



## Higher Education in India Post COVID – 19

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### Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide. Most governments around the world including India have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread. These closures have impacted over 91 per cent of the world's student population. This study attempts to gauge the impact of COVID - 19 on higher education in India and analyze the transformations likely to take place in system post COVID – 19. How will the new pattern maintain quality content in teaching and learning process; will online learning achieve objectives set for good education? This qualitative study has attempted to visualise how the overall system will figure and how the transformation can be adopted by the society. Since it is a novel but vital beginning, wide ranging discussions and deliberations are needed on the type of technology solution, its relevance and availability.

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### Introduction

Higher education is an optional final stage of formal learning at levels 6, 7 and 8 (International Standard Classification of Education, 2020). Being a valuable source of providing trained and educated personnel, higher education involves applied work in professional medical and engineering schools beside social service activities. Employees expect the graduates to possess good problem-solving skills, fluency in expression both speaking and writing, critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and decision-making skills, and a wide knowledge of liberal arts and sciences.

Article 13 of the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) declares that "higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education".

The World Bank's India Country Summary of Higher Education (2017) credits the country with the third highest higher education system in the world. This is next only to the United States and China. The University Grants Commission (UGC) enforces standards and coordinates between the centre and the state. The UGC has established 15 autonomous institutions that oversee accreditation for higher learning.

As of 2020, India has over 1000 universities, with 50 central universities, 402 state universities, 125 deemed universities, 334 private universities, and 155 Institutes of National Importance which include IIMs, AIIMS, and IITs, among others. There are also 52,627 colleges as government degree colleges, private colleges and post-graduate research institutions, functioning under these universities. Some of the institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISERs), and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) have been globally acclaimed for their standard of education (Higher Education National Informatics Centre, 2020).

Recently an unexpected challenge has caught the world unawares. World governments continue to face serious problem as the novel Coronavirus infections have devoured over five million lives globally since it surfaced in China late last year. The United States stands the hardest-hit with around 140,000 deaths. The situation continues to remain grim in Brazil with 64,867, Britain with 44,220, Italy with 34,861 and Mexico with 30,639 fatalities (AFP, July 2020).

India too with more than 20,000 fresh cases every day has crossed two grim COVID-19 milestones — of 20,000 deaths and 700,000 cases. As per India's ministry of finance estimates, the country's economy is likely to contract 4.5 per cent this year (Press Information Bureau, July 2020). Between employees' safety and restoring production to recovery, Indian industry faces a tough challenge. Chances of making a quick come look remote with the rising COVID-19 cases and fatalities at manufacturing places.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Like economy and industry sectors the COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, leading to the near-total closures of schools, universities and colleges (<https://plus.google.com/+UNESCO>, 2020). Most governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread (<https://plus.google.com/>). As of June 2020, approximately 1.725 billion learners had been affected due to school closures in response to the pandemic. Currently 134 countries are implementing nationwide closures and 38 are implementing local closures, impacting about 98.5 percent of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020).

Since these closures are impacting over 91 per cent of the world's student population, authorities are confronted with various social and economic issues, including digital learning, health care, internet, etc. (Lindzon J., March 2020). UNESCO (4 March 2020) says "the impact has been more severe for disadvantaged children and their families, causing interrupted learning, compromised nutrition, childcare problems, and consequent economic cost to families who could not work".

### **Research Objectives and Methodology**

This study attempts to gauge the impact of COVID-19 on the education system in India. In view of the social distancing to be maintained by teachers as well as students the only available method now is distance learning that can be continually refined and innovated with the help of technology. Will online learning achieve objectives set for good education; will the changes in education system help incorporating universalised

quality education and establish a discrimination-free system? These are some of the issues that this qualitative study has attempted to analyze. Some more issues addressed in this study are: What transformations will COVID - 19 introduce to the higher education in the country; how will the new pattern or changes maintain quality content in teaching and learning process? In addition to these issues this study has attempted to visualise how the overall system will figure and how the change will be adopted by the society.

With varied ways to define e-learning and the educational approaches, many colleges have started making use of the technology. Through applications such as Zoom, many institutions especially engineering and designing colleges have undertaken interactions through video conferencing

As the world is suddenly caught up in the COVID – 19 messes, quite a few professionals naturally feel uncomfortable with the change. Sudakshina Gupta a professor from Calcutta University at the department of Economics is critical of online learning. “Online classes cannot substitute classroom lectures as they do not generate the interaction needed in a class. The teachers’ body language is a part and parcel of the classroom interaction. That is missing in online classes”, she holds (May 2020).

Aparajita Sharma from Council for social development pleads the latest Draft New Education Policy (DNEP) 2019 should make room for “equity, inclusion and diversity” in the new frame of things. The pandemic has had a critical impact on students and it is possible that brings a change in forms of governance and participation. Long out-of-school learning may bore and alienate students from the system. That might lead to increase in social inequalities. According to her COVID-19 involves “a social space, a social process, to learn to live, think and act for one’s self and the collective good (June 2020)”.

Prof Kamlesh Misra, Vice-Chancellor, ( Northeastern University, Boston) says, the sudden speedy spread of the pandemic forced closure of education institutions without much homework. There could be no thought exchange on the repercussions that transition to online teaching brought. Universities in Canada, Australia, UK, and US have a big number of foreign students. The news situation beckons a serious financial risk for these places of higher learning. Health concerns may discourage many parents from sending their children for study overseas.

In many countries including India, online learning has not been much in vogue; nor has the curriculum been designed that way. Digital divide and insufficient attention span risks resulting in many students losing interest in studies. Professor Mishra wonders how far most teachers are knowledgeable about online learning methodology as a dedicated and specifically designed online platform does not exist. Online learning involves a special kind of methodology much different from mere conducting lectures on Zoom type video platforms. “Not all teachers are good at it or ready for this sudden transition from face to face learning”, Professor Mishra opines. That can of course, keep the students engaged but the desired learning outcomes may elude the grasp. A re-look is also necessary into the overall teachers’ and students’ recruitment process, Professor Mishra feels.

**Richa Choudhary from NitiAyog feels worried about the new situation's negative impact on employment** due to likely withdrawal of corporate job offers. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy's estimates on unemployment shot up from 8.4 per cent in mid-March to 23 per cent in early April and the urban unemployment rate to 30.9 per cent (April 2020). Ms**Choudhary calls for** "a well-rounded and effective educational practice that will develop their skills and employability, productivity, health, and well-being and ensure the country's overall progress (April 2020)".

In view of social distancing being prescribed as the best way to curb the spread of COVID-19, educational institutions have opted for different digital platforms to facilitate learning for students. Pune based educationists Deepali Kasrekar and Gayatri Wadhavane-Tapaswi, feel India has a long way to go before digital learning can become mainstream education. Students living in rural areas lack required infrastructure. They also financially weak to avail the resources. Building of big infrastructure is costly. Teachers lack exposure and training in the digital system and therefore cannot provide authentic and quality education to the students. Poor Internet connectivity and irregular power supply and are some other handicaps for smaller cities. Lack of appropriate atmosphere in e-learning may result in a high dropout rate. There is also risk that students get distracted by social media at home. Moreover, the authentication of the educational material may be at risk because the digital educational course classes may tempt hackers to join the field.

While it is difficult to counter the weakness of distance education pointed out by experts and educationists, a big issue remains and stares us all. Do we have much choice? Latest news reports say, COVID – 19 is here to stay. People will have to adapt to the new system. India recorded nearly 25,000 new corona virus infections on Thursday (9 July 2020) , **its highest single-day total**. Hospitals are overwhelmed and health officials are struggling to respond to the surge. Bihar and West Bengal are reintroducing social distancing measures they had lifted in June. India's virus reproduction rate has increased to 1.19 in early July, from 1.1 in late June, according to research by the Institute of Mathematical Sciences in Chennai. The rate had been steadily falling since March when the country was under lockdown. As of Thursday (9 July 20120) India had more than 767,000 confirmed infections and 21,129 deaths.

Globally despite more than six months battling the mess, the virus has infected more than 11 million people worldwide, killing more than 525,000. Despite the constantly increasing toll, scientists still do not have a definitive answer how deadly the virus is. According to Donald G. McNeil Jr. (New York Times, 5 July 2020), new factors are being introduced into the equation. Before July 2020 meeting, the WHO official spokesman failed to give official deaths estimate to the journalists. Oliver Morgan, the agency's director health emergency information and risk assessment, said in an interview (June 2020) that there is "a lot of uncertainty" about how many silent and untested carriers there are. The 25 studies that the Australian researchers considered the most accurate relied on very different methodologies.

Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota predicts: "We will go much higher in the next 12 to 18 months. This is a corona virus, not influenza, it may

not follow the same pattern, but it is a much more efficient transmitter than influenza. (Leaders, 4 July 2020)”.

As the pandemic seems indefinitely long lasting, we have to learn ways to live with restrictions. Social distancing is one that is invariably to be maintained. This means the class rooms cannot be kept or conducted in the old manner?

As we grope in the dark what shape the future will take, one thing looks certain. There is no alternative to online learning. Whatever may be the shortcomings, solution lies in amalgamating online learning in our teaching learning curriculum delivery.

*According to Kasrekar and Wadhavane-Tapaswi*, digital education can be integrated into mainstream education. Besides catering to India’s diverse geographies, it is capable of creating an opportunity for educators to think, deliberate and come up with customized learning solutions for varied students. “Technology enabled new learning can be made interesting, personalized and enjoyable”, stress *Kasrekar and Wadhavane-Tapaswi*.

Free from all geographical limitations, digital learning is cost-effective that students can learn in their chosen comfort zone. A massive open online course (MOOC) can have unlimited participation and open access via the web. “It will open gateways for diversified Indians population in bringing an educational revolution”, predict *Kasrekar and Wadhavane-Tapaswi* .

Professor Mishra pleads for blended learning with quality content that can bring openness and transparency in academics. Calling upon all teachers to undergo training and become technology savvy and upgrade their technical skill, he says: “New ways of delivery and assessments of learning outcomes will have to be adopted that open immense opportunities for a major transformation in the area of curriculum development and pedagogy”. Companies can cooperate by developing and strengthening learning management systems for use by universities and colleges. Professor Mishra visualises a new business model with massive teleconferencing opportunities, seminars, and online academic meetings.

Ms Richa Choudhary (April 2020) regards technology as the tool enabling all access and personalization of education far and wide. She recommends open-source digital learning solutions and learning management software that will enable teachers to conduct teaching online.

As distance learning emerges indispensable, decision has to be made on the type of technology solution, its relevance and availability. Factors like power supplies, internet connectivity, and review in recruitment of teachers may be undertaken at an appropriate level.

Since this is a vital novel beginning, it is always in the interest of decision makers to have wide ranging discussion especially with organisations and people who have made some attempts in the field. As the world

moves from normal to dealing with the new normal, the importance of effectively taking teaching and learning the students needs to take priority. A year that went from meeting students in class to taking virtual classes without a moments delay to complete courses, to counsel or just to talk. It's not the sudden changes that have happened across the globe in the higher education sector but how each has adapted to the new experiences that we can share amongst ourselves, a new way of looking at higher education worldwide to keep pace with the impermanence of things.

Many private institutions of higher learning have been conducting online teaching, conferences, virtual round tables and various deliberations for the last several months. At many universities FDPs for making teachers ready to conduct online classes and exams have been undertaken. Workshops for faculty members to understand grading and assessment for online quizzes, assignments and tests have been undertaken.

This disruptive online move has been an opportunity in disguise, viz a viz collaborative learning. Education industry is growing at a considerable rate and with the adoption in education technology. With edtech - virtual tutoring, video conferencing tools, Apps or online content- across the world are being invested into there will be a considerable surge in its usage. The online education will touch \$350 billion by 2025 as projected. This pandemic has been very clear that the education system has got a new lease of life; with a lot more content accessible for the teachers and students. A lot of skill based online content which can be used for classroom for making teaching learning more effective. Also the use of this online content will be in addition to the existing curriculum and will make students more employable as the world moves into the 21st century. With this pandemic there is more focus on disseminating knowledge across the length and breadth of the country including all sections of the society with the support of technology. With concerned stakeholders in higher education looking at bridging the digital divide so that students across the spectrum get access to knowledge and learning.

With this new normal in education making its presence felt and its urgent requirement being made mandatory, it is only incumbent for all of us to explore its full potential and effectively take classes online. As days pass there is an understanding between the stakeholders of higher education that this sector needs to unite to postulate a new future where students can be supported without making a dent on academic quality. Respecting the dictum of the government of no gatherings and the mandate to maintain social distancing, online education will become a part of future teaching learning delivery which will be the bridging factor.

This new normal is also the time to get policy makers to make online learning more inclusive and far reaching, cutting across the digital divide.

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