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Covid-19 the issues and challenges before higher education

Rashmi Meena[1], Meenakshi Meena[2]
[1, 2] Regional Institute of Education, Ajmer, Rajasthan, India

Abstract
Online education is conducted in two ways — either through recorded classes or via live online classes conducted as webinars Covid-19 has forced universities across India, and the world indeed, to suspend physical classrooms and shift to online classes. In India, while this transition has been smooth for most private universities, the public ones are still adapting. There have also been debates on the nature of classes and the future of examination and evaluation— whether they could be conducted online or not.

Keywords: webinar, online education, technology, learning, lockdown

Introduction

While faculty grapples with new ways of managing this sudden transition to online education, students are left clinging on to their mobile phones and computer screens. If the lockdowns were to continue for some time, how would higher education be affected? What are some of the deeper issues that require introspection? And what does this mean for the students going forward?

Online education is conducted in two ways. The first is through the use of recorded classes, which, when opened out to public, are referred to as Massive Open Online Course (MOOCs). The second one is via live online classes conducted as webinars, or zoom sessions. Universities require high-speed internet and education delivery platforms or learning management systems, besides stable IT infrastructure and faculty members who are comfortable teaching online. Students also need high-speed internet and computers/mobiles to attend these sessions or watch pre-recorded classes.

There are many platforms created to enable online education in India. These are supported by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), and the department of technical education. There also are initiatives like e-PG Pathshala (e-content), SWAYAM (online courses for teachers), and NEAT (enhancing employability). Other online platforms aim to increase connectivity with institutions, and accessibility to content. These are utilised for course materials and classes, and running of online modules. They include the National Project on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL), National Knowledge Network, (NKN), and National Academic Depository (NAD), among others.

The National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL), a project of MHRD initiated by seven Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT), along with the Indian Institute of Science Bangalore, was created in 2003 to provide online education. The aim was to have web and video courses in engineering, sciences, and management. However, while technology is enabling, it can also be limiting, especially in India, where basic access is a challenge. Not every student has a computer or fast-streaming internet at home.

"The main issue with online teaching is that some of our students come from remote villages with slow and patchy internet access. Exams would need to be conducted at commercial exam centres. Students would need to travel to the nearest centre." Many feel that online education is not as easy as speaking into the microphone at one end, and connecting a laptop or phone and listening in on the other. There are other challenges with this form of education which are faced at both ends of the spectrum — students as well as faculty. "Education is not just about classes. It is about interactions, broadening of ideas, free-flowing open discussions, debates, and mentoring of each student. While we try to do all of this, a lot gets lost in translation on the online platform. universities like Delhi's Indira Gandhi National Open University (Ignou), which offers distant teaching and is able to effectively utilise technology. "If universities can enforce Zoom teaching, if classes are taken to nodal places, and the institution takes the responsibility to connect students there, this can work well. But the downside is that, if done badly, it will be another legitimisation of bad, meaningless online education." "The state might decide that online teaching can be used for undergraduate education in a dematerialised way, and cut the salaries, upkeep, and funding of public institutions. Also, the idea that teaching can be dematerialised could lead to the next thought — of using resources produced elsewhere to mass-educate people within public education. These are especially true of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), which might reduce universities to examining bodies that have subcontracted intellectual content to MOOCs produced elsewhere."

Higher education is seldom about exams, classes, or grades. Rather, it is about an experience that prepares a student to become a functioning member of the work force, with requisite knowledge, skills, and life experiences. "This is fine for now. But what happens a few months later? Will the university be responsible if we don't get the grades, or if our careers are impacted, simply because we are struggling with online classes and figuring out what methods will be used to gauge our knowledge," asks a final-year student of social sciences from a public university in Delhi. He does not wish to be named. Students have complained about lack of clarity

going forward and what the plan of action would entail, especially with respect to examinations, results, internships, and placements. While most institutions of higher education are trying their best in this situation, nobody knows what will happen next.

Most educators across institutions agree that there is a need to invest in creating standardised online education platforms, and not using apps and Google hangouts only; and to train both students and teachers. Others highlight the necessity to introspect on the nature of these platforms and how students are taught using different online tools and methods, while keeping accessibility and equity challenges in mind. There is also the need to understand all this across academic disciplines and institutions.

The way ahead can be charted only if we take into account the diverse views of experts, and incorporate all the lessons learnt from the summer of 2020.

Online education for teachers

Advantages

- Allows innovative methods of teaching with the help of technology and online tools
- Allows reaching out to a large number of students across geographies
- Especially useful for distance learning

Disadvantages

- Online teaching takes time and practice
- There is little consensus on how students can be evaluated in a fair manner
- Inability to have a face-to-face connect with students and facilitate free conversations, discussions, and mentoring
- Inability to reach all students because of technological limitations

Online education for students

Advantages

- The ability to learn using different online tools and methods
- No disruption in learning because of the pandemic
- Listening to recorded and live conversations and working at their own speed

Disadvantages

- Lack of free-flowing conversations, debates, and discussions
- Technological difficulties related to weak devices or access to the internet
- Getting used to learning and being evaluated online
- Studying while living at home, with family and other distractions

Technological challenges being faced by the teachers and students

The lockdown crisis has forced us to adopt online learning mode without any preparations. The educators and students are strangled with the basics like internet connectivity and unpredictive power cuts. Also, the educators are under tremendous stress in solving structural issues like teaching methods and deliverables. The new learning system has also resulted in increased working hours for the educators, inviting more pressure. Many students also try to skip classes, as the teacher are not able to ensure 100% attendance. Many parents don't have a spare computer or a laptop at home, as they themselves are busy working from home. This forces the students to struggle with attending the classes over smartphones.

Method

This manuscript adopts a desktop analysis approach with careful consideration as to the quality of the information source. In order to create an effective and rigorous status update for universities globally, it is critical that we seek to use reliable sources given the general fluctuation of information regarding COVID-19. For transparency, we use of direct university and government sources supplemented by news articles, higher education news outlets, and other forms of communication.

Sources uses for findings

- News article
- University websites
- Government information
- Higher education news
- Reports and paper

Result

The COVID-19 has resulted in schools shut all across the world. As a result, education has changed dramatically, with the distinctive rise of e-learning, whereby teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. Research suggests that online learning has been shown to increase retention of information, and take less time, meaning the changes coronavirus have caused might be here to stay.

Discussion

We caveat this paper with recognition of the lack of information to date on the pedagogical approaches and principles being adopted with the rapid movement to digital education. This has the potential to be an enabler of more flexible and innovative digital methods of education, but it could also lead to less quality assurance activities while the focus is on revenue mitigation. Universities undergoing a rapid change period need to be conscious of their ability to continuously monitor the quality of the learning design.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discuss university responses across the world. The goal: to support a knowledge-sharing activity across a balanced sample of universities. At this stage, there is a recognition that the sector needs to unite to postulate a future where students can be supported digitally, without compromising academic quality and standards of the curriculum. We suspect the status updates from each of the university's positions will change significantly in the coming months as governments mandate diverse directives relating to gatherings, social outings, and similar. Universities have a role in the transition to support a society that needs to stay at home for periods of time, and higher education may be a valuable addition to their productive home environments in the short and potentially medium-term.

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