



Building a Right-Based Pathway
FOR INCLUSIVE
DIGITAL EDUCATION
in Nepal

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Executive Summary

Digital transformation has been reshaping education globally; however, its benefits remain unevenly distributed for developing countries like Nepal. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility in terms of structured inequalities, digital poverty, lack of competency and inequitable access despite decades of policy commitments towards ICT integration in learning, and yet, no substantial action plan targeted to future of learning has been envisioned. As digital technologies become inseparable from the exercise of fundamental human rights, Nepal is in dire need of right based framework that positions digital education not as a privilege but as an essential component of constitutional right to education.

The policy landscape of Nepal shows an immensely strong intent to move towards digital transformation in education. From the very first ODL Policy (2007) to ICT in Education Master Plan (2013-2017), National Education Policy (2019), SESP (2023-2032) and the most recent updated draft of Digital Nepal Framework highlight ICT enabled learning, strengthening of digital competency, expansion of connectivity, introduction of emerging technologies such as AI, AR/VR and IoT. Despite of strong intent, implementation seems to be limited due to infrastructural disparities, weak inter-ministerial coordination, outdated regulatory framework and failing to learn from past experiences.

The Nepalese context continues to demonstrate persistent inequalities; majority schools still lacking reliable connectivity, issues relating to digital literacy and scarcity of online learning material. Even the available contents online are vastly inaccessible for many learners including those with disabilities. The schools which have connectivity also suffer from low bandwidth speeds, unaffordable mobile data, language barriers and limited teachers being competent enough to implement digital pedagogy. These aspects restrict equitable and inclusive learning along with meaningful participation for digital education.

This policy analysis paper recommends a multi layered right-based approach along right to education (online learning), right to participation (connectivity), right to security (digital safety) and right to equality (inclusiveness and accessibility). The paper has prioritized expanding broadband access for all, adoption of accessibility standards across platform and contents, integration of digital pedagogy into teacher education, ensuring of affordable educational data packages for students along with robust coordination for effective implementation of DNF 2.0 and the need to promulgate second edition of ICT in education Masterplan to go along with the new digital Nepal framework. In order to uphold constitutional right to education, especially, in this post-digital era, digital education must be recognized as integral component of the education and not as a supplementary privilege.

The Context

The integration of technology in education is a concept that is been around for a while following a long and uneven trajectory. Technologies of the nineteenth century including radio and television introduced open and distance learning in its earliest forms. The rise of personal computer industry in the 1990s revolutionized e-learning and with crash of dot-com bubble in the early 2000s, the utility of the internet diversified into development of online learning platforms, tools and digital courses. It is indeed from this phase a new modality of learning began. Learning around schools and universities was supplemented by the use of internet and technology. During the COVID-19 pandemic, as all schools and universities had to close physical classes to restrict the outbreak corona virus, online learning, although glitchy during the initial phase, served as a savior to learning continuity at an unprecedented scale. This was actually a shift in the paradigm of learning, where online learning prior to this was a luxury and hereafter emerged as a necessity. Digital education brought an exciting promise for the future of learning but also revealed precarity in terms of exclusion where digital ecosystems were not equitable. The challenges for countries like Nepal were not limited simply to access of technology but also in competencies and meaningful learning experiences through technology. As of now, internet, computers, smartphones etc. have seamlessly integrated into our lives in the same way like radio, TV and electricity. In such context, a proper right-based framework is imperative to refrain expanding inequalities in digital education, especially for rural and remote population, women and girls and person with disabilities.

Online education now sits between the intersection of digital rights and rights to education. Access to technology is no longer a privilege, but a right. The Constitution of Nepal (Article 31) and Article 26 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantee education as a fundamental right. In this era of post-digital, access to technology, tools, affordable internet and inclusive digital platforms are seemingly the preconditions for exercising the right to learn. In order to ensure equitable and inclusive digital education, it become necessary to understand the provisions of existing policies and make recommendations in areas where improvements are necessary. This paper analyzes the existing Acts, policies, and frameworks aligning in the intersection of ICT and education.

Nepal is a landlocked developing nation with around 80% of the population residing in the rural areas of Nepal. The literacy rate of Nepal stands at 76.2% as per the census of 2021. The literacy rate in 2011 was just about 60%, showing increment of 27% in the past decade. According to UNICEF, 82% of children complete lower basic school and 75% complete upper basic school with mere 27% of children completing secondary schooling. A total of 15% secondary age children are out of school. These data show concerns and the necessity to pay heed to prevention of children dropping out of school as they transition into secondary schooling. One of the ways, to reduce dropouts could be making schools more accessible.

Nepal introduced a federal system of governance in 2015, delegating education structures and policies to local governments. Now, the federal, provincial, and municipal governments work together to formulate and oversee education. However, the Federal Education Act lacks a governing policy for effective coordination, hindering progress towards new educational milestones. Provincial Education Development Directories handle educational affairs at the provincial level, while municipalities have educational units responsible for local education development. As new school sector development plans and revised federal structures address local educational needs, it's time to rethink education modalities, prioritizing inclusive and accessible blended learning environments.

Policy Landscape for Digital Education

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has been a part of Nepalese education strategies since the early millennium. Radio education was practiced long before it became a mainstream policy. In 1957, the College of Education launched a radio education program for teacher training to promote adult education. The 1971 New Education System Plan (NESP) mandated teacher training for permanent job tenure. Physical training classes did not seem to be reaching out to many teachers in the remote area, so, an alternate approach of Radio Teacher Training Program (RTTP) was also implemented by government of Nepal. In 1994, Nepalese Distance Education was established under National Education Commission to proactively employ radio platform for the purpose of trainings, awareness and education. Despite promising outcomes, the advent of the internet revolutionized communication, leading to the formation of ODL policy in Nepal in 2007.

Online and Distance Learning Policy

Open and Distance Learning Policy 2007 was developed in Nepal in collaboration with National Curriculum Framework to provide general and vocational education through radio, television, internet and other electronic medium. This was the first significant approach made to impart quality e-Education in Nepal. The policy aims to create a supplementary ODL system with opportunities for diverse citizens, especially the deprived, women, and working people. It provides access to education, including personality development, through distance learning. The policy provides two streams of education: general and vocational, with separate curricula developed through the National Curriculum Development Framework. It also envisions lifelong learning, occupational skill development, and teacher development training.

In 2016, Nepal established its first open university, providing higher degree programs through virtual learning platforms. Major universities like Tribhuvan University and Kathmandu University introduced distance learning programs for higher degree courses in Education. Post-pandemic, these universities shifted towards a hybrid format, combining physical and virtual methodologies. While this trend is appreciable, a proper framework is needed to standardize accessibility, inclusiveness, and quality of teaching/learning.

Education Act and National Education Policies

The Education Act, 1971, which is over 5 decades old, is still in place in Nepal. The Act doesn't have specific provisions for Digital Education but it entrusts the Department of Education (DoE) under the education ministry to prepare and upgrade the curriculum based on the country's needs. The 5-decade old Education Act of Nepal, however is in the brink of replacement. The School Education Bill, 2080 is in the process of becoming the new Act for Education in Nepal. The bill has made a promising provision for arrangement for virtual classes with access for all including development of digital platforms, interactive e-learning materials and improvement of digital competency of teachers and students. The bill is yet to be enacted and implementation modality for its provisions through the School Sector Education Plan may barely be sufficient.

The Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education, 2018 in Nepal provides every citizen in Nepal to have the right to equal access in quality education without discrimination including right to education through their mother tongue and through the use of alternative medium wherever necessary. Article 8 of this Act entrusts Local Government to provide alternative basic education for children without convenient access to physical classrooms. Articles 14 and 15 mandate alternative and open education, instructing local governments to provide alternative learning for non-attending students and non-formal ODL measures for secondary students. The Act also requires the Ministry of Education to set quality education standards, which could effectively implement online and distance learning in Nepal.

The National Education Policy 2019 has acknowledged the importance of distance and online education and thereby has planned to equip educators with relevant digital skills for innovative teaching and learning. The policy has also planned to increase open learning centers all across Nepal and develop adequate amount of online learning materials. A separate radio and a television channel fully dedicated for the purpose of education has also been envisioned within the policy. Although the policy elaborates the amelioration of formal, informal, non-formal, lifelong learning, vocational learning, and open education system through effective use of technology, the frameworks and guidelines to use ICT for education specially within the formal education system is still scarce.

ICT Policies in Education

One of the most significant policies that brings ICT and education together deliberately for the purpose of equitable and quality learning outcomes is the ICT in Education Master Plan. ICT in Education Master Plan 1 (2013-2017) has identified four priority areas of intervention. Those areas include;

- * Preparing ICT structures (internet/connectivity, data and materials)
- * Developing competent human resources
- * Developing digital materials
- * Improving teaching methods and management.

ICT in Education Master Plan in Nepal aimed for capacity building of all human resources associated with education for ICT in education. The plan included ICT teacher training centers which would train ICT teacher of schools who would in return train and support other staffs and administrators. The goal would be achieved by assessing ICT needs in education, formulating ICT skill standards for teachers and developing respective training modules. National Center for Education Development (NCED) has been assigned for developing and providing teachers with trainings for integrating ICT in classroom learning along with evaluating of competency of teachers for ICT in education. Some key strategies to achieve above objectives has been to implement ICT and internet for teaching and learning in as much as 10,000 schools, establish digital data resource centers, use ICT in curriculum and prepare digital learning materials, digitizing education management information system etc. The other notable policy that supports ICT in education in Nepal is the National ICT Policy of 2015. The policy provided for instigating e-school initiatives, digital pedagogies and startup of Open University in Nepal. Despite of all these brilliant and ambitious strategies, the progress made in digital education seems insignificant with reference to bitter experience of COVID-19.

In Nepal there are 77 districts and currently all headquarters of those districts have claimed to have some sort of broadband connectivity. The government has announced optical fiber project to link all districts with information superhighway and connect beyond all district headquarters, but this project will take some time for completion. National Broadband Policy (2015) and ICT policy (2015) made promising targets of reducing broadband price to 5% of monthly GNI per capita, achieve digital literacy of 75%, broadband penetration of 90% and increasing internet penetration to 100% by 2020. These polices aim at creating digital Nepal with priority area of digital literacy and ICT in education through expansion of connectivity and infrastructure. On the contrary, these targets have proven to be quite unrealistic approach as Nepal's broadband penetration in 2019 was just over 30% and after the pandemic. it increased to around 36% according to Nepal Telecom Authority. In 2023, fixed broadband penetration of Nepal stood at 37.46% while the mobile broadband penetration is 93.18%. According to the national census of 2021, although the fiber broadband penetration stands at 37.46%, out of 460 rural municipalities, only 21% of those municipalities have fixed broadband connectivity. Furthermore, interestingly, 73% of families in Nepal do have a smartphone, however 49% families have a television and mere 15% families have computer/laptop.

Although 73% families in Nepal have smartphones, the device is mostly used by the head of the family. It is difficult for parents to share their devices if they have more than 2 children. The mobile broadband penetration in Nepal is relatively good with 93.18%. However, according to Ookla Report for median country internet speeds for June 2025, Nepal's mobile broadband internet upload speed averaged 14.16 Mbps. Online learning requires the use of audio, video and file sharing/uploading/downloading functions and therefore 14.16 Mbps is not even near to being sufficient. The next issue is about affordability. The Alliance for Affordable Internet is encouraging governments across the world to set targets for 5GB internet price, for both mobile and fixed, to not exceed more than 2% of average monthly income. The popular mobile service providers in Nepal offer 5GB data pack for a limited time at a cost ranging from 300 to 500 Nepali rupees. This is an affordable price range for working people but this can still be discounted for students. The diversity geographical terrains in Nepal still restrict uniform and reliable network coverage across many rural hilly and mountainous regions. For the aforementioned reasons, quality education through mobile internet in Nepal is a slim possibility.

Center for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) under MoEST annually publishes Flash Report illustrating the statistical milestones of students, schools and the education sector. The Flash Report 2024 shows incremental trend of improved ICT facilities in schools of Nepal. Currently, there are 35,447 schools out of which 27,298 are community schools in Nepal. Out of these total schools, 80.1% have electricity supply, 54.2% have ICT infrastructure and 58.6% have internet connectivity compared to 52.6%, 46.8% and 20.1% respectively in 2022. Although this data is in incremental trend compared to previous years, it is by no means adequate. Again, the important aspect is not in simply having the infrastructure in place, the pertinent part is in its utility. How much of these ICT components are actually functional and how are they being used for the purpose of teaching and learning is rather critical area of contemplation. These ICT components in schools are however a starting point and, in some way or the other, are definitely contributing to digital competency of teachers, administrators and students.

Education Sector Plan

School Education Sector Plan (SESP) 2022/23–2031/32 is the most recent document which is the successor to School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016–2022 meant to work towards Nepal's long-term goal of ensuring inclusive and quality education. A review document of Education Sector Analysis was published in 2021 which evaluated the targets and outcomes set forth by the SSDP document. The Ministry of Education (MoE) in Nepal had launched School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) in alignment to ICT master plan which was committed to improve teaching and learning by introducing interactive online modules of classes along with a repository for digital library. It also made compulsory usage of ICT in all schools. Despite of numerous provisions for remote learning, the abrupt transition during pandemic rather increased inequality and profound learning loss. Nepal Education Sector Analysis 2021 acknowledged the lack of readiness of education system during crisis and has committed to take COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to redesign the organization and delivery of education. The Education Sector Analysis document has prioritized ICT as the next medium for teaching and learning. Therefore, in order for educational institutes to shift towards online learning, digital infrastructure and digital competence need huge enhancements. This is a positive indication of Nepali education system being desirous to incorporate alternative medium of learning in mainstream education. However prudent this commitment maybe, the real test will be at its implementation level. The SESP is the guiding 10 years plan to achieve these goals.

The SESP has been developed upon the recommendations made in Education Sector Analysis report published in 2021. This is one of the most important planning documents for education sector in Nepal. Although SESP has documented a roadmap until 2031, the local governments are yet to produce their own education sector plan. The Education Sector Analysis reported that over 60% of schools were operating with outdated or minimal infrastructure in Nepal, therefore, one of the key strategies of SESP is to ensure children's right to education by making schools and education system resilient to any natural disasters including COVID. A high emphasis has been given to improve the physical infrastructure including the implementation of ICT aspects in pedagogical practices. The other major strategy as elaborated by the planning document is to properly manage tools/devices of ICT including digital resources and develop the skills of teachers and students in every school to enhance the use of technology as an integral part of teaching and learning. The document has also emphasized on upgrading teacher competency framework and coordinate with universities for development and implementation of teacher preparation and pre service training programs. In doing so, we can anticipate that improving digital competency is also a strategic area of intervention.

Digital Nepal Framework

In 2019, Digital Nepal Framework was launched which provides a comprehensive structure of policies and targets to be achieved in e-Education and digital literacy. The core purpose of the framework has been to enable Nepal to harness its growth potential by leveraging disruptive technologies and accelerate socioeconomic growth. The Digital Nepal Framework covers eight sectors namely, urban infrastructure, digital foundation, agriculture, health, energy, tourism finance and education.

The education sector encompasses further eight digital initiatives. Those initiative include smart classrooms, Online Learning Exchange (OLE), online learning platform, rent a laptop program, Education Information Management System (EMIS), centralized admission system, biometric attendance system and mobile learning systems in rural areas in coordination with MoCIT. Digital Nepal Initiative in education aims to use digital technology to enrich teaching and learning to improve educational outcomes for Nepal. The major targets of Digital Nepal Framework are in alignment with the School Sector Development Plan SSDP 2016–2023 which include;

- * Developing ICT platforms for teaching and learning
- * Develop digital and interactive learning materials in alignment with national curriculum initially for science mathematics and English subjects.
- * Establishing ICT learning centers at model schools

The Digital Nepal Framework admits the transition to digital education system to be cumbersome due to issues of infrastructural disparity in rural and urban schools, lack of sufficient budget, lack of digitally competent human resources in education and the state of digital poverty. The aforementioned barriers are indeed slowing the pace of development of digital education, however, reluctance of related stakeholders to embrace transition where infrastructure avail may be failing to inspire rural schools to await and adapt to the much-needed change of digital education system.

As the initial 2019 Digital Nepal Framework faced a severe backlash in accomplishing its set targets, a new draft of Digital Nepal Framework 2.0 is underway for enforcement for 2025/26. The DNF 2.0 emphasizes on strengthening digital competency across the population and also improvising digital competency of government staffs. The framework also pushes enhanced infrastructure for 4G/5G connectivity for a future ready foundation for digital education delivery. The updated framework continues to keep education as a priority sector and therefore aligns its agenda towards enabling inclusive online learning platforms, smart classrooms, ICT enabled teaching/learning environments along with implementation of emerging technology like virtual/augmented reality, AI and IOT for all development sectors.

Visionary policies of any nation are by far the most important aspect for institutionalization of online learning for any nation. This is because all nations have their own localized specific needs as per their pace and status of social and economic development. For example, Bangladesh has launched its 'Digital Bangladesh Vision, 2041' by introducing community ICT hubs and multimedia classrooms in all secondary schools. Rwanda operationalized 'One Laptop Per Child' program to improve digital competency of learners and teachers, Indonesia has integrated Open Education Resource (OER) in national policy to improve local language for digital content. United Nations advocates for a broader transformation through Global Digital Compact and Digital Learning Compact emphasizing nations digital education with human rights and sustainability principles. OECD on the other hand advocate for AI literacy and ethical frameworks to incorporate emerging technologies in education. UNDP emphasizes connectivity as social determinant of development. These are mere examples of how nations and organizations around the globe are preparing for digital rights in education. Nepal also needs a strategy to keep up with the global trend.

School Education Sector Plan (2023-2032), ICT in Education Master Plan 1 (2013-2017) and Digital Nepal Framework seem to be the most instrumental tools for implementing ICT aided education for Nepal. The School Sector Education Plan has already been released and although the plan encompasses the holistic activities for entire education endeavors for the next decade in Nepal, the plans for ICT in education are still very generic in approach. The timeline of ICT in education Master Plan 1 (2013-2017) has already expired and there is a need for second Master Plan upon proper evaluation of the achievements of the first Master Plan. The second Master Plan will be of paramount importance not only for its past learning experience, but also because, it shall incorporate along the new federal governance system of Nepal. As DNF 2.0 is getting ready to be implemented, the ICT in education Master Plan II should also be brought around the same time to accelerate progress in digital education. However, there seems to be no progress or plans to bring back the Masterplan II.

Nepal's Lived Reality

Nepal has been making progress in digital landscape; however, it is scarce as systemic barriers across four dimensions persists. The first challenge lies along digital infrastructure and access. Two-third of schools, most of which in the rural parts of Nepal, face no or unreliable connectivity. Even in the schools with broadband connectivity affordability becomes a severe issue, not only for schools, but also for individual families. The second challenge lies along digital literacy and pedagogy. Community learning center and ICT hubs for digital competency seems to be an effective initiative, however, it remains urban and semi-urban centric. There is no robust ICT pedagogy and its utility seems to be gradually fading as we have found normalcy back in physical classes. The third issues lie in inclusion and accessibility. Learners with disability have been facing multiple barriers like inaccessible digital content and lack of assistive devices. Rural population including marginalized communities, especially, women and girls do not have devices or access to connectivity. The digital social exclusion goes beyond lack of device and connectivity. Learning materials are vastly available in English language creating exclusion for local language users. The fourth lived reality of Nepal has to do with poor governance and coordination. The various ministries of Nepal working in ICT development, communication, education and Federal affairs seem to be operating in silos. The government also seems to lack technical capacity to implement the collaborative directives or digital frameworks. The 2019 Digital Nepal Framework and ICT in Education Master Plan could have achieved significantly more had the aforementioned issues not persisted. The successor DNF 2.0 must commit to overcome the challenges of governance and coordination.

Key Recommendation

Based on the policy analysis above, the following points have been recommended for policymakers and educational stakeholders with regards to building right-based inclusive digital education pathway in Nepal;

Infrastructure and Access

- * Expand broadband internet to all schools within next 5 years. The policies contributing to ICT infrastructural and connectivity need a rapid plan of action. Leaving around half of the schools stranded without connectivity for prolonged period is likely to increase digital divide causing disparity of skills amongst students and future workforce.
- * Make internet affordable through discounted pricing for educational data packages.
- * Encourage open community ICT hubs and ICT centers through fiscal decentralization.

Inclusive Design and Accessibility Standards

- * Adoption of universal and standard design principle across all digital educational platforms is quintessential but by incorporating local needs. Online contents and apps must adhere to basic Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.
- * Make educational content accessible in major local languages
- * Make available assistive technology through education budget procurement.

Digital Competency and Literacy

- * Establishment of Digital Learning Institute (Open Internet Hub) for capacity building and online safety. This learning institute should make people aware about online privacy issues, cybersecurity, child safety issues, online harassment/violence, online scams and other cybercrimes, data security and further internet governance issue along with improving competency in using digital tools.
- * Digital pedagogy needs to be institutionalized in teacher training and education curricula.
- * Although, overall literacy of people in Nepal is in an incremental trend, digital literacy still suffers in stagnancy. It is necessary to make digital literacy an important program for lifelong learning.
- * Formulation and deployment of minimum Internet and ICT infrastructure standards for schools is highly recommended.
- * Development of digital competency framework for educators, administrators, teachers and students along with relevant courses and toolkits to impart those competencies are also significant.

Accountable and Collaborative Governance

- * There is a dire need to establish a high level Digital Educational Council for inter ministerial collaboration for implementing accessible and inclusive digital education.
- * Development of right based indicators (gender, PWD, region etc.) are needed for tracking progress in digital education.
- * Learning from past experience and proper mapping of available resources for optimum utilization is absolutely necessary. It is important to translate the DNF 2.0 Plan into action through multi-government agencies and collaborative multi-stakeholder approach.
- * It is necessary to promote and institutionalize regular evaluation and participatory action research involving learners and teachers to update effective strategies for online learning.
- * There seems to be lack of awareness in government offices, schools and general public about DNF 2.0 and other ICT plans in education sector. All stakeholders need to be made aware about the future of education and what the policies are trying to achieve.

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