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Online courses and mobile apps are changing distance learning for graduates and postgraduates — making it more engaging, accessible

*The distance learning apps have a way for students to see how much ground they have covered compared to others in their batch. This helps keep the element of competition alive, and motivates you to work, unlike in a MOOC. SHANTANU ROOJ, CEO of SchoolGuru*

Distance education in India has traditionally been just that — distanced, characterised by lack of engagement and accessibility. Mass open online courses, also called MOOCs, helped somewhat, creating an online community of the curious, and offering free courses in niche areas like data science and paleontology. But distance was still a factor. MOOCs students had little to motivate them, and dropout rates stayed high.



Over the past two years, colleges across the country have adopted something of a middle path, offering full-term and short-term courses that can be completed online but come with interactive learning material, downloadable lectures, online assignment and internal assessment systems, chat rooms where you can engage in discussions with other students or with lecturers — and even possible placements at the end.

This is a lot more convenient than a regular correspondence degree, which would involve paying fees, buying books and doing exams offline. "Instead, students can now attend live webinars, or watch recordings of them later. For more immediate redressal, they can send an SMS, or an email, and get a reply within a couple of days," says Shantanu Rooj, CEO of SchoolGuru.

SchoolGuru is an online learning services company, that has tied-up with 17 universities, both open and dual-mode, to offer undergraduate and postgraduate education via its app, Lurningo. A partner university's course content is available to a student after enrolment, with exams, assessment and even placement options available for some courses via the app.

THE EXPERIENCE "Hearing someone explain the concepts is much better than simply reading the books by yourself," says Sanhita Pal, 28, who completed an MA in Education through the Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) in West Bengal, last year. She is now a professor at the Bengal Institute for Education Studies, Hooghly.

"NSOU is about two hours away from where I live, in Hooghly, and I couldn't work and study, so I chose a distance course to be able to teach more subjects at my college," she says. "I had to go to the study centre only to submit assignments and take my exams."

Some universities allow assignments to be submitted online. "I check assignments online, with an option to leave feedback too," says Neha Bhatia, a Mumbai-based professor of general and human resource management contributing to the Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University, Guwahati, which offers a number of Masters and diploma programmes via the SchoolGuru app.

There is also a way for students to see how much ground they have covered compared to others in their batch. "This helps keep the element of competition alive, and motivates you to work, unlike in a MOOC," says Rooj.

SchoolGuru also introduced the option of an employment skilling programme seven months ago, which includes classes in English language, communication and business etiquette. Industry tie-ups help the students get apprenticeships while they are studying, so they can learn on the job. "The CV is linked to the system, and is accessible to industry partners," says KRS Sambasiva Rao, vice chancellor of the Mizoram Central University, which has started a one-year diploma course in computer applications via the app.

HOW IT HAS HELPED In addition to motivating students and helping them connect with faculty and study material better, the app approach is also enabling students in more remote locations to sign up. "In case the student doesn't have internet connectivity, they can download the videos and store them offline," says Anirban Ghosh, head of ICT education at NSOU, which has offered MA programmes in education, commerce and library science in this manner for two years.

"This model can help improve Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education by reaching more students," says Surpriyo Patra, management faculty from the St Xavier's College in Kolkata, who contributes to NSOU's course content.

Being able to do almost every step online certainly helped push Abhishek Kumar, 25, to enrol. The video editor from Mumbai got a BSc IT degree last year, from the Acharya Nagarjuna University Andhra Pradesh, which helped him apply for a new job and get a hike in salary.

"I was stuck at Rs 15,000 because every job change required a degree," he says. "Immediately after I graduated, I applied for a new job and now earn Rs 25,000."

Kolkata-based Ritu Roy Chowdhury, 21, also graduated long-distance, after her fashion design career proved to be a non-starter. "My diploma in fashion design from NIFT, Kolkata, was not enough. I realised I would need to graduate. So I did a distance BA in history from the Tamil Nadu Open University, while I weighed my options," she says.

She is now teaching at the primary school level, and enrolled in a nine-month teacher training programme. "I am eligible to specialise in English and history, because of my graduation," she says.

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