Challenges in higher education during and after COVID-19 pandemic in India

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Abstract: Human Civilization has come a long way in terms of education. Starting from the ‘Pathsala’-‘Gurukul’ system to modern-day online teaching-learning, we made some massive strides. But, with arrival of Novel Corona Virus (COVID-19), an autopsy has happened to this millennium-old education system. This has pointed us to realize that, when we needed to shift the education paradigm from traditional chalk-talk method to online LMS-Blended learning technique all of a sudden within weeks, we are actually not ready. From premier institutions to the school/ colleges/ universities in rural area, everyone has struggled to some extent and huge amount of ground level remedial work need to be done to overcome the hurdles. Institutions need to be armed with proper infrastructure, teachers need to be trained, contents need to be developed, collaborations need to be built and the list goes on. In this paper we have discussed the challenges faced by the higher education learners and institutes in India in particular and also we have look beyond how this pandemic is going to change the educational path in future.

Key words: Higher Education, Online Teaching, COVID-19, Pandemic

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world much sooner than anyone could have imagined or expected. Globally interconnected societies, for which whole humanity took so much pride for years, have transformed into life in lockdown equipped with restricted mobility. Economies are collapsing in rapid pace and massive unemployment and recession will follow in the near future. Worldwide the governing bodies, educational institutions, public and private organizations, all are affected and radically changed their way of functioning within weeks and unfortunately, might be for longer run too. The education sector is witnessing massive changes and adopting revolutionary ideas shifting entire pedagogical approach\(^1\) to keep the momentum going. This shift in education from traditional classroom learning to computer-based learning might be one of the largest educational experiments to date\(^2\).

Effect created by pandemic on Higher Education in India

Since the second week of March 2020, state governments across the country began shutting down schools/ colleges/ universities temporarily as a precautionary measure to stop the spread of the Novel Corona Virus (COVID-19) and still there is no certainty when they will reopen. This is a crucial time for
the board/semester examinations, entrance tests of various universities and several competitive examinations. With each passing day, having no immediate remedy to stop this unwanted outbreak, prolonged closures of schools, colleges and universities, in addition to the short-term impact on the continuation of learning for young education seekers in India, will create far-stretching far more dangerous consequences overall. Most of the institutions had to take initiatives through ICT (e.g. ZOOM, Google Meet, Webex, GoToMeeting etc.) to remove the sudden distance barrier from education, providing priority to the safety issues of students and teachers both. Numbers of Indian students get them enrolled in reputed foreign universities every year, mostly in Americal and European countries, which are worst affected by the pandemic. Such students now have no other option but to think of alternate ways. If Situation persists, demand for such students will see a huge drop eventually. In short term, international student travel or exchanges will experience eventual decrease. UNESCO have estimated that around 1.26 billion or in other words 70% of the children around the globe have experienced educational interruption during this period, where majority of these children comes from “low-tech or no-tech” countries, with India’s contribution of 300 million.

It’s fair to say that, higher education sector is experiencing tectonic shift, standing still. Not a very long ago, several leaders of reputed global universities held strong opinion that, online mode of teaching could never match with class-room teaching environment, even though the education technologists were vocal about technology-friendly education forecast for years now. Eventually, it has happened and teachers and students are dealing with the sudden new paradigm of completely tech-mediated education. Technology became the biggest and only intermediary of teaching–learning processes and with no denial at all, definitely it’s the need of the hour and the way forward. What the whole higher education is up to is very much different from all the educational systems evolved since the starting point of human civilization, namely, Gurukula system and traditional school/college/university system.

Indian Higher Education Scenario in COVID situation

Though we are trying hard, but honest confession should be, in general, online higher education is still in mess in India. We had minimal time to redesign the pedagogy by professionals for structuring teaching materials in the purpose of online delivery or to provide proper training to lecturers, before the teaching-learning community needed to shift their focus to online model on a broader aspect throughout the country. Suddenly we had to remove focus from centuries-old, chalk-talk teaching model. Few questions definitely arise; digital higher education is around for more than a decade now. Several foreign universities and IITs, NITs, DU, IISERs etc had their fair share too in it. Why did it not take over the other universities too in the Pre-COVID era? Why is it still not a norm in daily routine, that too when major businesses platforms had already moved from offline to online mode already, Why will such
sudden panic arise today, when everyone involved in higher education has access to internet, smart phones, and computers? Attitude of existing educators are partially to blame along with the governing system, which didn’t provide a digital infrastructure for teaching and e-learning. Resilience and adaption must be incorporated into our educational systems to make it happen. The Crossover should be fast and smooth for better future of the students.

Concept of online education is not clear to everyone too. It is not just a collection/library of video lectures and e-contents converting classroom notes into docs/ PDFs. Monotonous same replication is not a great proposition. To keep the students interested and engaged, development of high quality digitized e-content must be contextualized. It takes a new set of skills. Several organizations in the world have mastered it already. Collaboration with such organizations is required for their digital pivots to make it successful here also. Working with those experts and ‘tailor-stitching’ a lecture delivery mechanism must be the priority. Learning, combined with other components such as, learning psychology and behavioral analytics, e-content delivery pedagogy and assessments to trace each individual student’s journey and progress in a curriculum, is actually what is to be done. Teachers across the country need to be thoroughly re-trained and oriented for online mode of education. In the post COVID-19 era, offline or traditional education models will not disappear, all of a sudden of course. They will survive in parallel. However, blended learning i.e. combination of both, must be the norm from a broader futuristic viewpoint. According to the context and the content, both the institutions and teachers both need to blend the two skilfully.

Government and Institutional Roles

Few educational institutes gracefully and actively acted upon the changing situation and transformed community interactions online. The organization is standing by its students during these distressing moments. Graduation, post-graduation levels classes are now being conducted online. Student-faculty interactions have graded to the virtual world. Access to technology and faculty determination is contributing to the success for this redefined paradigm shift, ensuring the cover up for academic calendar without the undesired break. Institutes are employing webinars as knowledge sharing sessions, video calls for one-to-one interactions, also made their admission process online in totality. Online applications are being accepted from aspirants desirous of applying for fresh batches followed by virtual/online interviews. Results too are to be announced online and fees payment and other admission formalities will also be completed online.

Eventually governments will plan reopening College/university campuses sooner or later. New modes of social distancing will continue to apply for quite some time for sure, affecting on-campus learning in physical spaces, library reading and on-campus student activities, in short almost everything in campus
culture. When we discuss in particular about Indian Higher Education and its ability to maneuver the change, we must keep in mind that the digital shift in India is relatively new, even for overall Asia as well, evident from the fact that the first Asian Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) was developed by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology in 2012 only. These E-learning social platforms have emerged as one of the best measures to the continuity of learning of the students during this outbreak, changing national education landscape by addressing the much needed demand-supply gap. It also broadened the scope for education and transcended it beyond classroom boundaries. e-GyanKosh, Gyandarshan, Gyandhara, DIKSHA, e-Adhyayan, e-Pathshala, e-Yantra, FOSSEE, SWAYAM, e-Sodhsindhu, Sodhganga, Swayam Prabha, Vidwan, Sakshat, National Educational Alliance for Technology (NEAT), National Digital Library of India, Virtual Labs etc. have become boons in disguise.

E-learning will revolutionize the academic scenario by breaking various educational barriers in coming years. All academic decision and UGC recommendations regarding the new examination method, evaluation pattern, research, and field study etc. also have not reached or appreciated across the mass too. Most of the stakeholders have given thumbs up, but one third of them are unknown of the governmental developments or announcements [educational survey report done in West Bengal]. But, the change is necessary as the time and scenario has evolved, what was relevant decades ago might not be equivalent today and definitely will not be the same in future. The future of education will find no room to ignore the utilization of technology as a way of life. Various challenges of traditional learning methods such as, repetition, cost-effectiveness and monotonous design, limitation to the classroom boundaries, fixed timing and fixed concept for learning, can now be overcome through e-learning advancements. High speed internet connectivity, rise in numbers of Smartphone/Computer users and incredible enthusiasm at the government level have remarkably pushed the growth of the digital/online education in India. Latest e-learning platforms are helping teachers, students and institutions in evaluating their performance by proper training, quizzes, interactive sessions, providing enough opportunity to address queries using webinars/e-workshops/skill development programs and its accessibility anytime and anywhere. On a brighter note, students are in favor of studying through online classes too, but they feel that there is lack of co-curricular activities in online mode of conducting classes. Universities must design proper plan, so that while studying their regular courses, students also can participate in fun-loving activities helping them to gain whole-hearted interest in the online lectures. Definitely, E-learning is going to be embedded in institutions’ policies and the portfolio in the post COVID-19 era.

Conclusion

Being in India, we are tired of listening, quality education comes at a huge cost and we have experienced it too, but with increasing e-learning trend/facilities, education has become cost-effective for poor/lesser
privileged students. Economic hurdle will disappear. For a country like India that’s remarkable. Learners can focus on building careers or becoming job-ready, discovering inner interests effectively and efficiently. It is the dawn of the unprecedented concept of e-learning, which got the potential to nurture the coveted change in the entire education system in India and provide a much better learning environment for the aspiring millennial. Looking at the brighter side, one must admit Covid-19 may have worked as the catalyst for the inter-change reactions that has been long pending. In a developing country like India where a light-year-gap between the socio-economic backgrounds of students in the most real thing and the quality of educational institutions too vary from place to place, the sudden paradigm shift towards digitalization has not been easy. But online education is here to stay and there’s no other option but to adapt to it. Trained teachers, refreshed-revitalized curricula and tailor-made tools/Learning management systems are future for students to stay involved and active in teaching-learning.

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