

BUDGET 2023 IS A CASE OF EDUCATION TAKING A HIT

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March 09, 2023 12:08 am | Updated 01:47 am IST

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'Penny-pinching when it comes to education may seriously hamper the revival and the resurgence of education' | Photo Credit: ANI

The allocation made for education in the Union Budget 2023 reminds a person of these lines from the Samuel Taylor Coleridge poem, "Work without Hope": "Work without Hope draws nectar in a sieve, And Hope without an object cannot live." However, the news headlines shouted out a different story: 'highest ever allocation to education'; '8% steep rise for education'; 'first-ever teacher and education-centric budget', and so on. But even a not-so-serious reading of the Budget and its provisions for education shows what is behind the facade.

The provision of 1,12,000 crore as compared to 1,04,000 crore, does not take the education sector any closer to the top 10 list of allocations as a percentage of GDP. Still, an increase of 8,000 crore may be termed as a massive increase.

The school sector has been allocated 68,804.85 crores, as against 63,449.37 crore last year, largely due to a fresh allocation of 4,000 crore for the PM Schools for Rising India, or PM-SHRI alone.

This combined with the newly announced Eklavya model residential schools to be opened in every district of India actually brings down the provisions for already existing schools and their activities, leaving them high and dry to deal with rising prices and the pressure of increasing enrolment in government schools. Government and government-aided schools are still where the deprived and have-nots go to. Out of about 15 lakh schools, 10 lakh schools are owned and managed by the government, employing about 97 lakh teachers and catering to over 26 crore students.

The story about higher education is no different. Allocation for higher education has also been enhanced from 40,828 crore in 2022-23 to 44,094 crore, with allocations to autonomous bodies (such as the University Grants Commission, All India Council for Technical Education, central universities, Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research, Indian Institutes of Information Technology, National Institutes of Technology, Schools of Planning and Architecture) having gone up by 13.60% on average. Of these, the central universities are the biggest beneficiary (22.39% increase).

Total budgetary support to the Indian Institutes of Management is down from 653.92 crore in 2022-23 to 300 crore this year. A bulk of the allocation is meant for the repayment of the Higher Education Funding/Financing Agency (HEFA) loan and interests thereon, leaving only 15.17 crore in 2023-24.

Such a drastic reduction might have caused unhappiness but that seemed inevitable as these institutes have raised their fees to justify public funding. We do not know whether this has impacted equity on their campuses.

Many others may be genuinely disappointed too. This year's Budget makes no provision for HEFA, which could mean no new loans for infrastructure development in the centrally funded institutions. The allocation for world class universities has been slashed from 1,700 crore to 1,500 crore. Also reduced to half is the Prime Minister's Girls' hostels allocation.

The interest subsidy and contribution for guarantee funds, scholarships for college and university students and the special scholarship for Jammu and Kashmir have now been merged into a new scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Protsahan (PM-USP) Yojana. Thus, the allocation for the three schemes has been slashed from 1,878 crore to 1,554 crore.

Budgetary allocations for research, innovation, incubation and startups have either been slashed or done away with. The Startup India initiative in higher educational institutions has a reduction from 60 crore in 2022-23 to 11.21 crore, whereas the provisions for the national initiative for design innovation are down from 17.80 crore to 10 crore. For IMPacting Research, INnovation and Technology (IMPRINT) and the Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration (SPARC), the allocations have been reduced drastically. The Budget makes no provision for Impactful Policy Research in Social Sciences (IMPRESS).

All these three schemes were launched with fanfare. While the provisions for the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (NMEICT) have been unaltered at 400 crore, no money has been provided for virtual classrooms and massive open online courses (MOOCs), e-ShodhSindhu, the national digital library and the national academic depository.

The Budget had made the grand announcement of opening 'three' centres of excellence for artificial intelligence in the top educational institutions. It also promised a policy on national data governance. It is hoped that these do not overwhelm the education sector.

The proposed National Research Foundation has been allotted 2,000 crore through the Department of Science and Technology, but this awaits approval from the Union cabinet.

Thus, the overall increase in allocation to higher education is due to a reduction in recoveries from 14,250 crore in 2022-23 to 6,000 crore. In reality, the allocation for higher education has declined from 55,078 crore in 2022-23 to 50,094 crore in 2023-24.

Going by the Economic Survey 2023, the combined expenditure on education by the Centre and States (as a percentage of GDP), has remained stagnant at 2.9% during 2019-20 to 2022-23 (BE). As a percentage of total government expenditure, it slid from 10.7% in 2019-20 to 9.5% in 2022-23 (BE), while the share of education in social services nosedived from 42.5% to 35.5% during the same period.

In this era of 'Amrit Kaal', everybody lives in the hope of getting some portion of the nectar. Penny-pinching when it comes to education may seriously hamper the revival and the resurgence of education. Budget 2023 does not bring anything afresh. Alas, it is nectar in a

sieve.

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