

Business Standard

Budget 2023: Allocating 6% of GDP by 2030 a must, say education experts



As Union Budget 2023 approaches, experts from the field of education believe that the focus of the government should be on digitisation and internationalisation of education. Concepts like smart classrooms, modern teaching techniques, and online education should be at the forefront.

The education sector too witnessed a massive disruption due to coronavirus pandemic, with the majority of academic learning relying on online means. The government gave a fillip to the sector in the previous year's Budget and set aside Rs 1.04 trillion for the education sector, which was an increase of Rs 11,000 crore, or 11.86 per cent, from what was pegged in 2021-22.

The previous year's Budget mainly focused on digital education, the creation of a digital university, job creation, and agricultural universities.

Here's a look at what experts expect from the upcoming Budget for the education sector.

Education sector allocation

Ashok Varma, Partner and Leader Social Sector, PwC India said that he would like to see greater urgency and budgetary commitment by the government to meet the suggestions made in the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020. "If we want the allocation for the education sector to reach six per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) by 2030, we must have at least a 50 per cent increase year-on-year (YoY). With this estimate, the upcoming Union Budget should allocate Rs 1,50,000 crore for the education sector.

The sentiment was also echoed by Prof. V N Rajasekharan Pillai, Vice-Chancellor, Somaiya Vidyavihar University, Mumbai, who said that until 2022, union and state governments could only manage to

achieve an allocation of 3.11 per cent of the GDP for education. He said, "allocation of 4.5 per cent of the GDP for the education sector is expected."

In the last Budget, the allocation for Samagra Siksha went up to Rs 37,383 crore in 2022-23 from Rs 29,999 crore in 2021-22. Similarly, the allocation for Strengthening Teaching-Learning and Results for States (STARS) went up from Rs 340 crore to Rs 550 crore.

Ground reality

A lot of initiatives were introduced in the last year's Budget including digital university, Samagra Siksha scheme, and One Class One TV Channel to give a boost to academic learning. Commenting on whether any real progress has been made in terms of these initiatives, Ashok Varma, PwC India said, "reasonable progress has been made by the PM e-Vidya platform (an e-learning platform) to address the challenges. He further added that the platform also has some e-content developed for children with special needs.

The last Budget also paved a way for the creation of National Digital University (NDU) to provide access to students across the country for world-class quality education. However, only two have seen the light of day thus far.

Varma said, "The progress on digital universities has been slow and till now we have two digital universities - one in Kerala and one in Rajasthan. However, digital universities would proliferate in the future as it is the only viable solution for addressing the seat gaps in colleges and universities."

But Mayank Kumar, Co-founder & MD, upGrad, thinks that the yet-to-arrive NDU could be another milestone under NEP 2020. He said, "We have seen Indian edtechs build a strong digital infrastructure and spearhead accessibility of learning in the last few years when traditional learning mechanism was brought to a standstill. Therefore, the government's push towards streamlining NDU's operations in India shall encourage top offline universities to co-create a learning ecosystem for millions, while also making quality online higher education a non-metro phenomenon."

Mental health

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, students were confined to their homes, which later impacted their mental health as well. Recognising the gravity of the issue, finance minister announced a National Tele Mental Health Programme.

While Rajiv Bansal, Director Operations, GIIS India, said, "The lack of social interactions took its toll, with students and learners falling into depressive moods. Hence the government implemented the District Mental Health Programme, which aims to detect, manage and treat such difficulties by providing services and information about the awareness and removal of stigma associated with it. Further, in October 2022, the government launched the National Tele Mental Health Programme that provides access to mental health care services all over India along with the toll-free helpline".

However, Ashok Varma, believes that this is one area where society and parents need to play a bigger role.

He said, "This is one area where I believe more than the government, we as parents and society need to play a larger role. The pressure and unhealthy competition created among children by society cannot be addressed by the government. The government can address the mental health issue to some extent by making the assessment process less stressful for students".

Boost for EdTech sector

Amid the pandemic, the EdTech sector also witnessed a boom after the classes were shifted online. According to a report by Times of India, the EdTech sector contributed immensely to the continuity of

academic learning in rural areas, irrespective of the circumstances. According to industry reports, education from grades 1 to 12 increased around 6.3 times in 2022, in comparison to 2019, owing to the availability of quality online learning.

However, the EdTech sector is now witnessing a slump as the offline classes have picked up the pace. Kumar of upGrad believes the government may announce initiatives to assist the expansion of the EdTech sector, given the need for online learning materials and technology.

Kumar said, "We are also optimistic because the new education policy has advocated & outlined the necessity of online education and early adoption of the same from the school level for a more integrated learning model. This can involve providing funding for research and development, providing tax breaks to edtech businesses, or launching programs to increase students' access to technology and internet connectivity in remote or underprivileged locations".

Mehul Pandya, MD& CEO CareEdge said that the EdTech sector has huge potential to grow in the long run. "The government needs to pre-empt the boom in the sector and have supportive policies around it. However, what is even more critical for the education sector is ensuring the availability of good quality education at the primary and secondary levels to the masses. It is critical to have strong fundamentals at the bottom level to further build on".