



## **Editorial**

### **Impact of Covid 19 on Higher Education**

**T**he pressure on students and higher education institutions is high. Schools and universities have been closed and exams postponed. Classrooms are going virtual and admissions for the upcoming academic year are fraught with confusion. According to UNESCO, over 320 million students in Indian schools and colleges are currently impacted.

The pandemic has pushed the world to drastically reinvent ways of coping with the ‘new normal’. After the initial phase of complete overhaul, it is critical to understand the short and long-term impact and future measures. Can India emerge from this crisis with a refreshed perspective and boost to higher education?

An immediate and effective response to the crisis was to go digital. Developing robust online platforms has become necessary to offer continuity in learning. Nationally there was a call for a de facto switch to virtual teaching, learning and evaluation, pushing a huge number of teachers into an unfamiliar mode. Online mode, formerly allowed only in open universities and varsities graded 3.5 onwards, is now licensed for all universities to run their UG and PG programmes accordingly.

Yet in a developing country like India with vast disparity in socio-economic backgrounds of students and the quality of educational institutions, the shift has not been easy. The digital divide has been further widening the gap, and needs urgent attention from both public and private sector players as the crisis continues. Good teachers, refreshed curricula and effective tools will ensure students stay involved and active in the learning process. Hailed as a more effective, quick and less expensive mode, online teaching/learning is being given precedence over the campus mode as the new normal. It has been suggested that a single podcast at the national level hosting the entire course material for smart teaching can ensure quality. Now, there is the UGC platform called SWAYAM offering several open online courses.

It appears that the contingent situation will predictably divide higher education institutions into two types: a) covering humanities and social sciences taught informally through virtual mode, less expensive and meant for liberal arts and social sciences and (b) covering pure sciences professional disciplines excluding law. Virtual higher education can never match the one imparted through campus-based real classroom that is distinct for various critical aspects of rigorous learning. Students of eminent universities enjoy the advantage of in-face interactive learning distinct for criticality and creativity of the campus.

Lakhs of Indian students have increasingly chosen to pursue higher education abroad. As per reports, India is the second-largest source of international students in the world. This usual exodus is likely to transform—at least in the immediate few years—to an influx into Indian institutions, given travel restrictions and health risks.

This means that crores of rupees and resources spent in foreign education could potentially be retained in the country, as more students look towards options at home. While international institutions might bear the brunt of

the change, it is a remarkable opportunity for India to enhance its capacities and offer quality education at par with global standards.

The economy has taken a severe hit, and its ripples can be felt in the education sector as well. While many students will chart alternative paths, the pandemic is also leaving others in limbo. As unemployment is predicted to increase and the financial capacity of Indian homes comes under stress, the country can expect a drop in enrolments and challenges with tuition fees. Public institutions too, may be under threat of reduced funding. On the flipside, the pandemic could also prompt reform in fee structures and creation of more cost-effective programmes.

Beyond the top band of institutional excellence with private universities setting best practices, Indian academia has been in need of transformation, long before the onset of the pandemic. There is an opportunity to rethink the traditional education system now.

Digital learning is leading the charge as a mainstay, and many new trends are picking up momentum across the globe. Multidisciplinary and modular pedagogy that afford transferable skills and customised learning will succeed. Post-pandemic times could see a blend of e-learning and mainstream face-to-face teaching with a boost from traditional universities and the ed-tech sector.

Thank you all for your continued support.



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