

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING PANDEMIC AND POST PANDEMIC INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The present article endeavours to analyse problems and opportunities in the field of higher educational institution in the wake of pandemic, Covid-19. The perspectives have been probed into from both the aspects of an administrative and academic point of views. It also aims to chart out the key areas where HEIs need to focus on for matching up with the global competition in the field of higher education and Indian aspiration of becoming Vishwa-Guru and lead the world towards equitable and inclusive education system.

Keywords: Open Educational Resource, Online teaching, innovation, Examinations, Assessment, Pandemic, COVID-19, challenges and opportunities

“Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

Introduction

The Pandemic, Covid-19 has gripped the whole world in its sinister ensnare and has forced the world to take unprecedented measures to overcome its horrifying death toll. Economies however strong are reeling and crumbling under its impact. Self-imposed lockdown and social distancing have virtually put a screeching brake on any social and economic activity, if not completely halted them. However, at the hind side, we are witnessing the exhibition of raw human resilience, never-surrendering attitude and acts of selfless Corona Warriors be it doctors and health workers, law enforcing agencies and workers involved in ensuring sanitation and hygiene. It is pertinent to note that academicians and academic administrators are not being in the limelight during the pandemic as compared to the people involved in the maintenance of essential services. The potent reason of such apathy to the teachers, academic administrators and also educational institutions might be the overwhelming question of survival on the face of the pandemic rather than other human aspirations. Does it mean the role of educational institutions and people involved in the imparting of education is any less valuable? No, teachers are the disseminators of knowledge and as Michael Foucault, a renowned cultural theorist and social scientist puts it that “knowledge is power”. The world

has been steered and shaped by knowledge/information driven societies and consequently, the parameter of success of any nation, society and culture inevitably lies in the knowledge centres i.e., schools, colleges and universities. The key to tackle with present crisis and prospect of bringing the life back on the track needs to be looked at in education system we offer to our students. The role of education in general and higher education in particular becomes the focal point of optimism in the times when every other government facility and infrastructure is under immense pressure. We therefore need to look at it from multiple perspectives of challenges and opportunities which the pandemic has presented before us especially in the field of higher education in India.

Literature Review

A cursory look at the current status of Indian higher education will reveal to us that there are about 821 universities which include central universities, state universities, deemed universities and private universities and more than 37,204 colleges in India. They cater services to and facilitate education of 35.7 million enrolled students of India. Such massive strength of students enrolled is only next to China which boasts of having 41.8 million enrolled students. The UGC has charted out the target of reaching at least 30%

gross enrolment ratio (GER) in the year 2020 from 25.4 % in the year 2017-18. Moreover, the objectives set out for Higher Education Institutions include regular revision of curriculum with clearly specified learning outcomes and soft skills, enabling youth to secure access to employment/self-employment, developing social-industry connect, availability of motivated teachers and accreditation to ensure qualitative self-improvement in HEIs.

Evidently, the objectives fixed by the UGC are realistic and the same would have been achieved quite comprehensively had there been a normal and conducive situation prevailing in the country. National lockdown has barred Indian universities and colleges from any on campus academic activities following social distancing norms. All the teaching, evaluation and administrative work of the universities have been suspended in the offline mode and the same are being haphazardly carried out on the virtual mode as a makeshift arrangement. This has presented before us some nagging challenges in different facets of education in India and the emerging opportunities in trials of pandemic and post pandemic situation:

The issues of poor quality of higher education: India has been facing the issues of maintaining the quality of higher education and level-headedness in comparison with acclaimed global educational institutions keeping in view outcome-based education system. Substantial fund crunch in higher education system, lack of innovation in pedagogy, disinterestedness of stake holders and infrastructural inadequacies have further created impediments on the path of India's becoming education hub for the world despite being the largest nation with young population. Although, the Prime Minister, in his previous term gave a call for digital India, the overall response on it from the HEIs was far from encouraging and universities and colleges with some obvious exceptions kept on largely treading the conventional and traditional ways of imparting education. This in turn, has put us in a slight disadvantageous position during the pandemic.

Lack of Institutions' infrastructure in higher education institutions: To back the transition of teaching from offline to online mode the lack of infrastructure in higher

education institutions has appeared to be a major handicap during the pandemic. However, the abrupt search for alternative platforms to mitigate the issues has resulted in the fast adoption and adaption of already available online platforms such as Zoom Meeting, Microsoft teams, Google Class room etc. Both teachers and students are getting oriented to use technology in teaching. The individual experiences assimilated during this time may be collated and the metadata so collected can be constructively used to address the disruptions and problems in teaching and learning online in the post pandemic India. Moreover, effective guidelines, protocols and regulations can also be formulated at the national level for the use of online tools.

Lack of awareness of the digital mode of education: The virtual world is full of reliable Open Educational Resources (OERs), non-orientation of students, yet the inadequate level of awareness among teachers and students has been observed. Moreover, there has been insignificant contribution of trailer made e-contents for Indian students by the university and college teachers further created a set-back in the prevailing situation. The MHRD in its recent directives encouraged the teachers and universities to create open e-contents and e-courses using government e-learning portals like SWYAM, NPTEL, Diksha, e-pathShala, education repository such National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) and National Digital Library. As it is said that the necessity is the mother of invention, the university and college teachers are motivated to make use of the initiatives of MHRD and they are massively creating such e-resources. It is discerned that the major reinforcement of such affirmative responses by the teachers in such a difficult time can only be attributed their call for duty towards nation. This certainly makes them no-less 'Corona Warriors'. This can prove to be an opportunity for the national planners of education policies to redefine the education system of India. Teachers need to be mentored by their senior colleagues and a well-defined policy should be kept in place to incentivise such teachers and a degree of freedom may be granted to individual teachers to offer need-based MOOC courses. Of course,

it also calls for eliminating bureaucratic red-tapism that unfortunately plagues the universities, colleges and regulatory bodies.

Democratisation of education is still a dream: Right to Education and Democratization of Education are two important aspects of Indian Education System. In view of the large number of students in India and the non-availability of proportional number of colleges and universities, the democratization of education will remain a distant dream. The pandemic presented an opportunity to delimit the boundaries of universities and colleges and spread a mix of need based and traditional education even to the remotest of the places and underprivileged students. The aspiration of nation to create equity in masses through education can be taken to its logical end by developing a robust internet connectivity and related infrastructure across the nation. The post-pandemic India can shine bright in the world and restore its legacy of Taxila and Nalanda University of the ancient past by internalizing the true essence of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas Aur Sabka Viswas'

Lack of implementation of strategies of the outcome-based-education and the students' poor employability: The present situation provided a much-needed pause to reassess, recalibrate and re-strategize the notion of outcome-based education (OBE). There has been a chasm between the need of the industry and education imparted to the students in universities and colleges. However, the accrediting agencies such as NAAC and NBA have been putting enough emphasis on OBE's but it has not been taken into much consideration and the same reflect into the poor employability of the students of various disciplines. Online platform used for teaching and conduct of examination may further be utilized to track the performance of the students even when the students have left the universities and a mechanism of periodic virtual interactions can be devised where university authorities, teachers, students, parents, industries and employers can share their views. The feedback and opinion shared may be utilized to create a conducive ecosystem for our industries. Such exercise, if seriously undertaken, will prove to be a game

changer for the nation in the post pandemic India.

Challenges of transition in the assessment and evaluation process in the educational institutions from offline to online mode of examination: In the pre-pandemic conditions, the assessment and evaluation of university and college students were in conformity with strict and to extent rigid rules as embedded in the ordinances and regulations of universities and regulatory bodies. During pandemic, a slew of measures were taken to re-define examination system by the regulatory bodies. These are welcome changes towards the much-needed examination reforms in Indian education system. The universities are promptly adapting its examination system to facilitate the students with fair, transparent and efficient system without compromising with the quality of testing and also keeping the students stress free throughout the assessment process. Teachers are given liberty to design specific assignments to validate course outcomes. An uninitiated teacher may find it difficult to design and frame assignments to assess the students in an un-proctored and open-book examination and evaluate projects, internship, dissertation and practical examinations. Both innovation from the end of teachers and technical interventions by experts can resolve the issues to a great extent. Online simulation based practical examinations, timed assignments; online projects to assess desirable skills-set are some initiatives which are poised to remain an intrinsic feature of examination system even in the post pandemic scenario. These subtle changes in examinations need to be framed meticulously keeping all the stakeholders viz. students, teachers, academic administrators, regulatory bodies and industries at the same pedestal. The sanctity of examination lends credence to the overall mechanism of education system. Therefore, careful scrutiny and adoption of best practices in the examination system are to be done in consonance with global standard.

Mental health and well-being of students: The abrupt suspension of the classes, switching from offline to online mode of learning, new examination pattern, lockdown, *social distancing* and being stranded in university

hostels and PGs have necessitated filial roles of and obligations on university and college administration, teachers and parents like never before. This has adversely contributed to the poor mental health which has led to the deterioration of the overall well-being of the students. In Indian society often takes the issues of mental health and well-being as taboo but the Pandemic has, in a way brought the issue to a central stage. Educational institutions that are traditionally considered to be the battle grounds for fierce academic rivalries among the student can be seen in role-reversal during pandemic. University authorities and teachers are seen playing pivotal role in reaching out to the students, arranging the medical care and taking care of most of the emotional need during the pandemic. This is enriching the value-based education which India was ever known for. The bonding so developed in such situation is expected to tone down the mercantile relation of teacher and student that was grown albeit steadily post LPG (Liberalization, Globalization and Privatization) India. The post-pandemic India will truly treasure the revival of 'Guru-Shishya' tradition and we can take a lead in this regard to redefine the basic end of education for the world (Mahajan, 2020).

Disruption in fund disbursement activity:

The universities and colleges apart from imparting education, provide services to their students such as scholarships, issuing degrees and certificates, conducting online examinations, maintain project grants, verification of documents. The lockdown in view of pandemic has exposed the unpreparedness of the HEIs to tackle such situations as most of the universities have

issues to replicate the ease of doing the work from home on virtual mode. The need of digitization and automation of office records, certificates and finances have yet not achieved fully in majority of universities and colleges. Therefore, it is evidently revealed that a comprehensive planning may be undertaken to take the automation and digitization of the ancillary departments of universities and colleges apart from the sections dealing with teaching. This will surely place India in good stead among the world best educational institutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be safely argued that HEIs in India were not pre-emptive about the pandemic, COVID-19 like most of the HEIs of the world yet the resilience, commitment, adaptability and dedication Indian HEIs have shown are surely reassuring. The pandemic has on the one hand exposed the inadequacy of infrastructure in Indian HEIs but at the same time it highlighted that they evolved themselves by constantly adapting to the demand of the situation and to a great extent they are able to address the issues whether related to teaching, innovation, evaluation by taking all the necessary steps for safeguarding the interest of the students. COVID-19 has been proved a blessing in the disguise for HEIs to reassess, re-calibrate and re-strategize with respect to the challenges that abruptly have cropped up. As it is said that extraordinary situation demands extraordinary measures. The HEIs of India are sure to retain their resilience and continue their commitment to the service of the nation even in post-pandemic India (Jena, 2020).

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