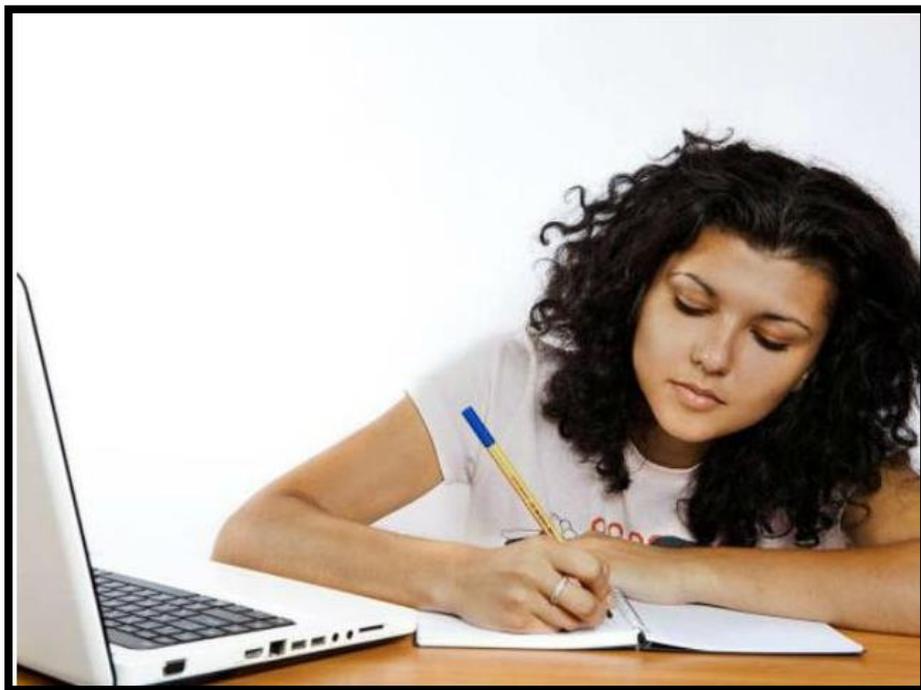


Online education is here to stay

As online education gains momentum, can India tap its full potential? Insights from U.S.-based professor Hari K. Rajagopalan.

I work in a small public university in South Carolina, U.S., and we pride ourselves on providing an excellent liberal arts education. The School of Business is accredited at the highest level by AACSB, an international accreditation body, for both its Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) and the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes. The 2008 recession and the resulting slump in the economy caused enrolments in the MBA programme to drop. By 2011, we had to take a call about continuing with the MBA programme.

The first thing we did was take a survey of our former students and companies in our area who pay for their employees to do an MBA. The most important feedback was that attending classes from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. after a full day's work was not convenient for them. Online programmes, they pointed out, were convenient and more suitable for working adults. Many colleagues in public and private universities who don't offer online classes believe that online education courses do not have the same rigour or value as the traditional style of education.



Rising popularity

However, I believe that this attitude is wrong. Online learning is here to stay and I believe it will revolutionise the education industry. It will make learning more accessible, cheaper and might enhance the learning experience for students if done properly. It is important, however, to ensure that the learning experience is legitimate and implemented correctly.

First, a quick word on the American university system. The U.S. has traditionally had publicly supported universities/colleges — which generally receive most of their funding from the State government — and privately held universities/colleges that incur higher costs because they do not receive the same kind of funding.

However, most private schools like Harvard, Stanford or Duke are non-profit universities, and their primary motivation is providing education.

Recently, there was a rise in the number of for-profit private institutions which aggressively offered online courses of dubious quality. The problem was more with the quality of the institution than the delivery system but this led to online courses in general being stigmatised, especially in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, a huge movement towards legitimising online education has begun now with Georgia Tech, a highly respected university in Atlanta, offering an entire Master's in Computer Science programme online.

The tuition fee (\$6,600) is radically lower than the \$46,000 tuition for the on-campus programme. Many other respected universities — both public and private — offer exclusive online programmes.

One reason for this boost is that, in the business world today, the differentiation between online programmes and traditional on-campus classes is fast disappearing. Companies are more interested in what you know and less in how you got your education. They also use universities as certifying agencies to reduce their search costs.

Therefore, an online programme must have very rigorous standards of evaluation or exams. The primary question in any online programme is: how do we know that the student who took the exam is the one who took the course?

The second issue is to show that it is in no way inferior to an on-campus one.

Different types

It is important to distinguish between the different types of online programmes: completely online or hybrid. In the first, students don't even see the professor, but, in a hybrid, students typically come to the campus for specific times in a semester.

This takes away the problem of validity and legitimacy since the students can be asked to fly to campus to take their exams.

Once the decision about completely online or hybrid is made, the next step is to decide whether to be synchronous or asynchronous. Asynchronous delivery uses pre-recorded lectures, which can be just voice-over PowerPoint slides or videos on YouTube. The videos will have the professor delivering the lecture (e.g. Khan Academy) or be an actual screen capture with only the presentation.

The students can ask questions using message boards, threads and/or email. The synchronous delivery mode, on the other hand, will have the students and the professor online at the same time. There is a white board for the professor to write on and the ability to share files.

The students hear what the professor is saying and can simultaneously ask questions. This allows for closer interaction between the two. The key here is not to look at these two as mutually exclusive.

The use of both modes can enhance the quality of education received.

I have found taking and teaching online classes to be very enjoyable. As a student, it helped to be able to sit on my desk with all my papers and files spread out.

The biggest advantage is that the lectures were recorded so I could go back and listen to them whenever I needed.

What I missed was interacting with my class and making friends, which is harder in an online programme.

I have also been teaching online classes, both synchronous and asynchronous, since 2012. At first, I had my lectures broken up into 20-minute clips. Students had to listen to the lectures, do their homework (asynchronous) and then come online for a three-hour class (synchronous). The exams were the same as those taken before I went online. So the results were comparable.

Around 20 students would enrol, and, by the time the semester ended, only around 10 would be left and the class average was around 70 per cent. In 2012, after online classes were introduced, the average went up to around 85 per cent. Students felt the ability to go over the lectures again made a huge difference to their performance. One student who dropped out in 2011 has now successfully finished. In 2013, I tried to do the online classes differently. I made it purely synchronous. Students could (a) come to class and listen to the three-hour lecture once a week; (b) listen to it online as I was teaching; (c) listen to the recorded three-hour lecture. Exams were the same but class performance dropped though it was still higher than pure face-to-face classes. But it was not as good as the year when I combined asynchronous and synchronous classes. Apparently, breaking the lecture into 20-minute clips and giving homework associated with each lecture was better than one three-hour lecture.

In 2015, I tried a new approach. I used asynchronous recorded lectures (20-minute clips) and homework and reduced the synchronous online class to one hour, where the students only cleared their doubts. Essentially, the synchronous component was less like a lecture and more of an hour where students could tell me what they did not understand. The class performance shot up again to the 2012 level.

While my class sizes are too small to generalise that online classes offer superior learning compared to face-to-face classes, I think there is enough evidence not to dismiss this kind of improvement in student performance. I believe there are strengths in both online and face-to-face classes.

I have been incorporating many lessons learnt from teaching online classes to my in-campus classes. This allows me to individualise the students' learning and focus on mentoring them based on their strengths and weaknesses. The focus is no longer on the lecture but on the student.

About India

Online education in India has a long way to go before it reaches the acceptance levels it has in the U.S. An important reason for this is that the demand for education far exceeds the number of available seats at educational institutions. Given this mismatch, there is no pressure for existing institutions to innovate and try different channels to reach more students. Online education is the way to bypass the infrastructure issues India faces and make education accessible to the masses. One can draw a parallel with the telecommunications industry. Landlines needed a lot of infrastructure and the penetration was very low. With the advent of cell phones, everyone — poor or rich — got one and bypassed the need to build infrastructure for landlines. Online education has similar potential. There are huge roadblocks that need to be overcome including acceptance from students, employers and the government.

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