

FROM HIGHER TO HIRE EDUCATION

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Higher education policy planners and regulators are busy giving shape to the digital university, which was announced in the 2022-23 Union Budget. Though still on the drawing board, the digital university is expected to offer any number, kind, and type of course without limits on intake, in a hybrid or 'physical plus digital' mode. It proclaims to provide equitable access to quality higher education and employability-enhancing skill development programmes to all.

In the interim, the University Grants Commission has relaxed the norms and standards for setting up open universities. In particular, land requirement has been reduced from 40 acres to just five acres. This is likely to open the floodgates for private open universities. Simultaneously, more universities are being enabled to offer courses in the distance, open and online mode, mostly in collaboration with EdTech startups and unicorns. Some have already outsourced the delivery of their courses to such agencies. Students are also made to complete a certain portion of their course requirements through Massive Open Online Courses. Additionally, they can accumulate credits at will and deposit them in their Academic Bank of Credit to be exchanged for a degree at a later stage. Higher education in India is getting metamorphosed into 'hire education'. In the process, higher education is now getting delivered by for-profit entities, in contravention of the long-held belief that education at all levels must be provided on a not-for-profit basis.

The idea of providing higher educational opportunities in a non-formal mode is not new. Most mainstream universities in India have been allowing students, particularly women and working people, to learn on their own and take university exams as private candidates. Many have performed quite well.

The mode and medium of remote learning have, however, been changing to keep pace with technological advancement. Broadcasts and telecasts were once regarded as game changers to impart education remotely. They were espoused to be the cheapest way of enhancing access to quality education. The realities belied these expectations.

Information Communication and Entertainment technologies, augmented and virtual realities, artificial intelligence and machine learning are being touted as technologies with immense possibilities for transforming the delivery of education. The higher education horizon appears densely dotted with EdTech startups and tech companies as higher education aggregators.

Technology-enabled and mediated digital learning is projected as the future of higher education. Such learning is supposed to end face-to-face formal education — so much so that some have already started writing the obituary of the brick-and-mortar universities. Two years of COVID-19-compelled online education seems to have convinced them that in future, education, particularly higher education, will transform into a virtual space.

Evidence of massive learning losses due to the digital divide, but primarily due to the inherent limitations of technology, are being regarded as mere teething troubles. Sold to the idea, policy planners and regulators are aggressively pushing the distance, open, virtual, and online modes of education.

The EdTechs and technology companies are euphoric about these developments. The media is already abuzz with EdTechs raising resources and enhancing capacities to capitalise on the opportunities that these market-friendly reforms throw up. How successful and effective would

such programmes be? No one knows. Going by the evidence, employers across the world are generally negatively disposed towards this. Most recruiters prefer to hire those who have graduated in face-to-face mode.

No wonder even the strongest proponents of online and virtual education feel that such programmes be subjected to stricter oversight, tighter regulations, and rigorous processes to ensure high standards and robust quality control. Given the fact that the quality of higher education is inversely proportional to the intensity of regulation, designing and developing an efficient and effective regulatory mechanism often proves more challenging than imagined.

The open and distance mode of learning, including the latest model based on digital and virtual delivery, often finds favour with the government due to cost considerations. It is, however, wrong to assume that these are economical and cost-effective. To be effective, they not only require massive capital investment in infrastructure, but also demand a significantly higher recurring expenses on content development and their continuous updating and upgradation.

Digital delivery and technology integration in education may undoubtedly serve a useful purpose. Higher education must indeed embrace and keep pace with the advancements in technology. Technology can be effectively leveraged as a quality-enhancement tool. It would, however, be a blunder to regard technology-mediated teaching-learning as an alternative to face-to-face education. Technology can supplement and not substitute teachers.

No world-class universities, including those with a high degree of technology integration in their teaching and learning processes, are planning to cut down their faculty cost or their number any time soon. On the contrary, they envision hiring more of them to attain greater excellence. India cannot be an exception to this. Higher education is a lot more than borrowing content and delivering them online or outsourcing content. This would render India a consumer of knowledge. We must, instead, be focussed on exploiting our full potential to emerge as a producer of knowledge and providers of the global workforce.

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