

TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

Vector illustration of graduate hat.

Much of the discourse on resuming higher education during the pandemic revolves around home-based learning — more specifically, the tools to deliver home-based learning. The merits and demerits of online learning and, in some measures, of broadcast-based learning, are being debated. There is a sense of heightened anxiousness and urgency to find solutions to tide over the pandemic-induced crisis.

This is not to suggest that the anxiety and urgency are misplaced. But instead of getting bogged down by the challenges of identifying the best solutions to provide an inclusive and affordable home-based education, we can think of the enormous possibilities presented by the pandemic to the education sector.

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There are three ideal learning outcomes of higher education. The first is to provide knowledge in the relevant discipline to the students. Second, since higher education students are on the verge of joining the workforce, it is expected that their education will also impart them with the skills needed for their jobs/enterprises. Finally, students are expected to play a constructive role in shaping the society and the world at large using the values and ideals of a modern, progressive society; the teaching-learning process is expected to mould their character accordingly.

We should reflect on how many of India's higher learning institutions, and the students within them, are able to fulfil any or all of these ideal learning outcomes. The reality is that apart from a handful of institutions in the technology, management and liberal arts streams, and a small number of extremely self-motivated students, a vast majority of other students just meander through college and acquire a degree.

That there is a huge gulf between the curriculum taught in the colleges and actual job requirements is universally known. It is common to hear even the brightest of students mention that they learnt more on the job than through their curriculum in college. If this is indeed the universal reality, why should we bestow so much importance on a syllabus? Why is there such enormous pressure on the higher education system to complete every bit of that syllabus within a prescribed time? And why do we take such massive efforts to evaluate students' knowledge of that syllabus through exams? Why not completely re-evaluate the syllabus every now and then? Why not have substantive industrial internships, while retaining only a very basic outline of essential concepts? The evaluation too can be a mix of regular assignments, performance in the internship as rated both by the industry and the college, and a light, home-based proctored exam. The time saved in attending regular classes in the institution can be compensated for by spending time on the development of skills and prosocial attitudes and values that will help the student lead an enriching life. This component can again be a guided teaching process using videos, films and books.

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India is uniquely positioned in the world today to benefit from its demographic dividend. Yet, in many contexts, it has been pointed out that this dividend can actually turn into a liability since those in the population bracket that are ready to join the workforce have practically no skills or

knowledge that add to their employability. The higher education sector has multiple stakeholders (and multiple vested interests). In normal times, maintaining the status quo or implementing incremental and marginal reforms was all one could hope for. The pandemic has opened the doors for ushering in massive, bold and transformational reforms. As John Lewis said, "If not now, then when?"

Jayesh Ranjan is an IAS officer in the Telangana government and the officiating Vice-Chancellor of the Jawaharlal Nehru Technology University, Hyderabad. Views are personal

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