Opinion

Is e-learning the best bet during lockdown?

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Rural	Q3	2.4	11.6	9.2	11.1	8.3	Rural	Q3		
	Q4	4.2	18.4	13.4	14.6	10.9		Q4		
	Top Q5	9.5	29	20.1	20.6	16.5		Top Q5		
	Total	**4**	**15**	**11.7**	**12.9**	**9.9**		**Total**		
Urban	Bottom Q1	6.6	18	21.9	22.1	16.8	Urban	Bottom Q1		
	Q2	8.8	26.5	27	27	21.9		Q2		
	Q3	15.6	38.7	31.6	31.1	26.7		Q3		
	Q4	23.3	50.1	38.2	37.5	32.9		Q4		
	Top Q5	48.9	68.3	51.3	50.2	45.8		Top Q5		
	Total	**20**	**39.8**	**33.6**	**33.2**	**28.4**		**Total**		
	Bottom Q1	3.1	9.3	11.6	12.3	9.2		Bottom Q1		
	Q2	3.7	13.7	13.2	14.3	11.4		Q2		

It's less egalitarian than TV in delivering education. Net-based learning holds promise, provided the digital ecosystem improves

The coronavirus pandemic has upended our world. The academic calendar all over the world has been disturbed. Caught in the maelstrom, some parts of the urban Indian education system has turned towards delivery of education via the internet — or online education.

The NCAER Skills Report 2018 discussed the immense potential of online learning, albeit as complementary to more traditional methods. In the current situation, online education is turning out to be a substitute to traditional modes. Is India ready for this switch in terms of its infrastructure and digital readiness of children?

Infrastructure readiness has to be assessed in terms of household assets ownership versus school facilities because of the lockdown that is characterised by social distancing. The National Statistical Organisation (NSO) 75th Round survey on 'Social Consumption of Education in 2017-18' had probed households' ownership of computers and access to the internet.

The computer was a catch-all for devices like desktop, laptop, notebook, netbook, palmtop, tablet (or similar hand-held devices). Specifically, the smartphone was not included in this list. Further, the survey probed if a household member of age five years and above had used internet to find, evaluate and communicate information from any location during the last 30 days preceding the date of survey, via any of the above-mentioned devices, and smartphone, etc.

The analysis only includes households which had students aged between 5-29 years and were currently enrolled and attending school. The survey showed that 8.3 per cent of households had computers and 21.6 per cent

had internet facility. Further, a larger share of households had access to internet facility versus ownership of computers. However, there are large variations between rural and urban areas and intra-regional gaps as well. In urban areas, 20 per cent of households had computers and 39.8 per cent had access to internet (see Table). The corresponding numbers in rural areas were 4 per cent and 15 per cent respectively. In the top two urban quintiles, 68.3 per cent and 50 per cent of households had internet access, respectively. This number was 18 per cent in the bottom-most urban quintile. Twenty-nine per cent of households had internet access in the top-most rural quintile and 5.7 per cent in the bottom-most quintile.

Digital skills

The Indian youth are also characterised by limited digital skills. Only 17.6 per cent of the youth could use a computer and 18.4 per cent could access internet. As per the NSO (2019), the ability to use of computer could include any of the following tasks — copying or moving a file or folder, using copy and paste tools to duplicate or move information within a document, sending e-mails with attached files (example, document, picture, and video), using basic arithmetic formulae in a spreadsheet, connecting and installing new devices (example, modem, camera, printer), finding, downloading, installing and configuring software, creating electronic presentations with presentation software (including text, images, sound, video or charts), transferring files between a computer and other devices, writing a computer program using a specialised programming language.

The ability to use internet meant that the household member was able to use internet browser for website navigation, using e-mail and social networking applications, etc., to find, evaluate and communicate information. Therefore, relatively speaking, only the top most urban

quintiles in India are the most ready for online education. State/UT education policy during the lockdown needs a more egalitarian means of delivering education. One alternative to online education is delivery of education via television.

The Delhi Government is ahead of the curve in thinking about it. The National Family Health Survey 2015-16 shows that 86 per cent of urban households and 51.5 per cent of rural households had colour television. In the short-run, the television holds a much more viable, equitable, cost-efficient and scalable alternative than online education.

A caveat remains, that is, how will children be assessed on their understanding of these lessons? Help or parental guidance at home especially in bottom quintiles may also be limited. Private tuitions are also not currently available.

The current crisis has acted as a fillip to encourage digital education. However, to achieve its potential in the medium run, Indian schools need to be better equipped digitally, which, in turn, needs to be measured appropriately by various statistical agencies. There is on-going research in NCAER to construct education satellite accounts for two States. These tools may be potentially used to analyse the contribution of digital education.

Students need to learn digital skills for its own sake and improving quality of education. The emphasis on online education has to be accompanied with changes in curriculum, textbooks, teacher training, examination systems and pedagogy. Last but not the least, quality of traditional education has to be improved, too.

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