LEARNING INCLUSIVENESS AND UNDER-SERVED COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

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Abstract

The need for adopting new models of teaching delivery has been well acknowledged in the extant literature and therefore research on antecedents of adoption of teaching-learning technology becomes significant. Digitization is changing the way we learn, live, and do business—particularly from an academic perspective as digital technologies offer newer opportunities for taking learning to the larger community of learners—particularly under-served segments in rural areas. A digitized landscape means democratized knowledge. They now assume greater responsibility for their own learning and design their own study trajectories. They learn 'on the go' using mobile computing devices and through ubiquitous connect to a global web. At the same time, employability of graduates remains contentious, particularly in emerging markets. The employability gap across many disciplines is enormous and there is a disconnect between graduate skill sets and the needs of industry—at the bottom of the pyramid.

Key words: Digitization; information; inclusiveness; learning; management education; skill sets; communities

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Introduction

Management education is at an inflexion point. Increasingly, thought leadership on the social impact of management education is focusing on how management education can not only pioneer but adopt flexible models of learning and delivery. Digital inclusion and the use of newer teaching-learning platforms are defining both the access to management education delivered over the Internet as well as the composition of learning communities. Business schools can leverage on the opportunities that digitization provides. The conceptual model in the paper builds a digitized flexible academic model based on a digital inclusion platform that promotes academic, social and economic opportunities for stakeholders. The study focuses on measuring the influence of digital teaching-learning platforms (distributed learning modes; blended learning modes; distance learning; and Massive Online Open Courses) on advancing learning to the broader community of learners in the society at large. The paper finds that digital inclusiveness is the key to taking the benefits of teaching and learning to the larger community of learners, improving gross enrollment, access to education and employability.

A. Business school ecosystems

Business schools can leverage on the opportunities that digitization provides. Business school teaching-learning environments are at the forefront of building a digitized flexible academic model based on a digital inclusion platform that promotes academic, social and economic opportunities for stakeholders. Business school curricula and mode of learning delivery focuses are also finding ways of measuring the influence of digital teaching-learning platforms (distributed learning modes; blended learning modes; distance learning; and Massive Online Open Courses) on advancing learning to the broader community of learners in the society at large.

Management scholars and thought leadership is increasingly curious to study digital inclusiveness. This paradigm shift is the key to taking the benefits of teaching and learning to the larger community of learners, improving gross enrollment, access to education and employability.

Business schools as institutions of higher education that impart professional education and training to graduates are best place to take the benefits of learning technology to underserved segments of society. The community of scholars, in particular, ought to play a proactive role in educating, training and mentoring talent among rural communities, women in rural areas, graduate from local areas and faculty, among others.

Institutions of higher learning and other stakeholders ought to create greater awareness and action on the access, usage and skills related to ICTs even as it purports to further the debate and discussion on how models can be co-opted to ensure that the benefits of the digitization result in

definite and tangible spill over benefits: improve the quality of life of user communities in rural zones, value creation, and delivery of information, technology and innovation in the digital age for the society at large, going forward.

To this end, several management institutions have championed blended learning and distributed learning models that are delivered online. The courses offered on these platforms of Internet-based learning enable participants to engage in self-paced study and on-demand content that is interactive and participative at the same time. The key beneficiaries of this newer form of learning delivery are learners who are unable to pursue professional courses of full-time study, and are seeking to enhance knowledge and skills without interruptions in career.

There is also a large and substantial demographic group of beneficiaries who seek out a higher education opportunity in more generic areas such as the arts and humanities as well other fields of science, technology and social sciences. For such groups business school environments have created effective learning platforms through distance education programs.

B. Digital teaching-learning platforms

Digitization—the mass adoption of connected digital services by key stakeholder publics: consumers, enterprises, civil society and governments among others, is a fundamental driver of growth and innovation across sectors, globally. Digitization has helped to create an enormous global market for information and communication technologies while laying the foundation of networked readiness—a ubiquitous, vast and interconnected modern information society.

The role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the advancement of digitization and the rise of the information society has led to the widespread adoption of ICTs among user groups and corporations across the world, including a vast and diverse communities of learners across demographic groups.

Business schools can optimize on the opportunities that digitization provides. Many are building a digitized flexible academic model based on a digital inclusion platform that promotes academic, social and economic opportunities for stakeholders. Others are measuring the influence of digital teaching-learning platforms (distributed learning modes; blended learning modes; distance education; and Massive Online Open Courses) on advancing learning to the broader community of learners in the society at large.

Open source ware that include online applications and storage of learning content are offering opportunities to take learning and assessment beyond the confines of universities and institutions of higher education. Some exemplary initiatives in this direction include the offerings of Sikkim Manipal University and Indira Gandhi Open University, India and more recently, Stanford

University, USA. Other prominent institutions of higher learning are in the process of planning more extensive course content and online instruction across management learning domains, notably, Universitas 21, a Singapore based consortium of 'online' universities that offer unmatched access to professional and academic courses.

C. Leveraging stronger learning opportunities

Distributed modes of learning are based on blended learning platforms that combine the benefits of classroom based instruction and class sessions stored online for retrieval and viewing. Distributed learning technologies such as learning content management systems enable the education service provide to reach out to a vast audience of learning spanning geographies. Also, such platforms help unleash the power of interactivity with the instructor and make learning far more participative. Online courses across professional and academic disciplines offered by leading universities are best placed to deliver these learning benefits.

Despite a growing number of beneficiaries who own a computer and have Internet access, most users in developing countries have little opportunity to connect to the Internet. They are unaware of socio-economic benefits and stimulus to good governance that ICTs can bring.
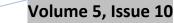
Access to ICTs remains low, more so in rural areas. Indicators of IT penetration in Indian society are lagging behind other peer nations. PC penetration, for example is 1.21% (China is at 4.08%, Asia at 6.39% and world average at 9.63%).

Recent estimates state that in 2013-14 there are 7 billion mobile-cellular subscriptions—almost one for each inhabitant on the planet; and there are 2.7 billion users of the Internet. With the proliferation of ICT the day is not far when digital and broadband connectivity, accessibility and affordability create a truly inclusive information society that as a global collective drives the pace of technology growth and change. Wireless communication networks are now the world's largest platform to deliver information, including public and social services to global communities who are underprivileged and reside in underserved, rural and poor regions.

D. Digital inclusiveness:a flexible delivery model

The existing ICT models across the globe need to take a holistic view of engagingenterprises, institutions of higher education and communities, collaboratively and inclusively. For example, in Africa, as part of a predominantly social enterprise model, Intel, among others, in providing refurbished desktop computers recycled from waste.

Western models of ICT engagement focus primarily on knowledge enterprise by proliferating distance learning and blended learning modes of education such as open course resources of world-class universities that are now available as free courseware.

Similarly, the third paradigm of community enterprise highlights the role of networked communities and social media through their engagement through face book, which, for example, alone hosts 1.15 billion users who converse and communicate in real time.

There is a need for a framework that not only unifies the social benefits of each of the existing enterprise based models but transcends these to bring businesses, institutions of higher education and communities closer, and in more enlightened ways. Thus, an 'innovation for inclusion', ICT-based model ought to connect key stakeholders: innovators, institutions of higher education and communities through funding indigenous innovations based on not-for-profit considerations.

Frugal innovation under this paradigm produces affordable and often simplified versions of existing sophisticated technologies for use by low-income populations. There are challenges in the way of the proliferation of technology-enabled initiatives, aimed at improving the quality of life of rural communities in particular. The key challenges and opportunities require enterprises, educationists and governments to focus on the following areas, going forward.

Building affordable, yet, robust digital infrastructure in rural areas will attract frugal innovation in ICT. While there are time tested models available that successfully proliferate the adoption of ICT among rural communities (e-Mitra in Rajasthan and Bangalore One in Karnataka) there is much more to be done in this domain. For example, universities can champion and lead with ideas and new learning such as the applications of ICT to improving the quality of life of communities that deploy and adopt them in their daily lives.

E. Conclusion

The last decade or more technology has redefined the delivery of learning. The Open Education Resource movement offers educational materials that are free and freely available, suitable for all levels of education, reusable and online. Institutions of higher education, which include business schools and management institutions, cannot stop here and ought to take this model to the next level of innovation.

This can only happen through greater inclusiveness where the community of scholars evolves indigenous models to disseminate learning. Institutions of higher learning and other stakeholders

ought to create greater awareness and action on the access, usage and skills related to ICTs even as it purports to further the debate and discussion on how models can be co-opted to ensure that the benefits of the digitization result in definite and tangible spill over benefits: improve the quality of life of user communities, value creation, and delivery of information, technology and innovation in the digital age for the society at large, going forward.

Institutions of higher learning also need to fund research and create new learning on several thematic areas of ICT and rural transformation such as the role of skill based training through ICT to increase jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities in rural areas; creating a network of rural-based educators and ensuring national-level access to vocational content and resources; and leveraging ICT expertise in creating multimedia enabled education methods while maintaining quality learning and affordability.

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