



# Catalysing youth aspirations through an inclusive and accessible digital ecosystem



# Context

Throughout history, the young have been the most potent agents of change. At 1.2 billion,<sup>1</sup> the population of youth today (aged 15–24 years) is the largest the world has ever seen. India is home to two of every five youths worldwide, and youth account for more than 34% of the total population in India.<sup>2</sup> Broadly, the youth span two stages: from adolescents to adults, and thereafter, as adults employed in economic activities, either through jobs or through entrepreneurial activities. Although the challenges and priorities across these two segments vary significantly, these two stages are closely intertwined. The right interventions to enable and support the youth across these two stages is central to the growth of the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic induced a countrywide lockdown, and further underlined the need to address structural and institutional weaknesses in the way we engage with the youth. With the closing of schools and other educational and skilling institutions, along with the impact on jobs, the impact on the young was the most significant. While many institutions have transitioned to digital means for continued learning and employment, the digital divide and the lack of digital accessibility has led to further impact on the vulnerable and disadvantaged sections.

For instance, it is estimated that the parents of only one out of four children enrolled in schools in rural areas have secondary education<sup>3</sup> themselves. For the remaining 75% of children, without the possibility of the needed guidance from their parents at home, the need for augmented or blended learning through digital means takes prominence. This need aggravates for children studying in higher grades.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the learning challenges, the COVID-19 induced job losses too have higher impact on the youth from the economically weaker sections. Limited jobs that they are employed in could be transitioned to online modes – about 4.1 million<sup>5</sup> youth lost their employment due to COVID-19, most of these jobs from construction and agriculture sectors.

A recent COVID-19 Consumer Survey by PwC, conducted in June 2020, found that most working age youth spread across urban, semi-urban and rural India, believe that the COVID-19 pandemic will have an impact on their income levels.<sup>6</sup> As more facets of everyday life—education, skilling, jobs, healthcare, etc., shift from a physical to a digital landscape, it is now time to intervene and ensure that the digitally disadvantaged do not suffer a longer term or permanent socio-economic impact.

The recent surge of the young entrepreneurs led start-up ecosystem in the country is a glimpse of the collective power of the youth and their contribution to our country's economic and social development. Given their sheer numbers, the next ten years is an opportune time for India to unleash a 'youth revolution' that will benefit the society as a whole and uplift the world. Such a revolution can be fast tracked by strengthening the underlying foundations of a digital society, where every young person shall be able to thrive and evolve, where inclusive digital ecosystems are able to provide equitable access to resources and opportunities to every young person.

**For the young in our country, the challenges that first need to be acknowledged and addressed revolve around the four foundational areas viz. education, skilling, economic opportunities and participation in nation building. Technology, which takes centre stage to bring about this change, still remain elusive for many. Solving for issues which place youth at a digital disadvantage in terms of connectivity, accessibility, digital literacy and work-ready skills is therefore the most critical aspect in the journey of youth enablement. Focussed measures for connectivity, affordability, inclusivity as well as strategic interventions for creating an open digital infrastructure, relevant quality content and the right blend of physical and digital initiatives are, therefore, imperative to set India on this progressive path.**

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<sup>1</sup> UN DESA World Population Prospects 2019

<sup>2</sup> [http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/Youth\\_in\\_India-2017.pdf](http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Youth_in_India-2017.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Secondary education is defined where both parents have completed their studies at least up to standard IX, as surveyed for the ASER 2020 Wave 1 (Rural) findings report

<sup>4</sup> Analysis based on data from ASER 2020 Wave 1 (Rural) findings report

<sup>5</sup> Tackling the COVID-19 youth employment crisis in Asia and the Pacific, ILO ADB Report

<sup>6</sup> Full Potential Revival and Growth, PwC, August 2020



## Re-imagining the priorities

**While there are many aspects to enabling the youth, challenges pertaining to four specific areas have a wider impact on the youth population.**

Policymakers, administrators and the society, must collectively acknowledge that the needs of youth vary across demographic and geographic boundaries, and hence, a common framework addressing their needs may not generate the desired outcome. It is important to re-strategise and re-invent solutions addressing the specific challenges of these different groups.



## Education

**About 40%<sup>7</sup> of the school-going children in rural areas do not have a smartphone at home, although the actual accessibility to a device for children's education may be lesser.**

Post the pandemic, it is also estimated that about one in every ten households purchased a new device for supporting the education of children at home, and another 10% have access to a smartphone elsewhere (e.g. with neighbours)<sup>8</sup>. The availability of reliable power is another infrastructural impediment to access to digital means for education in smaller towns and in villages.

Prior to the pandemic too, certain areas needed more focus. India's share of education in the national budget remains at a low of 3.1%,<sup>9</sup> the lowest among its BRICS counterparts. This also resulted in critical infrastructure gaps and the shortage of teachers. Amongst peers, India has amongst the lowest student teacher ratio at 24:1<sup>10</sup> against 19:1 for Brazil and China, 16:1 in Britain and 12:1 in Sweden.

In addition to the issues pertaining to both digital and physical infrastructure, quality education content for students in vernacular languages is a major challenge that requires resolution. The absence of teaching and learning material in the vernacular leads to a deeper gap in the learning outcomes for students from Tier 3/ 4 towns and rural areas, placing them at a disadvantage during higher education, and subsequently, for employment opportunities.



<sup>7</sup> Do children have smartphone at home? ASER 2020 Wave 1 (Rural) findings

<sup>8</sup> India Skills Report 2020, Reimagining India's talent landscape for a \$5T economy

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/economicsurvey/doc/vol2chapter/echap10\\_vol2.pdf](https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/economicsurvey/doc/vol2chapter/echap10_vol2.pdf), Table 1

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/india-s-student-teacher-ratio-lowest-lags-behind-brazil-and-china>



## Skilling

**With the changing business models of the new digital age, the jobs of the future would also demand the workforce to be well equipped with new age skills.**

A recent survey has found that only 46% of students have skills that are 'employable'.<sup>11</sup> This highlights the need for increased synergy between skilling strategies and the evolving business needs of the industry.

The Indian economy is a two-tone economy, one with a small but growing technology-enabled and hi-tech productivity layer, and the second deeper and wider layer, which is less productive, low tech and informal but an important one, with high employment numbers. This second layer is often ignored, which mostly consists of youth transitioning from agriculture-based employment to opportunities in manufacturing and services industry, either formal or informal. The clear skilling challenge here is to ensure that such youth are trained at scale to make them employable in the low tech but highly employable sectors.

The skilling of youth, who continue to engage themselves in agricultural activities, is necessary to ensure that they can leverage newer technologies to increase farm yield, and therefore, improve their incomes. It is estimated that digital interventions, viz., precision agriculture, digital farmer financing and other associated technologies can add economic value of more than US\$50bn<sup>12</sup> over the next few years.

The other challenge, mostly for the first layer of a small group employed in the technology sectors, is to enable their transition to specialised high-end technical skills, viz., artificial intelligence, automation, cloud technology, Internet of Things, etc., in emerging sectors such as e-commerce, financial technologies, health tech, logistics and the automotive industry.<sup>13</sup> The ever-evolving nature of jobs demands that the young are not only proficient in new age digital technologies but also groomed in problem solving, critical thinking, and can engage in networked collaborations.

Skilling efforts for the young across the country must be synergised to accommodate the aspirations and needs of both these layers. There is a need to shift from the traditional approaches of measuring the systemic efficiencies and move towards an outcome-based methodology.



<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> India's Trillion Dollar Digital Opportunity, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology

<sup>13</sup> Global Employment Trends for Youth 2020, Technology and the future of jobs, International Labour Organization

## Employability and entrepreneurship

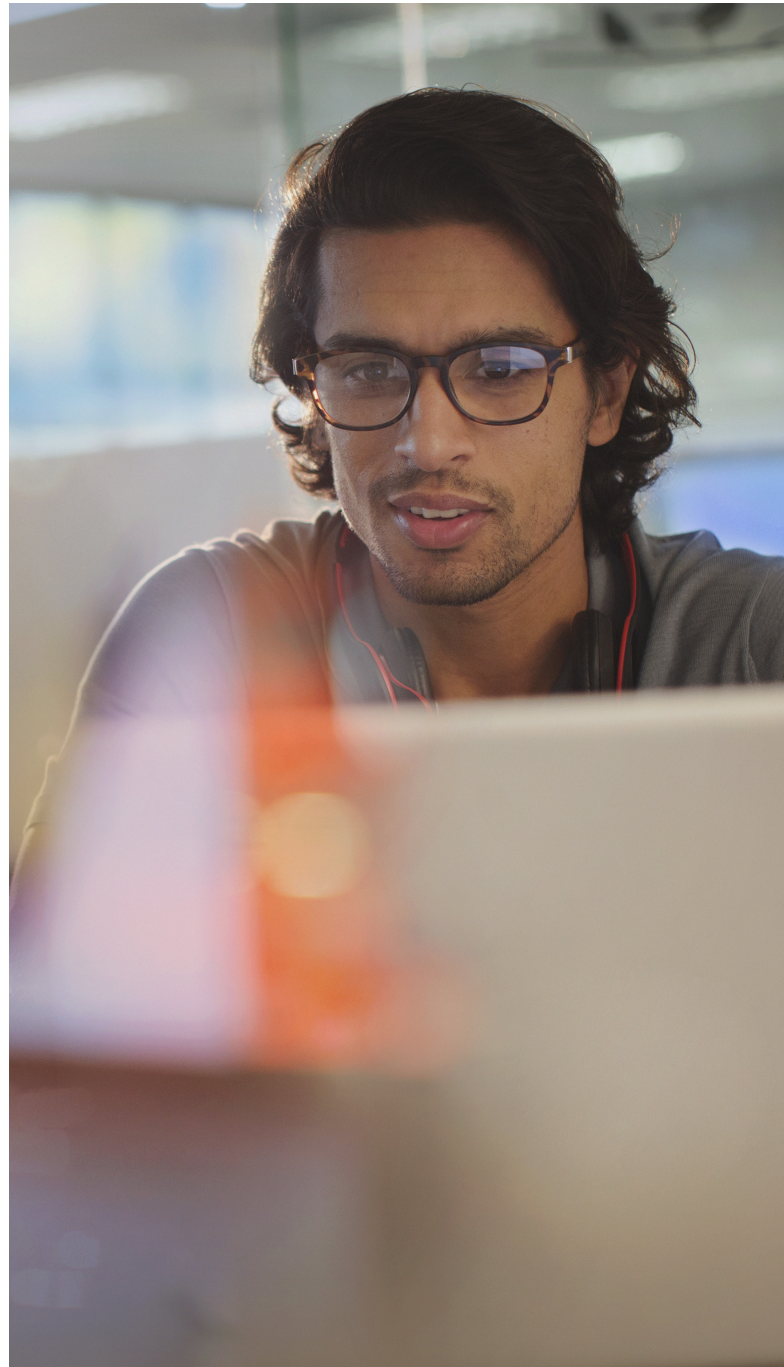
**Wage inequalities amongst the young (15 to 29 years old) are higher in India (as is the case in other emerging nations) than among mature workers (30 to 49 years old), which indicates that jobs available for the young are more heterogeneous and unstable.<sup>14</sup>**

A recently conducted study concluded that digital channels have overcome the inherent inequalities of traditional job searches through informal networks.<sup>15</sup> Data from such digital channels are also used to improve labour market monitoring and better match the demand and supply for specific skills.<sup>16</sup>

The ability of the youth to access various jobs per their needs, without external dependencies, is an important factor to establish equitable access. Video CVs and the ability to connect with potential employers through one-on-one video chats with recruiters help the youth from disadvantaged backgrounds to transcend the traditional barriers of job search and application.

Post COVID-19, there is growing impetus to entrepreneurship and innovation at the grassroots level to provide solutions across a varied range of subjects—agriculture, supply chain, healthcare, education, technology, etc., with tremendous potential to boost hyper-local economic activities with the young being at the forefront to reap the benefits. It is important to harness this opportunity to re-imagine the geographical distribution of work and help create a sustainable job ecosystem across the smaller towns and villages in India.

For youth engaged in their own ventures, the accessibility to mainstream finances, linkages with the value chains (both forward and backward integrations) and access to market remain a constant challenge. According to a study, 42% of Indian SMEs find it difficult to access finance to grow their business.<sup>17</sup> In addition to the need of attitudinal and mind-set shifts to encourage more youth to pursue entrepreneurship, enabling access to resources and markets can be bridged through digitally enabled solutions. Hyper-local entrepreneurial activities coupled with localised job matching addresses the problems of both job creation and employment at the local level, with a more equal distribution of wealth generation across regions. This also reduces the need for youth from smaller towns and villages to migrate to cities for work, which in turn reduces the infrastructure burden on the cities.



<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/42-smes-in-india-find-accessing-finance-difficult/1398758/>



## Youth participation in nation building

**The youth are the repository of new ideas and fresh attitudes, which will bring about a qualitative change in the approach to nation building.**

This new generation is without the baggage of history, class, caste and geographic locations, and aspires to see a developed and progressive India. The youth will take this idea of a new India forward over the next 50 years, and therefore, their participation at different forums is critical for the country's growth.

There are many opportunities for youth engagement in our country by leveraging technology, creating a more positive outcome through constructive work, so that they relate to nation building. Youth groups and active engagements at the grass roots, starting at the gram panchayat levels and youth movements are crucial in kick starting this social revolution. This not only helps develop their capacities to embrace their commitments to social impact and act as advocates of social change, but also helps in reducing the socio-economic differences in the entire spectrum of the young across the country.

The young wanting to create an impact in their local communities or at the national or international levels should have access to opportunities where they can influence decision makers and encourage them to act, rather than simply raising awareness about an issue. Youth empowerment through digital means leads to the active participation of the youth in nation building and provides a medium for them to extend help and support to other peer groups. It is easier to forge community networks through digital channels and to run informed campaigns for social wellbeing.



## Enablement through a digital ecosystem

Digital enablement is critical to enable the youth at scale and integrate the larger ecosystem to collectively work towards this common objective, where the partners can collaborate, co-create and innovate. A digital platform-centric approach has the potential to build on existing efforts, remove silos and create synergies across stakeholders and actors, integrate the demand and supply side drivers and create an interlinked ecosystem where everyone can be part of the solution. Technology can play a key role in engaging the youth, provide a platform to express themselves, with access to appropriate skilling, employability, entrepreneurial opportunities.

Such a digital marketplace has immense potential to unlock exponential benefits across the value chain, although the extent of its impact would depend upon the ability of the ecosystem players—government, industry, policy influencers, civil society, youth organisations and individuals—to take concerted efforts.

It will provide an opportunity for the young to engage with their peers, gain access to knowledge and information, skilling and economic opportunities and attach themselves to campaigns and causes close to their heart, while contributing to the development of the society. Policymakers and administrators can leverage the insights and voice of youth gathered from the platform (or a digital marketplace) for taking informed decisions, which are more relevant to the aspirations of the youth.





**Stepping Forward: Connecting today's youth to the digital future**, a joint report by PwC, UNICEF and Generation Unlimited, identifies four stepping-stones enabling the youth to cross the digital divide and be ready to thrive in a digital society.

**Connectivity**, including elements that youth must have to access the Internet, such as the availability of reliable power, digital infrastructure (broadband, access to the Internet), affordable devices and access to digital platforms.

**Access**, covering non-technical elements that allow the youth to take advantage of connectivity, such as affordable tariffs, native-language content, household income and support of family members.

**Digital literacy**, encompassing elements that allow youth to gain digital literacy, viz., foundational learning and basic digital skills, quality education curriculum and content and awareness of basic measures to safeguard against online risks and dangers.

**Work-ready skills**, including elements that help youth prepare for and thrive in a digital world, such as advanced digital skilling programmes, access to employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, programmes for 21st Century Skills, et al.





## Strategic Interventions to achieve change at scale

**Addressing the above foundational aspects of creating a digitally inclusive society for the youth of India is of paramount importance and calls for a whole-of-society approach, with Government, enterprises and citizens coming together with a shared vision, leveraging their complementary strengths.**

Addressing the existing challenges and gaps in the underlying digital infrastructure of the country should be a priority focus area for the stakeholders, both Government and private, as these are imperative to

bridge the digital divide and ensure that every youth is able to benefit from the new digital world. In parallel, strategic interventions, augmenting the physical initiatives, are necessary to ensure that youth are effectively and confidently able to participate in the larger digital landscape.





## Access

**India has approximately 750m<sup>18</sup> Internet subscribers in the country, with 55 Internet subscribers per 100 population.**

However, the urban rural divide is stark with more than 98 Internet subscribers per 100 population in urban, as compared to only 33 in rural areas.<sup>19</sup> There is disproportional access to the Internet across states,<sup>20</sup> further extending into the rural-urban schism, where 13% people of over five years of age in rural areas can use the Internet, against 37%<sup>21</sup> in urban areas.

A survey conducted by Centre for Policy and Budget Studies found that in 77% of households, phones belonged to male members and only 30% of children could access them. Further, young boys had slightly higher access to phones and internet than young girls. 37% of boys reported access to mobile phone as opposed to only 26% of girls.\*

Last year, the Union Government announced its intent to enable access to 50 Mbps broadband connectivity<sup>22</sup> to every citizen of the country. The accessibility to robust bandwidth connectivity can be provided by aligning with such Government programmes and leveraging innovative solutions to reach even the most rural and remote areas. Government and private digital infrastructure entities need to work in tandem to strengthen the underlying infrastructure to connect every school with high-speed broadband.



<sup>18</sup> TRAI, *The Indian Telecom Services Performance Indicators*, April – June 2020

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Statistics' report on Key Indicators of Household and Social Consumption on Education in India (2017-18) report

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>22</sup> National Broadband Mission, Department of Telecommunications, Government of India

\* <http://cbps.in/wp-content/uploads/Report-Final-1.pdf>

## Affordable

**Although the cost of data has fallen considerably, access to hardware and devices remain a challenge for the poorest students.**

About 40%<sup>23</sup> of school-going children in rural areas do not have a smartphone at home, though the actual accessibility to a device for the purpose of education of the children may be lesser. Post the pandemic, it is also estimated that about one in every ten households purchased a new device for supporting the education of children at home, and another 10% have access to a smartphone elsewhere (e.g. with neighbours).<sup>24</sup> The stark digital divide amongst the youth can be addressed through focussed strategies for enhancing accessibility to affordable high-speed Internet and direct-to-device technologies to empower youth from underprivileged sections to engage with learning and skilling opportunities online.



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<sup>23</sup> Do children have smartphone at home? ASER 2020 Wave 1 (Rural) findings

<sup>24</sup> Ibid



## Inclusive

**Gender inequalities mire the education and learning outcomes that eventually result in inequitable access to economic opportunities.**

Right to Education Act (RTE), applicable up to the age of 14, has led to decrease in the enrolment difference between boys and girls. However, by the age of 18, when RTE is not enforced, 32% girls are not enrolled in comparison to 28% boys.<sup>25</sup> This inequality aggravates with a skewed workforce participation ratio of 1:3<sup>26</sup> for females and males, respectively.

About 75% of out-of-school children are concentrated in six States of India.<sup>27</sup> These States have lesser than average per capita income,<sup>28</sup> highlighting a strong correlation between school enrolment and the financial wellbeing of citizens.

The language diversity of India, with 22 scheduled languages and 122 major languages, is another perspective that needs to be considered for holistic growth. Youth from rural, remote or tribal areas, face constant challenges in access to quality education, skilling content and resources, as they progress from school education to higher or technical education, eventually leading to challenges in securing high quality jobs. The interlinkage between social development and the potential economic wellbeing of individuals cannot be ignored.



<sup>25</sup> Annual Survey of Education Report (Aser) 2017

<sup>26</sup> India Skills Report 2020, Reimagining India's talent landscape for a \$5T economy

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/education>

<sup>28</sup> MOSPI Net State Domestic Product, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India

## Digital content

**Quality digital content can play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between learning outcomes amongst students from various backgrounds and to help teachers and trainers equip with better pedagogy and teaching methodologies.**

Government, industry and civil society collaboration may be leveraged for creating, crowdsourcing, curating, and aggregating education and skilling content from various sources; and translate the sourced/ developed content in local languages to ensure consumption by much of the youth. Mechanisms must also be put in place to curate and leverage content from existing platforms and mechanisms, e.g. from the Khan Academy, Diksha, Vidyadaan, etc., for addressing specific learning needs. Additional focus is necessary to develop content for children with special needs to create a seamless learning experience for them.

A focussed approach can bring students and teachers from rural and remote areas and from poor and vulnerable societies to the digital mainstream. Partnering with NGOs, foundations, private companies (for CSR initiatives) and skilling companies/ agencies to curate the programme, customised to various degrees of maturity and need (based on social, economic and demographic profile) of the targeted group (teachers and students).





## Open digital infrastructure

**Platform business models can activate the whole of society approach as they have demonstrated the power of enabling scale, growth and outcomes with far fewer resources than traditional models and by involving customers or citizens in the value creation process.**

Such an approach enables all actors and participants in the ecosystem, whether Government, citizens or enterprises, to collaborate and create stronger and valuable solutions for everyone, as well as equipping the actors and stakeholders to participate in the problem-solving process to create contextual solutions.

The impact from such platforms can be amplified with the use of open digital infrastructures, which enable the continuous adoption of latest available technologies, promote innovative solutions to be built on top of the platform and to amplify the platform ecosystem by embracing an open framework for platform design.

The outcomes of digital initiatives remain subdued most often due to the inability of using the digital services and data from licenced products beyond specific digital systems, mirroring the investments of costs, time and effort. Digital platforms must be considered as common public goods, and hence, all required steps must be taken to allow for free and unhindered access and open innovation. Use of an open framework, with open data, standards, APIs and source code, is a non-negotiable principle for designing digital platforms. Digital platforms thrive on open standards, which are made available to the public and are developed (or approved) and maintained via a collaborative and consensus driven process.<sup>29</sup>



<sup>29</sup> <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/lpr/Pages/open.aspx>

## Phygital

**The right blend of physical and digital interventions can help bridge the gaps between education and skilling needs for students.**

There is a need to create synergies between classroom teaching and digital learning to ensure uniformity of learning outcomes for every child, as well as providing customised augmented learning through digital means (e.g. peer-to-peer learning) to enable customised learning pathways for every child. Alternative methods to augment digital learning, e.g. community radios, local connectivity solutions, village gurukuls, etc., may be leveraged to act as interim measures to bridge the gap.

In addition to focusing on augmented learning for the school curriculum, thrust must also be provided for 21st Century Skilling to prepare schoolchildren for the future with skills such as critical thinking and entrepreneurial mind-set. A similar alignment is necessary for skilling and professional training to accommodate the aspirations of cohorts from different demographic and geographic backgrounds.

Schools in India have been enablers of socio-economic sustenance for the poor and economically disadvantaged. Mid-day meal programmes have played a primary role in addressing the nutritional needs of many children. Schools also act as 'day care centres' for many children, allowing both parents to engage themselves in labour and other economic activities to augment household earnings. While digital interventions can improve the learning and skilling outcomes, an enabling physical layer is needed to aid the holistic development of the youth.





## A joint step forward

**Bridging the youth digital divide is too large and complex for individual stakeholders to tackle. They must come together in new ways to share knowledge, build expertise, and co-create solutions in innovative, data-driven, scalable, inclusive, and locally relevant ways. The effort to create positive change towards more inclusive, fair and sustainable communities can be achieved through a holistic youth activation strategy focusing on both youth empowerment and enablement.**

To succeed, stakeholders must identify and dismantle historical silos, as the most impactful engagements are likely to arise from non-traditional collaborations and from enabling existing alliances to scale and

sustain effective practices. Stakeholders must seek out and develop new collaboration structures and financing arrangements. The time is now to put youth on equal footing by creating an inclusive and accessible ecosystem by leveraging digital technologies. This will result in the improvement of economic fitness of the society, create an employable pool of digitally skilled youth and lead to overall sustenance of businesses and economy.



# YuWaah! and PwC's collaboration to Solve for Scale

**Recognising the need to realise the full potential of the youth, the YuWaah! programme in India seeks to enable India's youth, connect them to aspirational socio-economic opportunities and engage them as active change-makers. The collaboration intends to build on existing efforts, catalyse digitally enabled solutions, ensure coordination between different actors and ensure scalability of the programme.**

YuWaah! is part of the global initiative, Generation Unlimited, which is helping young people become co-creators and develop their own innovative solutions to the challenges in their lives in more than 40 countries. Founded in September 2018, Generation Unlimited (GenU) aims to create better education, skills, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for the young worldwide by bringing public-private partners together, putting youth at the heart of everything, to crowd-in capital and deliver innovations at scale to address both global and local needs.

Under YuWaah!, PwC and UNICEF, in support of GenU, are collaborating in India to develop, expand and fund education and skills programmes for the young. The program ecosystem targets to engage 300 million young people across the country, to equip them with relevant skills for productive lives and the future of work, provide avenues for financial empowerment through employability and entrepreneurship support, and collaborate with them for increased participation and amplify their voices.

PwC's collaboration with YuWaah! is part of a three-year strategic, global collaboration with UNICEF in support of GenU, focusing on up-skilling youth, equipping them to understand and navigate the digital world and preparing them for the future of work. The collaboration focuses on convening public, private and civil society stakeholders to develop investment opportunities, programmes and innovations that support young people in their path to productive futures and engaged citizenship, co-creating research on the global skills challenge.

**'Solving for Scale'** remains the foundation for programme in India to create an integrated, sustainable ecosystem for connecting the demand and supply sides. Technology will be crucial to scale the programme and play an enabling role (in both online and offline modes) for every solution. It is envisaged to that an integrated digital platform or 'marketplace' be developed that brings together different stakeholder groups, and inform policy initiatives across India, while creating a feedback loop to the young themselves. PwC is assisting YuWaah! to conceptualise and design a digital marketplace where all stakeholders and the young can connect and work together at scale to achieve common goals.



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