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Are We Ready for the Digital University?

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The government is pushing ahead with its plans for a digital university; elsewhere it is pressing universities to offer online courses. Norms are being diluted and EdTech is becoming a central player. Are we rushing without thinking of the most important person: the student?

Policymakers and regulators seem determined to carry out a big push in online and Open Distance Learning (ODL) for higher education. They draw support from the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), which believes that the "ODL and online education provide a natural path to increase access to quality higher education" (NEP 2020: 39).

The policy stresses that online education should be used to enhance access to outstanding public education and promote inclusion (p 34). Top-rated mainstream universities can now offer online and distance mode programmes without obtaining prior approval from regulatory bodies. Norms and standards for starting open universities are being watered down. Proposed amendments seek to remove territorial jurisdiction for autonomous colleges offering online programmes (though they are evasive about the issue as far as universities and other higher educational institutions are concerned).

The country could then soon see the mushrooming of online ODL institutions offering academic, professional, technical and skill development programmes in digital and virtual modes. Going by the present trends, most are likely to be in the private sector. (As of now, there is just one private university among the 17 open universities in the country.)

Traditional universities are being nudged to partner with educational technology companies (EdTech) and technology companies to deliver their courses and programmes. (This aligns with the NEP 2020 prescription to integrate high-quality online content into mainstream higher education.) Many universities, including premier ones, have outsourced the delivery of their academic, professional, and training programmes to the national and international EdTech.

Higher educational institutions providing face-to-face formal higher education have used Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for the digital delivery of some of their conventional programmes. EdTech companies, which act as higher education aggregators, have signed up with higher education institutions to design, develop, market, and digitally deliver micro-credentials, courses, and programmes to prospective students.

Such a blending and hybridisation of higher education transforms formal face-to-face universities into online, virtual, and digital *digivarsites.* This is happening less of their own volition and more because of a continued prodding by the regulators. Potential and prospective students are being urged to accumulate credits by taking online courses and deposit them into a digital depository called the Academic Bank of Credit (ABC). Universities have been ordered to enter into the ABC all courses, and qualifications awarded to students. Full-time students are required to take up to 40% of their courses online through *SWAYAM*, an indigenous version of MOOCs. With face-to-face education blended with the digital, the higher education system is fast mutating into what may be termed as *phygital*.

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The *digital-phygital* agenda has now taken a paradigm shift with the union government's plans to establish a Digital University by 2023. While the details are being worked out, its broad contours include universal access to world-class quality education with a personalised learning experience at the doorsteps of the students in different Indian languages and ICT formats.

The Digital University is conceptualised as a networked hub and spoke model wherein the country's best public higher educational institutions will come together. This would lead to "a modern, pioneering and practical blueprint for steering India in the Amrit Kaal," and would strengthen the "universalised quality education." The University Grants Commission feels that the Digital University would serve students from economically poor, marginalised, and rural backgrounds. There is, however, no explanation of how these laudable goals would be achieved.

The digital delivery of higher education has been championed by technology enthusiasts for at least the past two decades. Digital education, to promote access to quality education, began with the launch of the National Mission on Education through Information Communication Technology (NMEICT) and the National Knowledge Network (NKN) in 2009.

The practice, however, gained momentum with the campuses coming to a halt due to the Covid-19 lockdown. As long they remained out of bounds for faculty and students, the teaching-learning processes continued by leveraging technology. Encouraged by the rapidity with which campuses migrated from the physical to the virtual, technology enthusiasts have written off brick-and-mortar colleges and universities. To them, the future of higher education is digital. They see technology-mediated teaching and learning as a better alternative to face-to-face education and as the new normal.

EdTech companies are now imagined to be silently revolutionising education. A report by the Confederation of Indian Industry and PriceWaterhouseCoopers projects them to have 'a golden future'. The prospect was predicated on the belief that the students and parents were enthusiastic about the benefits that EdTech offered. These included time flexibility, personalised learning, customised study materials, and continuity of education even during challenging times. Buoyed by the enormous untapped possibilities, EdTech and technology companies have been working on expansion plans and raising funds from the market. They have been euphoric about their prospects. Much to the chagrin of educationists, EdTech sees technological disruptions as a game changer with the potential to transform higher education.

For the NEP 2020, online, virtual, and digital technologies are the new elixirs of life, not only for higher education but across the entire spectrum of education. This zeal notwithstanding, the NEP had reservations about the efficacy, effectiveness, consequences, and implications of digital learning. It had recommended undertaking "carefully designed and appropriately scaled studies" to ascertain how the benefits of online and digital education could be reaped to the fullest and their downsides mitigated.

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The NEP also cautioned that "the benefits of online digital education can't be leveraged unless the digital divide is eliminated through concerted efforts, such as the digital India campaign and the availability of affordable computing devices" (p. 58). These caveats are yet to catch the attention of the policy planners. The digital divide and skewed access to data, devices, and connectivity remain major constraints.

Most educationists have pointed out the pitfalls and ill-effects of digital education. Oblivious to these academic concerns, policy planners and regulators appear–to have been completely sold out to the idea. They even ignored the increasing clamour for reverting to face-to-face teaching-learning interactions. Instead, they aggressively pushed and promoted the *digital-phygita*l modes of delivering higher education.

The best universities in the world have a high degree of technology integration in their teaching, learning, research, governance, and administration. But none of them have visualised their technological capabilities as curtailing the dependence on teachers. On the contrary, they all envision hiring more faculty members to attain greater excellence. India must not be an exception.

It is often argued that the digital delivery of higher education would solve capacity constraints caused by scarcity. The reality, however, turns out to be quite different. Barring a few disciplines, the intake capacity of India's higher educational institutions far exceeds demand. AICTE-approved institutions offering courses in engineering and management can fill up only half their approved intake.

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Yet, a few elite institutions in the same disciplinary domains are hard-pressed to deal with a very high demand. The real reason lies in the dearth of institutions providing quality higher education at affordable cost. The digital university would hardly be able to redress the situation. Most digitally delivered programmes are of poor quality – not only in India but worldwide. The issue of capacity constraints can be addressed only by improving the overall quality of higher education.

The idea that better and more effective regulation would enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of education delivered in person or online has proven to be utopian. No one quite knows how to regulate the sector in India. The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) said in 2007 that higher education was 'over-regulated but under-governed'. The National Education Policy 2020 argues that the sector

needs 'light but tight regulation'.

With ineffective gatekeeping, the digital space in higher education could quickly get filled with substandard institutions. Even if competition-led market correction weeds out poor-quality providers, that would happen only in the long run, when "we are all dead."

For the overwhelming majority of India's over 38 million students in higher education, the transition to virtual learning from physical learning has only been namesake. Most of them – particularly those in rural, remote, or tribal areas – were hardly equipped during the pandemic to go online. Even in metros and towns, barring a minuscule from the affluent minority, most students were attending classes on smartphones. These small screen devices not only strained their eyes and minds but also hampered their ability to learn effectively. Students in urban areas might have had connectivity but preferred to keep their cameras and microphones off to save data. Most of the time, teachers lectured to faceless screen or to themselves.

Online examinations – even those with proctoring through facial recognition and eye movements and contacts – have proven to be a farce. Not only the teachers but even the students themselves admit to their follies. No wonder most students in higher education wanted to study offline but insisted they take examinations online.

Most stakeholders, including the premier higher educational institutions, have concluded that the remote teaching-learning can at best be a stop-gap arrangement. They are convinced that technology has inherent deficiencies, leading to compromises in the teaching-learning process. A classroom is never as simple as Zoom imagines and where the teachers could mute the class at the click of a button.

Technology provided an alternative in the time of crisis and could be leveraged as an effective instrument for enhancing quality and promoting excellence. It would, however, be simplistic to deduce that the future of higher education will be virtual, with no place for brick-and-mortar universities.

Broadcast and telecast technologies have not rendered classrooms redundant. MOOCs fizzled out without making much of a dent in the time-tested teaching-learning methodologies and intuitions. Universities have embraced technologies without paradigm shifts in their teaching, learning, or research processes. They have learned to flourish with technology; teachers have survived textbooks.

Recall the plagues in Europe that repeatedly recurred during the 14th to 17th centuries. Every time the plague struck, students and faculty would flee their campuses to take refuge in the countryside manor houses, which would temporarily transform into academies. Universities would, however, return to their usual and none of those manor houses could ever become academies in perpetuity.

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So is likely to be the case with digital technology. Many EdTech companies are now under severe strain due to sharp declines in their enrolment and rising revenue losses. The bubble could burst soon. Some of the biggies are downsizing digital operations, causing massive layoffs and retrenchments. Many of them are working towards face-to-face teaching, by acquiring physical facilities and hiring teachers. Artificial Intelligence, augmented and virtual reality, and machine learning are not proving adequate or appropriate to retain clients. Policy support and governmental backing notwithstanding, EdTech is unable to sell the idea of ease of learning to the primary stakeholders of education – the students.

Technology-enabled education requires continuous investments in infrastructure and into developing and upgradation of contents. Content development is an altogether different ball game than classroom teaching. The nation must be willing to invest heavily in training a large number of teachers to become quality content creators. Should we choose to borrow or buy the contents from elsewhere, we would end up being mere users of knowledge. The nation must aspire to produce content indigenously. That would be possible only if the country invests in hiring, retaining and nurturing an adequate number of appropriately qualified faculty and researchers. Else the country would be saddled with worthless, poor-quality content.

The quality of higher education comes from closer classroom interactions, discussions, question and answers sessions, debates, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and the overall ecosystem. Campuses enable experiential learning by being in the company of not only the like-minded but also those with drastically differing views.

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