

Is online the way forward?

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States of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh see a strange conundrum. While almost all students who complete class XII and all those who can afford to pay, end up getting into some higher education Programme, tens of thousands of seats go vacant every year in professional and arts/science colleges in these States. Very few youngsters, who can afford it, choose not to enter college.

So, although seats are available, lakhs of students do not pursue higher education as they cannot afford it. Alternatively, the problem may lie in not having access to a college or university. Or the learners feel the quality of education is not up to the mark.

Enrolment crisis

Look at the other side. The Union government wants to increase the gross enrolment ratio to at least 30 per cent in the next five - six years. (Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is the ratio between youth population in the 17 – 25 age group and the number actually enrolled in higher education institutions). Overall, only about 20 per cent of the relevant age population in India is enrolled in higher education. Tamil Nadu is relatively better off, as its GER is already 30 per cent.

A GER target of 30 per cent translates into bringing 35 million young people within the higher education ecosystem — a mammoth task in terms of cost of infrastructure, systems, processes and recruiting the faculty. Still, there is no guarantee that the education that's delivered will be affordable and accessible for all rural students, or be of reasonable quality.

Can we imagine a situation where a student from a village or a small town is able to get high quality college education at less than Rs.5, 000?

Yes, it is possible, because technology can make this dream a reality.

Beyond MOOCs

At present, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are changing the way higher education is practised. But for a country like India, the solution ought to go beyond MOOCs to make for a more engaging and high quality learning.

India can start by taking arts, commerce, business and management studies online. The university curricula can be delivered online to reach millions of students. There is, of course, the problem of connectivity. Recent studies show that India has an Internet penetration of about 20 per cent. But this gives tremendous headroom for improvement.

The growth of the National Knowledge Network which hopes to connect over 2.5 lakh villages in India using high bandwidth connectivity and thousands of points of presence along with growth of 3G and 4G networks will not only increase the connectivity but make communication extremely affordable.

If we need to reach our GER targets, the brick and mortar model may not work fully, as it will mean creating another 25,000 institutions. However, a range of technologies can help in using the existing infrastructure and faculty strength innovatively.

Of course, it is not a question of technology alone. Online learning and its pedagogy have to be engineered in a specific manner to evolve and deliver an education that is engaging, measurable and suited to meet the aspirations of a range of learners.

This disruptive idea can help deliver a B.A or B.Com degree online at less than Rs.1,000 a year, with higher learning quality. Already more than 10 universities across India have started delivering formal education programmes using the online medium. As the number goes up, the cost of the programmes can come down dramatically.

In this medium, students can access the best of learning assets and teachers and interact in real time with industry practitioners. An ideal combination of audio, video, text, presentations and real-life case studies can be offered to students. A radical amount of personalisation is possible. A variety of digital tools and resources enriches the learning ecosystem. Diverse forms of courses can be created by disaggregating the existing rigid system offered in colleges due to infrastructure and other constraints.

Online mode can attract people in their 30s and 40s — especially those who are looking for career shifts or gaining new knowledge without leaving their job.

This leaves academicians and policy — makers with a much simpler task — to create a framework for online and virtual education in India as elucidated three years ago by the Prof. N. R. Madhava Menon Committee. If each of India's 500-plus government universities and 150 private universities are provided the legal framework to roll out formal education online, India can not only reach its GER targets, but also create a body of high quality graduates. The only limiting factor is our imagination.

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