

An Opportunity in the Pandemic



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Nana Diri Programme

— By —
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Digital education is often referred to as e-Learning, is the innovative use of Digital Technologies and infusion of technology-driven processes into the educational value chains. One could even

define it as the effective use of digital technologies in designing and delivering education. This digitalization of education systems allows educators to develop engaging, interactive, and blended learning methodologies.

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on availability and accessibility of digital technologies for children and younger generation. And it must be acknowledged that we are not equally prepared for the technologically advanced future; various digital inequalities still exist in society, affecting digital literacy of the younger generation. To satisfy these needs and their digitalized future, schools and children's education need to undergo a significant digital change and the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled educational institutions to experience such a transition drastically.

Prof. Dewasiri N. Jayantha (Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka) interviewed Mr. Supun Weerasinghe (Director/Group CEO, Dialog Axiata PLC) on the role of Telcos' in Digital Education and how Dialog has positioned itself to facilitate digital education. Following are the excerpts of the interview;

How does “Digital Education” transform the traditional education system of a country?

We are in the midst of a profound technological revolution where incredible advancements in technology are transforming all facets of life in leaps, including how we access information and learn. The effective use of technology in education bypasses the limitations of traditional models and allow learners to develop advanced and contemporary skills while making education more accessible, affordable and available for the benefit of the masses. The biggest benefit of digital education transforming the traditional education system is its ability to level the field of opportunity for students across the country.

What is the importance of a “Digital Education” environment in a pandemic situation like COVID 19?

Digital education platforms have been around for decades, and the pandemic has pushed these platforms to the fore as the education sector grappled with remote teaching. With traditional learning systems disrupted by school closures across the country, democratising digital education is more important than ever to ensure the continuity of education for all students and close the education gap. Digital education platforms delivering targeted interventions to increase accessibility to education reduces the burden on parents, teachers and schools while enabling them to make the most of e-Learning.

As a developing country, can Sri Lanka move from traditional education to digital education? What are the challenges in implementing digital education in Sri Lanka?

The onset of the pandemic has accelerated the digitisation of industries in Sri Lanka, including the education sector. We're already seeing this transition through the efforts by the Ministry of Education and other supporting agencies, and as a long-standing facilitator in using technology as an enabler of education, Dialog will continue to support these forces to empower the digital transformation of education systems during these unprecedented times.

Empowering a future-ready generation needs to be a collective effort by the public and private sectors to help overcome challenges in digital education adoption including, changing the status quo, developing infrastructure, and enhancing technological literacy. In addressing these challenges, the Ministry of Education is transforming the curricula to be more student-centric than teacher-centric, enabling students to do more self-learning and utilise the advantages of the inclusive e-Learning platforms available. However, primary and secondary grades require greater engagement between educators and students, which can be addressed and amplified through interactive e-Learning platforms.

At Dialog, what steps have you taken to facilitate “Digital Education” in Sri Lanka while reducing inequity and inequality?

Despite the learning loss that ensued the pandemic, Dialog remains committed in its resolve to ensure that no child is left behind. While the pandemic has magnified the disparities in education and underscored the importance of inclusive education, Dialog remains resolute in continuing to bridge this gap through its overarching efforts in providing schoolchildren across the country with equitable access to education to achieve their aspirations.

Making Digital Education Universally Available

We believe in universally available digital education systems and wanted to see some form of Digital Education available for children across the country, reducing inequity and inequality. To achieve this objective, Dialog powers a range of educational platforms under the Nenasa initiative; Nenasa TV, Nenasa Smart School, Nenasa App and the toll-free Nenasa 1916 distance learning helpline. We extended free access to its education bouquet Nenasa Sinhala, Nenasa Tamil and Guru TV channels through Dialog Television and ViU App.

Dialog also endeavoured to provide 100,000 schoolchildren in need with Data Scholarships under the ‘NanaDiri Data Scholarship’ programme to facilitate their online learning from home. Furthermore, the company extended free access without any data charges to e-Thakshalawa, the National Learning Content Management System (LCMS)/Learning Management System (LMS) and all official e-Learning platforms of State Universities under the purview of the University Grants Commission.

Making Digital Education Accessible

Not everyone has access to the same technology, and we understand the diverse needs among students who represent various socioeconomic strata.

For this reason, we endeavoured to make education services accessible via any mainstream platform be it mobile phones (Zoom, Teams, Nenasa App, etc.), computers (Nenasa.lk and e-Thakshalawa.lk) or television (NenasaTV, GuruTV, etc.). Furthermore, in our efforts to upgrade and expand the coverage of our network, we added 515 new towers to the network during the pandemic period, surpassing 4000 mobile 4G sites, the highest ever tower count recorded in Sri Lanka.

Making Digital Education Affordable

Various steps have also been taken to make Digital Education solutions more affordable for students at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. All Government University websites, Learning Management Systems (LMS) and video collaboration via Zoom application through LEARN network have been facilitated with free data, enabling over 150,000 students to continue their education. Nenas TV and Guru TV have been extended completely free of charge, with Learning Management Systems such as Nenas.lk and e-Thakshalawa being accessible without any data charges.

What services and packages do Dialog offers to its customers?

In addition to the aforementioned freely accessible platforms and services, we also introduced various supplementary packages to enable the continuation of education for both educators and students. These include the Dialog Teachers Package, Video Conferencing Plans, Special Data Packs for Office 365 & Zoom, Work & Learn Packs, and Unlimited Data Plans specially designed for educators.

How should learners, teachers, and institutes get ready for digital education?

The tools and technologies available today have empowered the education sector, allowing for on-demand learning, where institutes can create and implement strong institutional practices that use technology to connect students with meaningful learning experiences, while teachers can find creative and innovative ways to integrate these digital teaching methodologies in their respective roles. This calls for the pedagogy to proactively adapt to enable technology-driven design and delivery of education. Thoughtful technology integration in the classroom can help students actively engage with concepts and ideas, enhancing the learning experience.

What is the role of the Government in promoting Digital Education in Sri Lanka?

Technology-friendly education policies and reforms will pave the way for universally accessible and advanced Digital Education in Sri Lanka. It is imperative that the role of the state evolve in sync with a learning society and economy, where the digital transformation of the education sector will be a key driver. Distance learning and e-learning have become the future of education in this new normal and is also the primary catalyst in ensuring equitable education while providing each individual with the opportunity for a top education learning experience outside of traditional classrooms.

Finally, how will the country as a whole benefit from “Digital Education”?

Children are the future of this great nation and its greatest asset. Digitisation of education enables the development of a knowledge-based economy which is at the top of the national development agenda. Accelerating Digital Education in the country will produce a future-ready generation and a highly skilled workforce, which will play a critical role in the development of Sri Lanka's social, economic and cultural landscape. I see digital education as an opportunity in this pandemic threat, and we have to gather it before closing its strategic windows.