

# EXPRESS VIEW ON ASER REPORT: CUES FOR REFORM

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) focuses on an age group that is critical to India unlocking its demographic dividend — 14- 18-year-olds in rural areas. It confirms the heartening trend of more students transiting to secondary education. Apprehensions that the pandemic-induced economic distress would result in older children dropping out of school have been belied. Education's well-established links with people's aspirations seem to have trumped economic exigencies. ASER 2023 notes that "today more children in India have more years of schooling than ever before". But like ASER's previous editions, the latest report doesn't see enrollment as an end in itself. It lists failings and challenges, and charts opportunities. The more sobering findings relate to foundational skills — about a fourth of those surveyed find it difficult to read a Grade 2 level text in the local language and more than half struggle with arithmetic skills they should have been proficient in by Grade 5. This is a serious deficit that has a bearing on the quality of the country's labour force — no skilling programme, however ambitious and well-designed, can succeed when its targeted beneficiaries have problems with elementary reading and basic arithmetic.

The report engages with one of the most difficult education-related predicaments of recent times — the increasing pressure on young students amidst acute academic competition. The problem, as ASER 2023 reveals, is not confined to urban areas. The difficulties of a section of learners get compounded because they have to juggle academic requirements with responsibilities like working in family farms. ASER suggests reforming pedagogic processes to reduce pressures on such students. The increasing use of smartphones in rural areas — about 95 per cent surveyed households had these devices and nearly 95 per cent men and 90 per cent women could use them — is an opportunity to extend education, and design classrooms that are flexible with time and schedules. Planners will, however, have to find ways to nudge students and their parents to use digital technologies for learning. The use of smartphones for education today is way less than that for entertainment. NEP 2020 envisions embedding digital technologies in the educational landscape. It also talks of pivoting from a curriculum-centred approach to one focused on the individual learner. The snapshots of the digital — and other educational — capabilities of youngsters in ASER 2023 could provide cues to policymakers in implementing NEP's visions. At the same time, they should also remain alert against lapsing into technological fundamentalism.

China has been able to realise its demographic dividend to a large extent by prudent reforms in its technical and vocational education and training systems. The ASER report shows that India has a long way to go in this respect. Vocational skilling is not the first choice for youth. Only 6 per cent of the surveyed are currently doing vocational courses. This should be a wake-up call for policymakers to re-imagine vocational education — as NEP envisages — and make it truly aspirational.

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