Out-of-the-box solutions needed

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The current crisis has somewhat highlighted the need to incorporate edutech within the mainstream education system

In a desperate bid to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, Governments across the world have taken many drastic steps. Several countries, including India, have opted for a complete lockdown, mandating the closure of schools, offices and universities alike. In India, even prior to the countrywide lockdown, several State Governments had issued notifications for the closure of universities to prevent the spread of the virus among students. As all the universities and colleges across the country are closed, a significant question arises regarding the continuation of education. A large number of students are being affected in the midst of the semester with uncertainty about the time of re-opening of these institutions of higher education.

However, it is essential to minimise educational disruptions as the impact of the same is long-lasting. Difficult times like these require innovative solutions. Even the Central Government has acknowledged the same and issued a “COVID-19 Solution Challenge” wherein people have been asked to share technology-driven resolutions for the problems thrown up by the outbreak. Thousands of firms across the country are also adopting technology to enable their staff to work from home. A similar approach has been taken by schools and universities, which are using technology to facilitate the learning process of the students from the safety and comfort of their homes/hostels.

While institutions like Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia and the Indian Institute of Mass Communication are taking classes online and also making study material available to students on a weekly basis to maintain continuity in the learning process, some universities are trying to conduct online classes and to replace in-class assessments with online ones. Others, like the Amity University have also shifted the entire post-graduate curriculum online while others are using micro groups on WhatsApp and e-mails to send materials to the students. Many universities including the OP Jindal Global University have made the remote access of their e-resources available, thereby allowing their students to undertake research from home. Several other universities are also under the process of developing mechanisms to offer remote learning opportunities, alternative assessments and extensions.

Despite the initiatives being undertaken by the universities to promote online classes, there are several issues which need immediate attention. The success rate of conducting such classes is contingent on openness to new technology and the availability of infrastructure across the country. Online classes require persistent connectivity which may also be an area of concern. Furthermore, not all courses can be taught completely online and subjects involving practical pedagogy may involve fieldwork which cannot be completed at home. Furthermore, apps and tools such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom have experienced outage across Europe due to an increased number of users.

Technology has the potential to completely alter the education sector. According to a report by KPMG, the Indian online education industry will grow from 1.6 million users in 2016 to 9.6 million users by 2021. The importance of the online education industry has grown multifold in the past few months and innovative education solutions are the need of the hour. However, online education and edutech in India are still not a part of the mainstream education system for the most part. It is necessary to introduce capital and investments in this sector to integrate edutech with mainstream education.

In the recent years, esteemed universities like Harvard, Stanford, Yale and Oxford have been providing online courses accessible all over the world through platforms such as EdX, Coursera and Udemy. Similarly, in India, the Department of Higher Education has undertaken the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology to leverage the potential of ICT in providing the best information accessible to all learners in the country, free of cost. Under this mission, initiatives such as the National Online Education Platform SWAYAM and the National Digital Library
have been developed. SWAYAM offers interactive online courses for students, which are prepared by
the best teachers in the country and are available, free of cost to any learner. The National Digital
Library, on the other hand, is designed to hold content of any language and provides interface support
for leading Indian languages. The access to SWAYAM and other Digital Initiatives has tripled in the last
one week.

It is in adverse times like these, the mettle of a nation is tested. The Indian Government should be
applauded for its hard work in keepings its citizens safe. However, once the situation is under control,
the focus must be shifted to develop overall infrastructural capacities to facilitate edutech.

The digital initiatives, which were always considered secondary to the traditional education systems,
are now at least being considered as an alternative. The current crisis has somewhat highlighted the
need to incorporate edutech within the mainstream education system.

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University. The views expressed are personal)