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Promoting Digital Readiness of the Higher Education Institutions for Effective Implementation of National Education Policy-2020

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Abstract:

Digital Readiness is a concept mostly in practice in the business enterprises, however, its use need not be limited. The concept holds importance for many other fields too. Higher educational institutes can avail the benefits from the concept in various ways. The National Education Policy launched on 29th July, 2020 articulates the aim of the policy is to “have an education system by 2040 that is second to none, with equitable access to the highest-quality education for all learners regardless of social or economic background” (GoI2020). The policy acknowledges that, digital technology, especially the educational technology will play a crucial role in realizing the goal. Therefore, it’s no wonder that the doing “extensive use of technology in education is one of the key principles of the policy.

To make such extensive use of the educational and Information and Communication Technologies, it is not sufficient to increase network coverage, public and private investment in basic digital infrastructure, and providing cheap and equitable access to all its stakeholders. One more very important aspect must be taken into account, and it is that the human resources must be trained made digital ready both to avail and meet the challenges brought in by

the fast pacing technologies and disruptive innovations. Before we train the resources to make the best use of the technological innovations, we must first know if we are ready and what is the current status of digital readiness of the higher educational institutions. Before that, it is first essential to know what digital readiness is.

Digital Readiness Defined

Digital Readiness, like literacy, deals with the training and skill development of the human resources. As literacy and basic numerical calculation abilities are inseparable from the survival of a human being in the present world, so will be the digital literacy, if not competency, in the future world. In order to thrive as well as to survive in the modern digital world, it is not enough just to know the new advancements and technical breakthroughs, but of equal import are the skills to make their use in carrying out the personal and the professional tasks. The ability to handle a machine, or at least one of its functions, was an essential skill for a labour of the Industrial Era, however, Digital Era demands far more than this even from a layman. There are numerous skills at work when a common person uses technology for interpersonal communication, web browsing, e-transactions and applying online. For a technology oriented job to be carried out, it is not enough to master the required skills; it is mandatory to unlearn or de-skill and re-learn or re-skill oneself every now and then. Despite the everlasting process of learning the new, all are not equally competent to use the technology. Digital readiness refers to the competence of the citizens or the employees in carrying out their tasks with help of digital tools and technologies. There are these definitions aiming at clarifying the term more: 1. “Digital readiness refers to the level of behavioural competencies, cognitive skills, and digital proficiency of a company’s employees that helps them adapt and manage the digital transformation process” (Björklund, 2021).

2. "Digital readiness is defined by the level of readiness of an organization's workforce to transition into digitized workflows that are enabled by software and technology" (Ogbevoen, n.d.)

3. "Digital readiness primarily looks at how ready employees are to adopt new processes, software and technology in order to begin the process of 'going digital' or enabling, 'digital transformation'" (Pattison, 2020).

The three definitions above summarily point out towards 'competence', 'cognitive skills', 'adopting the new' or 'transformation processes'. So, the idea of 'digital readiness' refers to preparedness of an individual's or a workforce to undergo a behavioral or cognitive change. The concept of digital readiness thus seems unquantifiable and more of a qualitative nature. The parameters of judging if an employee is 'digitally ready' or not seems to be based on perception rather than on any checklist. Thus, the interpretation of the term by the three writers does not fully encompass the other meanings of the word 'Readiness' and they do not provide any criteria for evaluating it. John Horrigan of The PEW Research Centre codifies it better. He enlists the three elements of 'Digital Readiness' which are like a check-list of items. They are more of a quantitative kind than of a qualitative nature. They are:

1. **Digital skills**, that is, the skills necessary to initiate an online session, surf the internet and share content online.
2. **Trust**, that is, people's beliefs about their capacity to determine the trustworthiness of information online and safeguard personal information.
3. **Use** – the degree to which people use digital tools in the course of carrying out online tasks (Horrigan, 2016).

In order to assess the 'digital readiness' of a company, or of a country, many times a research or business strategy company surveys its employees. Such surveys are commissioned by the companies for their own self-assessment

and sometimes they are carried out involuntarily. The findings of one such survey recently conducted by The Salesforce Global Index was reported in The Economic Times wherein, India scored the highest among the 19 countries selected for the study. The index was meant to "measure the global employee sentiments and readiness to acquire the key digital skills needed by businesses today and over the next five years". What the survey found was that, the employees in India were "actively learning digital skills to prepare themselves for the future of work". In the survey, more than 23,500 workers in 19 countries were questioned. The average score of global readiness was 33 out of 100. It is noteworthy that India scored 63 in it (ET Bureau, 2022). The news is plausible indeed, however, it should also be noted that the survey primarily focused on the employees. The labour in the unorganized sector, the common citizens, women, poor, and especially the students await an extensive survey of such kind.

Ways of Promoting Digital Readiness

There are various ways and strategies worth adopting in order to promote digital readiness. The higher education institutes can devise an action plan as per the results of profiling digital readiness and fix the priorities.

1. **Training of the Staff:** As the National Education Policy-2020 perceives teacher as the soul of the entire pedagogical processes, it is natural that teachers must first be trained and made digital ready. Either higher education institutes can schedule a training program on the premises or, the faculty can be offered expenses and time to get themselves trained in the ICT. A digital ready teacher will easily and surely promote the digital readiness.
2. **Training of the Students:** After the results of digital readiness profiling of the students, the students with less or no digital skills should be trained on first priority. There are many digital skills imparting private institutes aided by the state and central governments training the stu-

dents from Below Poverty Line (BPL) section of society. Such students can be enrolled in the governments' schemes. The HEIs can also do an agreement with the training institutes regarding reduced costs. The HEIs can sponsor training course scholarships to the students excelling in various curricular and extra-curricular activities.

3. Peer to Peer Training: This is one more way of speeding up digital readiness of the students. The students at the advanced stage of digital skills can be assigned the task of helping those without digital skills. The basic skills like browsing the internet, downloading, printing, and accessing the data can be easily imparted by a student to another student. The advanced and the technical aspects of digital skills can be reserved for the experts only. This way, it will save the time and efforts of the master trainers.

4. Inclusion of Digital Tasks in Assignment: To make digital skills a serious issue, it can be made a part of evaluation system. Some tasks can be assigned to the students only to be completed through digital medium only. This way, the students will get themselves acquainted with digital skills out of necessity.

5. Increasing Access to Digital Infrastructure: One of the key ingredients of learning digital or any skill is time and frequency of exposure to the skill. Easy and ready access to digital devices will also help the students and the faculty in practicing the digital skills. Computer laboratories can be utilized by the students at the leisure time.

6. BYOD: Bring Your Own Device: This is one more factor to take into account—the present status of technological infrastructure needs a boost through funding, however, the practices like BYOD (bring-your-own-device) have been reported in the US and UK reducing the cost of infrastructure (Flavin 2017). It is observed that, digital devices are more likely to be used if the users own them. The devices meant for common use are often either not trusted or not likely

to be used.

7. SEC in Digital Literacy: In the National Education Policy-2020, it is expected there should not be a strict boundary between the disciplines and the students should be given freedom of choice. Accordingly, some universities have adopted a policy of offering freedom of choice through Skill Enhancement Course (SEC). In it, a Skills Enhancement Course in Digital Literacy can be offered across all the disciplines. This way, the students will learn the basic digital skills as a part of their curriculum.

8. Preparing a Certificate Course in Digital Literacy: One more way to make digital skills a part of curriculum for all will a Value Added Course like Certificate Course in Digital Literacy. This way, the students can earn the credits and utilize them wherever necessary.

9. Scholarships and Fellowships of personal devices: The nature of scholarships and fellowships so far has been of monetary kind. To make it more useful in this regard is to offer scholarships and fellowship to the meritorious students in the way of personal digital devices like Tabs, Laptops etc.

Significance of Digital Readiness

While the NEP-2020 identifies India as a 'global leader in information and communication technology' and also credits the 'explosive pace' of ICTs and creativity of the techno-savvy teachers, students and entrepreneurs for impacting education in multiple and hitherto unforeseen ways, it is important that there should be an equitable access to technology across all the sections of the society. The country has many divides besides a major divide based on economic conditions. It has been often noted that 'digital divide' will have more adverse effects on the lives of the individuals and of a nation more than an 'economic divide'. All the investment in digital infrastructure and all the efforts of the government to bridge the digital divides may not have a concentrated and output oriented effect unless there is any profiling done

regarding digital readiness of the institutions.

NEP-2020 has facilitated National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) with multiple functions like advising, articulating and envisioning the use and directions of technological interventions in pedagogy in order to give a platform for 'free exchange of ideas 'regarding ICT Educational software will be developed across all languages. It declares that E-content will be uploaded on DIKSHA and SWAYAM platforms. NEP-2020 also admits that our present education system is unable to "cope with these rapid and disruptive changes" which indeed places us individually and nationally at a perilous disadvantage in an increasingly competitive world" (GoI 2020). Today when almost all the fields of knowledge and production are being digitalized and 'what will be digitized, will be' is the rule, the employable and employed human resource needs to be trained more for digital skills.

Profiling and training for making the higher education institutes digitally ready will be significant in various ways. Profiling of higher education institutes on the basis of the level and status of digital readiness will reveal the digital divides and the factors contributing to it. Various measures to bridge the digital divides will be figured out. Not only will the data bring in 'ease of work' and 'access of quality higher education' to all, it will also clarify the roadmap to do concentrated efforts in making India a 'knowledge society'. Digitally ready teachers and students will only be able to reap the benefits of the 'information explosion' and disruptive technologies. Without either a digitally ready teacher or a student, the alternative advanced modes of learning like Blended and Flipped Modes of education, Virtual Field Tours, Computer Assisted language Learning cannot be imagined in India. Rich, and up-to-date Web Resources cannot be availed without having digital readiness either by the teachers or the students.

Digital readiness cannot be achieved

without its prerequisite skill-digital literacy. As alphanumeric literacy, digital literacy is also an indispensable part of modern civil life. Digital literacy is the founding stone of the digital era. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology defines digital literacy as "the ability of individuals and communities to understand and use digital technologies for meaningful actions within life situations. Any individual who can operate computer/laptop/tablet/smartphone and use other IT related tools is being considered as digitally literate." Based on this definition, the households are categorized by the Ministry as digitally literate if at least one person in the household has the ability to operate a computer and use the internet (among individuals who are 5 years of age and older). Moreover, Venugopal Mothkoo of NITI Aayog informs that, as per the above definition, only 38% of households in India can be categorized as digitally literate. And, there is regional inequality in the levels of digital literacy. In urban areas, digital literacy is relatively higher at 61% relative to just 25% in rural areas. (Mothkoo 2021). The challenge is to make the remaining 60% citizens digitally literate. These facts only point out the significance of profiling digital readiness including digital literacy of the students and the teaching faculty in order to make the most out of modern ICT.

If we look at more recent status of digital literacy and digital readiness especially in the employed youth in India, the picture that emerges out shows a room for more concentrated efforts. The findings from a research by Amazon Web Services, Inc. (AWS), published on livemint.com are eye-opening. The report of the study reveals that despite India being a country which runs 40% of the Silicon Valley IT enterprises, the youth of India don't feel confident about their proficiency in carrying out the required digital tasks. It also brings to fore the fact that the country whose talents run Google, and Microsoft should have a situation that, 95%

workers in India feel in need more digital skills to cope with changes in their jobs due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Livemint, 2022). The report also mentioned that, 27.3 million more jobs in India will require additional digital skills.

Naman Agrawal, Senior Associate, Seepana Mohit Rao, Young Professional and Himanshu Agrawal, Young Professional at NITI Aayog write that India is a country of the highest working age population where there is a need of 12 million new jobs a year to absorb the growing working age population. To meet the demands of the new age industry, about 50 million people need to be skilled each year. However, our current capacity of imparting digital skills is only 3 million (Niti Ayog, 2022).

To sum up, it is necessary that Digital readiness of the students and the teachers should be profiled in order to decide the training programme. It will reveal the actual status of digital literacy. High number of digital ready students and employees definitely contribute more than the non-ready employees. In order to realize the goals of the National Education Policy like, making India a Global Knowledge superpower and a vibrant knowledge society, it is the most required that the next generations and their teachers should both be trained for digital skills. Indexing and profiling of the institutes can be carried out through surveys and questionnaires.

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