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The Perils of the Digital University

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Without proper regulatory clarity and oversight, the emerging policy on online education threatens to turn the university into a shell institution, commandeered by industry for profiteering.

Two recent developments promise to further intensify trends towards online education in India, with profound implications for the traditional separation between the academy and industry, ownership of intellectual property, control of the means of knowledge production, and the role of the physical campus in reforming society.

The first is the University Grant Commission's (UGC) impending decision to allow education technology firms to collaborate with universities to develop course content and evaluation for online degrees. The second is a plan to set up a digital university, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi has positioned as a solution to India's deficit in higher education seats.

These developments have ultimately been made possible by an enabling environment created by the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). The NEP diagnoses India's education woes as primarily a problem of access, focusing on "increased access, equity, and inclusion." (NEP 2020, pg 34). Towards this goal, it enthusiastically supports technocentric solutions such as online learning and Open Distance Education (NEP 2020, 34).

Commandeering the university

The word 'access' appears more than 60 times in the NEP document, with its usage mostly connoting online access to courses and modules in universities. Online education is positioned as "a natural path to increase access to quality higher education" (NEP 2020 39). HEIs are directed to offer "online programs to enhance their offerings, improve access, increase Gross Enrolment Rate (GER), and provide opportunities for lifelong learning" (NEP 2020, 35). Where the NEP expresses an intent for capacity-building by declaring that "more HEIs shall be established and developed in underserved regions to ensure full access, equity, and inclusion" (NEP 2020, 35), this is sought to be achieved through online learning and open distance learning.

The proposed UGC amendment has been justified as a progressive move to accord universities greater flexibility and improve the quality of education by harnessing the technological expertise of ed-tech companies. The final draft regulations were made public for comments and feedback in March. The draft proposed allowing institutions to source up to 40% of their course content from external sources such as Open Educational Resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). The remaining 60% of the course content could be developed in-house, in collaboration with ed-tech companies. The draft specified that universities would retain complete intellectual property rights over in-house content.

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Many questions arise. Will the online courses be taught by university faculty or by external experts hired by ed-tech companies? Will universities continue to hire new permanent faculty, or will course design, teaching and evaluation be outsourced wholesale to ed-tech companies? If an ed-tech company can offer a ready-made course, taught by external experts at a lower cost, what happens to the university faculty with the expertise to teach the same subject? Will universities still be able to set their own syllabus and offer the courses they want or will their course offerings be increasingly influenced by the profit motive of ed-tech companies, which may push for more saleable courses such as business and commerce to be offered over classical ones such as history and philosophy?

These questions acquire increased salience when contextualised against the broader systemic crisis plaguing the public education system with lack of permanent hires, increasing reliance on temporary teachers on precarious contracts, reduced budgets for libraries, and utter lack of investment in physical infrastructure. There is also a move towards standardisation in the form of a common entrance test for 45 central universities and proposals for a common syllabus across state universities which risks compromising context-specific learning.

The UGC's formalisation of collaboration between universities and the ed-tech industry lays the groundwork for consolidating a 'university-ed-tech complex'. Without proper regulatory clarity and oversight, the university-ed-tech complex threatens to turn the university into a shell institution, commandeered by industry for profiteering.

The digital university

If the university-ed-tech complex represents the risks of corporate penetration of the higher education system, the government's announcement of a digital university presents a different set of equally worrying concerns.

The stated rationale behind creating a digital university is to increase the degree enrollment rate for those between 18-23 years to 50% in the next 15 years. The government plans to have no restrictions on intake, proposing to make it open to anyone who has passed class 12 to take courses of their choice, across degree, diploma and certificate levels.

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The government also avers that the university will be based on a 'hub and spoke' network model with the Digital University as its hub and top-tier higher education institutions within and outside India as its spokes. The digital university will be at the core of a digital ecosystem consisting of other higher education institutions, digital content creators and technology platform providers.

This raises many worrying questions. Will this centralised hub end up centralising the means of knowledge production and dissemination in the hands of the central government? Would a single university with nationwide reach end up disseminating a homogenous courseware in a highly diverse country where context-specific learning is the need of the hour? How will the digital university hub, interact with the university-ed-tech complex in the 'spokes', the traditional universities?

Transforming society

The powerful currents of prejudice and segregation that characterise Indian society need an education system built around a physical campus where people of different castes, religions, and genders can freely intermingle for long periods. Does online education have the capacity to address fundamental problems of divisiveness, segregation and gender discrimination that still afflict Indian society?

Data highlight the need for a national conversation on the implications of a transition towards digital learning on social conservatism.

The recent Pew surveys on attitudes of Indians towards religion and gender provide a sobering assessment of the deeply conservative nature of Indian society. Large sections of the population shun interreligious friendships. Majorities oppose interreligious marriages and believe a wife should obey her husband. These data highlight the need for a national conversation on the implications of a transition towards digital learning on social conservatism.

A substantive shift to online education will obliterate the possibility that prolonged interaction between diverse groups could reduce such prejudices. Young people will be bereft of opportunities by which, as the psychologist Gordon Allport (1954) argues: "prejudice may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom, or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups." (Allport 1954, p 281).

An online classroom will also hamper women's liberation as they lose regular access to a physical campus and opportunities to forge strong and lasting friendships and relationships with men and women of different castes and religions. The virtual classroom and the digital university simply cannot provide this benefit.

India has a severe problem of lack of access to high-quality, low-cost education, particularly for disadvantaged groups. But it also has deeper prejudicial and segregationist tendencies, which are significant impediments to realising a progressive, modern nation-state. Online education might be able to solve the problem of access (although even that is in doubt given the digital divide). But only embodied, on-campus education, which simultaneously provides the space for interaction, can blur the caste, religious, and gender divisions that hold India back.

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References:

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