Budget focused on several things – digital education, creation of digital university, creation of jobs, agricultural universities, skilling programmes, etc.

The overall allocation on education in the current Budget is Rs 1,04,278 crore, which is Rs 11,054 crore more than the last Budget. The education budget allocation for 2021-22 was Rs 93,223 crore, which was reduced by 6 per cent compared to the year before. The revised estimate was Rs 88,002 crore. This year, the education budget was increased by 11.86 per cent from the previous budget. However, many educationists are not satisfied with this minimum increase, considering the revival of the education system due to the disruption caused by the pandemic and also implementation of the National Education Policy. The overall Budget allocation for school education and lit-

eracy is Rs 63,449.37 crore, which is about Rs 9,000 crore higher than the previous budget allocation of Rs 54,873 crore. Higher education will receive Rs 40,810.34 crore and last year, it was Rs 38,350.65 crore. Allocations for Central universities, Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), National Institutes of Technology (NITs), and other Centrally funded institutions have increased

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significantly. The University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) budgets have been increased.

The Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, which is also called the National Education Mission, is India's biggest school education scheme. This scheme has seen a big reduction in the Budget allocation than the 2020-21 Budget, which was Rs 38,750.50 crore. A total of Rs 37,383.36 crore has been allocated for this scheme in the Budget 2022-23. This year, the allocation wasn't able to go back to the level of 2020-21 even after a hike of more than Rs 6,000 crore. A loan of USD 500 million has been taken from the Asian Development Bank for funding the Samagra

Shiksha Abhiyan and creating 'exemplar schools'. The concept of 'exemplar schools' was first introduced in the Budget 2021 where the Finance Minister proposed that 1,500 schools be converted to 'exemplar schools' with quality education. The PM Poshan Scheme, which replaces the mid-day meal scheme from this year, has been allocated Rs 11,000 crore this year, which is a slight increase from the previous year Budget allocation on the mid-day meal scheme.

The Padhna Likhna Abhiyan, which is another programme for adult education, focuses on basic literacy among the adult population, but no allocation of fund has been made in this year's Budget. Last year, Rs 250 crore was allocated under this scheme. Similarly, no fund allocation has been made on the National Scheme for Incentive to Girls, although

the last budget had allocated Rs 110 crore under this scheme. Skill development is one of the major initiatives of the Budget, as the Budget 2022 is focusing a lot on the skilling programme which is a boon for the nation as the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a major hit in this field. As per the budgetary announcement, the Skill Hub Initiative of the MoE and the MSDE will be launched in 5000 skill centres during next year. Job creation is another significant initiative of the Finance Minister. As per the budget announcement, the Government was targeting a creation of 60 lakh jobs in 14 sectors through the PM Gati Shakti and the Production Linked Incentive scheme for achieving Aatmanirbhar Bharat. Although this budget has not an-

nounced any new educational institution except Digital University, as per the budget announcement, five existing academic institutions in different regions will be developed into centres of excellence in urban planning. The AICTE will take the lead to improve the syllabi, quality and access of urban planning courses in other institutions.

Another remarkable initiative in the Budget 2022 is the announcement of a Tele Mental Health Programme which will include a network of 23 Tele Mental Health Centres of excellence. We know how the Covid-19 pandemic affected not just physical health but also mental health of people of all ages, including students. Therefore, this initiative is quite relevant and significant. Although India has made significant increase in its total expenditure outlay for education in its annual budget, but the figure is still far less than the promised 6 per cent of the GDP. Year after year, while presenting the Budget, successive Finance Ministers have promised to make every effort to raise the national budgetary allocation for education to a reasonable 6 per cent of the GNP. The National Education Policy 2020 calls for public investment on education up to 6 per cent of the GDP. As per the Economic Survey presented by the Finance Minister in Parliament, the expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP was 2.8 per cent in 2019-20, 3.1 per cent in 2020-21 and 3.1 per cent in 2021-22.

To meet the 6 per cent of the GDP criteria, the education budget for 2022-23 should have been almost double that of the last year, but this year also, the Government has failed to increase the GDP expenditure on education. In spite of certain inadequacy, the Budget 2022-23 has some positive initiatives in the education sector.