

Still grappling with online classes

State universities require funding if online education is to continue in India

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A year since the outbreak of COVID-19, online education remains a chimera in India. Notwithstanding their preparedness, higher education institutions were directed by the government to shift from classroom education to online education. This was mandated even though the government spent merely 3.2% of its GDP on education in 2020-21. University administrations too released orders overnight in haste. They instructed teachers and students to move to online classes without taking cognisance of changes needed in infrastructure, training, etc.

Differences within institutions

The financial health of state universities in the country is an open secret. While centrally funded elite institutes such as the IITs, IIMs, NITs and Central universities launched video channels and uploaded e-content on institutional websites and digital platforms, a majority of the state universities still struggle without proper Internet connectivity and bandwidth in their campuses. State universities are only able to provide salaries on time. The move to online learning especially came as a surprise for overburdened teachers given that there are several vacant faculty positions in universities across India. This move also came as a shock for the students, many of whom are distressed by the COVID-19 situation. Many of them also lack the facilities to attend online classes. Teachers and students had a sense of déjà vu as they had a similar experience when the annual scheme of teaching and regular courses was replaced by the semester scheme of teaching and the choice-based credit system earlier.

A transition from conventional classroom teaching and learning to online education needs to be done in a phased manner. State universities should first equip their infrastructure (both hard and soft) with wholehearted government support. A sledgehammer approach to adapt to a new setting won't serve anybody's interests. On the contrary, it may prove to be a counterproductive exercise.

There are 993 universities, 39,931

colleges, 3.73 crore students and 14.16 lakh teachers in India, according to All India Survey on Higher Education (2018-19). If such a drastic decision was to be taken, there should have been wider consultation between the government and all the academic stakeholders to find a way forward. With Internet penetration still low in India, it is incumbent on the government to allow suitable financial aids to state universities to obtain appropriate IT tools, platforms, devices, provide training, etc. before initiating such an exercise. Else, given the difference in students' access to digital education, their performances are also bound to differ. This creates an asymmetrical society and leads to anxiety among the students. Most importantly, education is denied to the less privileged student community.

Study material

Another predicament in online education is the preparation of appropriate study material. Policymakers need to acknowledge that merely uploading scanned lecture notes or power point presentations does not serve any meaningful purpose. There is no imaginative thinking and exploring, no application-based learning for students. For practical field and laboratory-based learning, the whole idea of online education could prove to be a disaster.

Given that there is talk of more COVID-19 waves, it is imperative for the government to embrace a pragmatic approach by engaging all academic stakeholders and investing generously in online education as suggested by the Fifteenth Finance Commission in its report. Development of massive open online courses (MOOCs), direct-to-home (DTH) content development, digital classrooms and provision of devices (laptop/tablets) for 25 lakh students belonging to the socially and economically weaker sections of society, especially in state universities, would help.

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