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Connectivity can scale up enrolment

Shantanu Rooj, Feb 25, 2016, Perspective



On 24 June, 2015, the UGC (University Grants Commission) circulated 20 themes for the formulation of a new education policy. Suggestions and inputs were requested from various stakeholders on the themes. However, an analysis of some of the themes provides a fair estimate of the direction and its possible impact. The new education policy is an ambitious resolution of Government of India to transform India's education system.

Through this new policy, the Indian higher education system will ensure that the universities will be able to provide better learning solutions and enhance the students' skills to become more employable. The integration of technology to boost students' enrolment in the higher education universities will be necessary step to do.

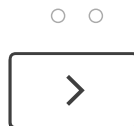
Making students employable While this is a good step ahead, there are other meaningful steps which will also encourage the students' academic talent, skills and innovation to improve the growing workforce of India. Here are some of the ways that can be beneficial to the students: *Integrating skill development in higher education: MoHRD has finally hit the nail on its head with the proposition to ensure that every student graduating out of our universities is skilled enough to take up employment. The proposal to ensure that a vocational programme is tagged along with the standard graduation programme can be quite rewarding in the current context and has the potential to make our students employable.

*Promoting open and distance learning (ODL) and online courses: It has been accepted publicly world over by academia and the industry that the proper use of IT and ICT can fill up the gaps in the higher education infrastructure and improve the learning outcomes too. As flipped classrooms and many other interventions have demonstrated, ICT Tools can have a significant positive impact on learning outcomes. The use of ICT learning tools like Digital SLM's, Video based lectures, formative assessments in the form of unit end quizzes, if made available to all ODL students, in addition to the current printed SLM and contact classes, it can dramatically improve learning outcomes. In addition, the online courses can be positioned as a viable and effective alternative to the currently popular ODL programs. Online courses have the ability to improve upon the learning outcomes with use of limited resources. However, in the Indian context, efforts must be made by Universities towards offering the Online Courses in English and also in Vernacular medium.

*Opportunities for technology enabled learning: Owing to its huge potential knowledge capital, India has the ability to be one of the world's leading economies. The ever growing Indian youth population has the potential to feed into the growing demand-supply gap of skilled manpower across the world. However, the manifestation of this potential solely depends on our ability to train our youth largely residing in the rural fold of the country. However, to make them employable beyond basic literary skills, the higher education infrastructure of the country needs a lot of over hauling.

Virtual education Keeping in mind the efforts and time required to build up the physical infrastructure, the virtual, online medium of education can quickly fill up the void without compromising on the quality of education. Various reports published across the world are corroborative of the fact that the ICT based audio-

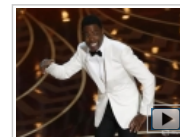
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visual medium has immense potential, if delivered well, to deliver high quality, highly interactive, yet highly flexible learning to the masses.

A large number of the universities are facing challenges in recruiting qualified, trained teachers at their remote locations. The UGC may consider providing a guideline to all universities and institutions to use ICT effectively to meet the gaps of availability of good quality faculty.

A number of students can benefit from this tool immensely, if provided with additional facilities such as video-based lectures, formative assessments in the form of quizzes, and podcasts as well to complement the classroom learning. Additionally, universities should consider using the mobile platform optimally use to remain in continuous communication with the students and also use it as a base for learning as well.

Sustaining student support system It is imperative that universities put up and implement some sturdy and sustainable student support systems. The system should be able to capture the requests from the students and provide them with accurate and timely information. Universities must strive to put across a multi-modal form of student support. The various initiatives that can be undertaken in this regard are:

*Student information system – This is a system that will capture details of the student at the time of enrolment and maintain updated information about the student. This would be used and updated by various arms of the university.

*Student support call centre — The adequately manned call centre should be supported by the required technology to be able to ingest, route, distribute, log and record all incoming calls.

*Student support software — The software should be able to record all incoming complaints and the details regarding resolution

n Self-service portal — Universities must strive to create a student self-service portal which shall be used by the students with their unique user name and passwords to retrieve all required information

n SMS and e-mail based support — Universities should set up a rugged mailing system and a SMS base student alerting system for effective communication with the students

Private sector partnership Universities should engage in meaningful partnerships with the private sector as service providers during this capacity building.

The private sector may have a significant role to play in assisting the university build its technology platform, create audio-visual and other electronic content, create a sustainable student support system.

A PPP model with experienced service providers, where the risks and fruit are equitably shared, may be a viable option. This would reduce the investment required and align the private partner efforts with the desired outcomes.

Globalised education Universities, who build up their capacities, with the help of ICT and service a larger student base should be allowed to offer their courses to students abroad. Internet has come as a great opportunity and leveler for educational institutes.

Indian universities who are allowed to offer online courses that does not require the creation of physical infrastructure in foreign soil, should have the permission to enroll students irrespective of the geographical boundaries. These courses can target the Indian diaspora residing across the world and help them improve their qualifications. In many countries such as the Middle East, there are no avenues available to Indians to study further.

There are also vast opportunities in our neighbouring SAARC countries and Africa where Indian education is highly regarded and Indian universities can offer cost-effective education. Keeping this in mind, there is immense potential and avenues that the universities can tap into to enable students to become more employable and be future ready.

(the author is CEO and Founder, Schoolguru Eduserve.)



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