

Is India ready to embrace the full potential of online education?

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There is a subtle revolution underway in how India delivers secondary and tertiary education to its students.

Modern communications has already transformed distance learning by bringing access to a high-quality and real-time learning experience to a large number of people.

Use of technology in school and college classrooms across India is further creating a richer and more productive learning experience for those fortunate to be inside them.

At the macro-level though, technology has only had a limited impact on India's education system. This is however about to change.

India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education is just over 25%, meaning that only one out of four eligible students enroll for a higher education degree or diploma in a given year.

In comparison, China's GER is over 43% and United States' is over 85%.

With this context, the government's goal of reaching 30% GER by 2020 is not ambitious enough. Even this modest goal looks difficult to achieve – the GER grew by just 0.7% last year.

The government has fortunately recognized the challenge on hand and recently allowed close to 15% universities to offer online degrees. Not only will this reform allow students and working professionals to earn a degree, it would further provide a great fillip to India's gross enrolment ratio in higher education.

With the 'Digital India' movement, the country is working towards transforming itself into a digitally empowered knowledge economy.

Many large and established companies are already working with the government to create skilled and future-ready workforce.



• Use of technology in school and college classrooms across India is making learning a more productive experience

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Most of this reskilling requires technology for program delivery. Can the same process be replicated for delivery of higher education?

To answer this question, we can see how countries like the US have embraced online learning to educate more students than ever before, at lower cost, and with similar or at times better learning outcomes than the conventional system.

Referring to information on Google news, online degrees fueled the growth of for-profit universities for a decade as they penetrated the huge market of nearly 40 million Americans with 'some college' but no credentials. By 2010, there were nearly 3 million students enrolled in online degree pro-

grams, 70% of who attended for-profit institutions.

In fact, India's unique challenges are better served by technology. Till today, one of the most pressing challenges faced by India's education system is availability of quality teachers across levels.

A study shows 40% of faculty positions are lying vacant, especially in higher education institutions in India.

Good faculty, who are anyway scarce in India, want to be associated with the limited, renowned universities only. Because technology can scale up infinitely better than people, online learning can easily solve this problem by allowing access to quality teachers and faculty to a larger population.

The Indian education system has slowly begun to acknowledge the benefits of offering their courses online.

Though most institutes currently lack the expertise to take their courses online, a few progressive universities and institutes have started to acquire the necessary technology expertise both for in-campus as well as online-only courses.

In fact, a greater number of universities and institutes have been hesitant to offer online courses only because of scarce resources and budgets. However, similar to private companies in the USA, there are enough industry collaborators in India who are ready to handhold and support the institutions. These players not only

offer their technology platform for course delivery, but also bring their expertise in student acquisition, particularly from remote locations, as well as management and operations support.

MOVING ALONG THE MATURITY CURVE

Until recently, an online degree or a certificate carried little weight in the employment market. This is however changing as employers now recognize the validity and credentials.

The biggest beneficiary of this shift is the young student living in a small town. She could be living in Namakkal in Tamil Nadu or Mokochung in Nagaland, and now has the opportunity of pursuing a highly coveted course in

Artificial Intelligence from a reputed university without having to leave her hometown. In fact, an internal research by our team found that 48% of all students pursuing online degree programs from various universities are from the so-called tier-II and tier-III towns of India.

Working professionals are benefitting in a big way too, as they are able to plan their career progression by pursuing advanced and more industry-ready degrees from a university or college of their choice without having to take a break from regular employment.

Universities on the other hand stand to benefit from increased revenues on account of more enrolments by students from distant geographies beyond their catchment area. As an example, a prominent Indian university has already generated over INR20 crores in additional yearly income through delivery of online courses, without having to substantially invest in manpower.

The Indian government recently granted greater autonomy to 65 institutions, who can now bring foreign faculty provided they are able to generate additional income to support this increased expense. Revenue from offering online education will certainly help address this funding gap.

More importantly, India can easily meet its GER targets provided the government remains focused on quality, grants greater autonomy to more universities and institutions, supports a push towards online courses and finally, encourages a closer collaboration between industry and academia for adopting contemporary technology in education.

The author is a veteran entrepreneur and is the founder and CEO of AEDON Learning, an edtech company, which offers its Avagmat Technology Platform to Universities to offer its programs online as well as online courses on emerging technologies under Acadpilot