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The Coming Disruption in Higher Education in India

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The National Education Policy of 2020 does not look to build on existing strengths in higher education. Instead, its aim is total disruption: a drastic modification in the meaning of higher education itself and the facilitation of edtech.

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) has a declared ambition to overhaul India's education sector. While the NEP is yet to be debated in Parliament, actual outcomes will greatly depend on the details of implementation.

For higher education, though, the pathway is being made clearer by the day through a series of new rules and directions from the University Grants Commission (UGC). In contrast to the current 'mode-for-learning' approach — which privileges critical thinking and citizenship training — the NEP intends to make dominant a 'mode-for-instruction' framework centred around information, exams, vocational training, and skilling.

This shift to a mode-for-instruction requires that the notion of the university classroom be dismantled or, more accurately, fragmented. This involves transforming the previous arrangement of having students seated before a shared blackboard, to becoming instead an online virtual collection, disconnected by individual digital screens. The NEP emphasis on the online module is to ultimately overrun the current academic-professor-centred system with an educational-influencer economy.

Downgrading the Professor

In March, the UGC chairman announced that plans were afoot to allow for the 'lateral entry' of 'professors-of-practice', at universities and colleges. These professors-of-practice would not be required to have a PhD nor pass the National Eligibility Test (NET). Their domain experience by itself is thus considered enough to allow them to skip academic qualifications that are otherwise essential for a university position. (Though it can be pointed out that awarding a professorship without a doctoral degree in India has precedence, it was usually a rarity and an exception to the norm.)

The introduction of the lateral entry professor as part of the NEP announces two very significant ruptures. First, there is a clear intention to disconnect the notion of the professorship from academic process. Notable is the fact that the professor-of-practice gets to entirely bypass all academic institutional performance markers.

These markers refer to an academic standing earned by intellectual labours such as research, teaching, peer-reviewed publications and, most importantly, by advancing the disciplinary field. In ideal terms, the academic professor is expected to be only formally responsible to the institution or the university. The more meaningful accountability of the professorship, in fact, is to the global community of scholars and being constantly vetted by peers within the discipline (Hamman 2019, 919-941).

The professor-of-practice, on the other hand, as currently imagined by the UGC, remains restricted to being, at most, an information service provider: a subject expert who is, comically enough, outside the academic process.

The edtech boom

The lateral entry also announces a second rupture, serving as a side-door entry for educational technology companies (edtech) and their personnel into university departments and centres. The UGC chairman was fairly forthcoming on the issue, when in an interview with the *Indian Express* in February, he unhesitatingly confirmed that several amendments were in the offing to enable universities and colleges to 'collaborate' with edtech platforms for 'developing course content and financial rules'.

India has witnessed a 'Covid-19 edtech bonanza' by attracting close to $1.4 billion in investments in 2020. Several industry trackers even foresee a near tripling within the next five years, with edtech in India expected to grow from a $2.8 billion (2020) to a $10.4 billion (2025) market. According to one report, from January 2020 to barely halfway through 2021, three Indian edtech startups ? Unacademy, Eruditus, and UpGrad ? became unicorns, with Byju achieving a decacorn status. (In start-up parlance, a company valued at above $1 billion is a unicorn, while a company valued above $10 billion is a decacorn.)

While judging the educational competence of these Indian edtech companies (termed as technology service providers in the NEP) is beyond our scope here, one could nonetheless flag a recent piece by Chaitanya Ravi and Juhi Sidharth that astutely discusses several emerging anxieties about the corporate control of course content and the potential of the university having to play second fiddle to the profit motive of these 'technology service providers'. Equally worrying, edtech companies mostly draw their investments from a range of venture capitalists, who are really in the business of trying to earn super profits.

Troubling doubts also persist about the ownership of the meta-data that will be generated from the glut of digital interactions through online courses. Will the student-users get to own and control their data exhaust, or will it remain with the educational platform?

Classroom is not for learning

At the heart of the edtech investment in online technologies is the call to disrupt the 'aura' of the classroom.

Historically, the classroom lies at the very core of the learning endeavour of the modern university and college. Ideally, the classroom lecture format aims to co-evolve the understanding of the teacher and student through interactions around ideas. It draws the teacher and the student into an intellectual entanglement, that gets further circled with questions, doubts, and contingent claims. The classroom is thus not just a physical space to synchronise teacher-student interactions, but it is literally 'the' place where learning as a social activity happens.

In contrast to the 'analogue' classroom, the edtech strategy for online learning is fundamentally driven by an 'algorithmic architecture' and by 'business models' (Dijick, 2018. 117-136). As the Dutch media scholars J. Van Dijck, T. Poell and M. de Waal argue, the pedagogical philosophy that underlies such corporate assembled online courses are 'datafication and personalisation'. The chief claim of edtech companies is that they can curate customised education by deploying artificial intelligence, teaching analytics, cloud computing and learning apps. Edtech companies view learning as individual-centric, customised and steered by predictive analytics — algorithms that can replace the teacher's professional judgement with 'learnification'. The learnification paradigm is the belief that "learning can be managed, monitored, controlled and ultimately modified in each student's personal mind" through a customised algorithm that tracks, maps and stores information on their abilities, emotional states and psychological dispositions.

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The much talked up customised education products involves training the user-student with algorithms while continually collecting the latter's data exhaust. Every digital indent, in the form of a like button, an emoji, a quiz, a survey or a click adds to the assembling of the user-student's behavioural-psychological profile, which in the absence of legal protection, can be turned into an exclusively owned raw material to be repurposed by the platform. Abstract automated instructions of Artificial Intelligence (AI) are designed to train and modulate an individual for the passive acquisition of skills, which is in stark contrast to learning as a social activity that involves critical thinking.

In tandem with the aim for individualised passive skill acquisition, the NEP has also been insistent in advocating for a 'multiple entry and exit' option, or what Dipsita Dhar describes as the "fatal illusion of choice." A single year at college would be enough to earn a certificate. If you clear two years, a diploma could be acquired, finish three years to get a degree and push for a fourth to get a multidisciplinary bachelor's degree. The student could weave in and out of different colleges by doing different years at different points of time. Facilitating these multiple exits and entries will be an Academic Bank of Credit (ABC) that would digitally store all the course credits and make them somehow commensurable even when earned from different higher education institutions across several years.

At heart, flexibility and 'multiple entry and exit' are as much about dismantling the integrity of the classroom as it is about destroying the very idea of achieving group solidarity through learning. Moreover, as Dhar correctly warns us, the many social and financial reasons why a student is forced to discontinue or compelled to abandon the programme midway will no longer be addressed. Instead, the reverse will play out, where compulsions (financial, gender, caste or otherwise) to drop out from college can now be officially normalised as issues of individual choice.

Problems of trust

For the NEP to succeed as a disruptor, however, it also needs to sweep aside or seriously damage the previous intellectual standing and the goodwill of India's public higher education institutions.

The conceptual grounds for the NEP may well have been laid when an unprecedented anti-intellectual campaign was launched during the first term of the Modi-led government (2014-19), targeting, amongst others, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jadavpur University, Ramjas College (Delhi University), Film and Television Institute of India, Aligarh Muslim University, Jamia Milia Islamia , Indian Institute of Technology (Madras), and University of Hyderabad. The anti-intellectual campaign, the first in independent India, aimed for the 'ideological cleansing' of public universities and colleges by ridding campuses of 'anti-nationals' and those found to be ostensibly abetting 'seditious' academic cultures (D'Souza, 2021. 23-52).

What was particularly striking about this assault was how a double whammy of pro-government electronic media channels and social media acted in concert to manufacture a popular appeal for denouncing university students as slackers, hounding researchers as parasites on tax-payers money, and thought it fit to accuse many a faculty of harbouring anti-patriotic sentiment. The campaign proved that the public imagination could be successfully captured by a combination of trolling, misinformation, social media antics, and even by some standard propaganda delivered by pro-establishment news channels.

The digital media, in other words, when weaponised as political and ideological infrastructure, could be readily deployed to outwit, out shout and overwhelm the academic world, which prefers doubt over simple conclusions, and whose claims, relatively speaking, are ponderous and prefer (Kahneman 2013). When compared to the agile circulation of 'information- forwards' by the 'WhatsApp University', the academic university would fall woefully short in trying to win over the public.

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It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that the power of the WhatsApp University lies only in how rapidly it moves fake news or misinformation. Instead, as Rachel Botsman argues, the credibility and persuasion of digital technologies derives from how it evokes 'trust'.

Previously, trust flowed 'upwards' to referees, regulators, gatekeepers, authorities, watchdogs, and experts. The intellectual standing of the academic professor and the university, for example, are based on the judgements of subject experts and their proven expertise. In contrast, trust in digital technologies flow 'horizontally' or as 'distributed trust', where approval is generated from how 'fellow human beings' score through ratings that build 'reputation trails' (Botsman 2018, 8-9, 81-108). Think, for example, how an Uber or Airbnb experience is evaluated, based largely on user feedback: the number of likes, comments, emojis and negative ratings. In the digital age, for Botsman, the emergence of distributed trust has, in fact, begun to increasingly offer ways for undermining the 'old sources of power, expertise and authority' (Botsman 2018, 8).

Rise of the education influencers

The emergence and proliferation in recent years of the 'educational influencer' has produced an altogether different online format to challenge existing academic conventions for rigour and scrutiny. The influencer, in a broad definition by Gil-Quintana and Vida de León, refers to 'opinion leaders capable of influencing large social groups'. India's educational influencer market is fast growing, with the top position on YouTube currently held by the *Khan GS Research Centre* (Patna, Bihar). The 28-year-old Faisal Khan, often referred to as Khan Sir by his followers, coaches candidates who attempt various competitive exams for government jobs. According to the influencer search engine Qoruz, Khan sir has a subscriber base of 15.2 million, with average views for his videos at 4.9 million.

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While assessing the quality of Khan Sir's teaching and the content of his courses deserve greater study, for us, however, what is critical in this short article is his use of the algorithmic architecture to earn horizontal trust. The validity and the credibility of his educational content is judged by how large a subscriber base he collects, the number of likes received, the views registered, and the engagement generated in the comments section. His teaching is judged and evaluated, as in the case of Uber or Airbnb, entirely on the analytics generated by the users' experience. Such a validation exercise, more pointedly, is the exact opposite of the academic university

professor, whose contributions can only be assessed by moving upwards towards a narrow band of experts and peer reviewers.

The educational influencer industry can only function and thrive where the mode-for-instruction dominates the mode-for-learning: where education and learning is reduced to skilling, exam preparation, problem solving, memorising dry information, and vocational training. In India, a digital trio of edtech companies, educational influencers and their educational products are, in fact, fast cohering into a formidable educational ecosystem. Pre-recorded video or asynchronous format for instruction enables the educational influencer to turn teaching content into educational products, the access to which can be monetised through a branding exercise. Even so, educational influencers will definitely come up short when trying to enable creative thinking and learning through social interactions.

NEP is for the *precariat*

It is probable that awareness of this deep chasm in teaching outcomes between the mode-for-instruction and the mode-for-learning has caused the government and the NEP to talk up the need for skilling, up-skilling and vocational training.

On the surface, there may be a point in arguing that employment opportunities in the near future will be beset by challenges such as fast changing technologies, obsolescence, redundancy, and the need for the average person to make several career shifts. Consequently, it could be claimed that existing higher education design and public universities would be ill-equipped in meaningfully preparing students for dealing with Industry 4.0 ? the new economy based on digitalisation, artificial intelligence, block chain, big data, genome engineering, the start-up economy etc.

On the other hand, there could be a more effective counter. Higher education in the age of the half-life of skills requires that students, more than ever, need to develop durable capacities such as critical thinking and citizenship training, while maintaining strong emotional bonds with their classroom peers and batch mates. That is, only with learning that is enduring can students meaningfully adapt and stay ahead of the rapid pace at which technological changes are happening.

> In the society of the precariat not only will extreme wealth be concentrated in a few hands but that education will no longer drive social mobility nor strive for citizen empowerment.

The NEP, when stripped of its high rhetoric and fantastical tone, reveals a more straightforward plot. It is an education policy that sets the tone for India's youth and learners to join the ranks of what the activist scholar Guy Standing describes as the precariat ? a work force dominated by flexible labour contracts, temporary jobs, casualisation, self-employment and part-timers (Standing, 2011). In the society of the precariat extreme wealth be concentrated in a few hands. Education will neither drive social mobility nor strive for citizen empowerment.

A precariat society, however, may not necessarily spell the end of the privately run corporate university. Instead, private universities would effectively serve as finishing schools for the rich and privileged by skirting the political question of challenging the existing status quo. Within the last decade or so, India has in fact witnessed a dramatic addition in the number of self-financed private universities. In March, for example, the Gujarat Assembly unanimously passed The Gujarat Private Universities (Amendment) Bill (2022), which paved the way for 11 new private universities, to be set up by corporates, and religious and social trusts.

Private universities are currently neither legally bound nor incentivised to enable the social mobility of discriminated caste and marginalised economic groups. The NEP, interestingly enough, makes no mention of the term caste-based reservation and offers only a vague gesture about making available measures to 'incentivise the merit' of those who are socially and economically discriminated. No surprise then, that in the absence of any legal means to address discrimination and social mobility, higher education in brick-and-mortar private institutions in India could only be expected to reinforce privilege.

NEP in a nutshell

India's higher education system has been in a tailspin for several decades now, dogged by financial cuts, mismanagement and crumbling infrastructure. Calls for drastic change are not surprising. That said, despite years of institutional decline the public university is not a write-off. If anything, the commanding heights of India's higher education continue to retain some of the best professors in the country, sustain the university classroom as 'the' place for learning, encourage academic freedom and enable social mobility through affirmative policies such as reservations.

The NEP, however, is not looking to build on such strengths. Instead, the aim is to achieve a total disruption: a drastic modification in the meaning of higher education itself. For the NEP, higher education will neither involve nurturing citizenship nor aim to evolve critiques of social and political power. Instead, training for the half-life of skills will be considered central to the learning quest with edtech companies and other educational corporate platforms formulating and putting out algorithm based instructional content.

Through a mode-of-instruction framework, higher education in India will be dominated by educational influencers peddlling digital learning packages and asynchronous video products. Downgrading the academic professor and dismantling the classroom will marginalise the notion of learning as a social activity and as a source for critical reflection through a peer group. And even where the brick-and-mortar university teaching exists, it is most likely that they will be privately owned and aimed at sustaining privilege through social exclusion rather than enabling citizen empowerment. The NEP, in both design and promise, will aim to consolidate New India as a ‘society of the precariats’.

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