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Will the internet replace the universities?

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Millions of students will enter higher education institutions in India in the next one decade. The human resource development ministry wants to double the gross enrolment ratio in higher education by 2020 from 15 per cent in 2011. The brick-and-mortar colleges in the country, however, are not equipped to meet this burgeoning demand, prompting many to look up at online education.

Many believe that with higher internet penetration, the demand for online education will grow radically in India in the coming years. Some even believe the traditional university system might not survive for long.

Though the internet penetration in India is low, the number of internet users in the country (150 million) is bettered only by the US (275 million) and China (575 million).

The Indian government is trying to boost online education through the National Knowledge Network (NKN). In January, the National Innovation Council launched NKN with a lecture series held at Delhi University. This is the largest online education network in the country, with 955 institutions already connected to it to share their content online, using a high bandwidth network. It aims to connect nearly 1,500 institutions in the future.

In the future, whether the students will get credits for the online courses they take will depend on the university that offers the particular courses, says Dinesh Singh, vice-chancellor of Delhi University (DU). "In DU, this will be done on a case by case basis. If you come with a structured proposal, DU will definitely give credit, though I cannot predict a time frame."

Open online courses are not new in India. In 2011, the government had launched the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL), which made the lectures at seven Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institute of Science-Bangalore available online. In the future, the other IITs and National Institutes of Technology (NITs), too, are expected to be part of NPTEL.

Many private players are also now active in the online education sector. India's online educational market is estimated to be over \$20 billion (Rs1.08 lakh crore) and is growing very fast. Some expect it to double in the next five years.

Edukart, a private online education portal, has bachelor and master courses with degrees awarded by Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya, and certificate courses with degrees issued by various industry bodies.

"Online education is a better option for many students who prefer to work while studying because it's more flexible and affordable. We have come across students from every strata of the society though most students are in the 17-35 age range," said Ishan Gupta, chief executive officer of Edukart.

Several internet libraries are also supporting this online education drive. The Internet Archive, a non-profit internet library founded in 1996, makes a large number of texts, audios and images available to scholars and the general public in digital format. It has more than 30,00,000 free e-books.

The Khan Academy, a donor-supported not-for-profit venture founded in 2008, for instance, has over 4,000 free videos for students on a wide variety of subjects ranging from computer science to arts history. The Khan Academy is immensely popular. The YouTube channel of the academy has more than 530,000 subscribers. The donors of Khan Academy include Google and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Salman Khan, the founder of Khan Academy, is of Indian and Bangladeshi origins, and has multiple degrees from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard.

Michael Spence, an American economist who won the Nobel Prize in 2001 for his work on information asymmetry, had argued that though the intrinsic value of formal education is little, students would profit from attending colleges because employers value college degrees.

But Tyler Cowen, an economist dubbed as "America's Hottest Economist" by Bloomberg Businessweek, thinks the students of Khan Academy and other online universities are far superior to typical students. "I do not see their low conformity as a problem. Those are conscientious learners who are not quite satisfied with more traditional approaches. Students in India might get transfer credits from online universities abroad."

Cowen recently founded a free massive online open course (MOOC) platform which has a series on India. Delhi and Bangalore were among the top 10 cities from which Cowen's Marginal Revolution University's course on development economics drew registrations.

Cowen thinks that employers are already valuing online education and that it will have more acceptability when there are credits attached to it.

Apart from online universities and private portals, there are internet libraries which make even recent works accessible. Bookfi.org has 1,232,446 books available for free download. The Online Library of Liberty, run by Liberty Fund, a private, educational foundation, has 1,367 classics on different subjects. The Mises Institute, a US think tank, has made more than 600 e-books, videos and thousands of papers and articles accessible to students and scholars.

However, some believe it is difficult to separate out the good from the bad over the internet. Anyone can create a website and put content online. Another criticism is that the internet can never replace face-to-face interaction between students and teachers and among students themselves. Tom Palmer, director of the educational arm of Cato Institute, a think tank, says it is difficult to learn many subjects over the internet. "It's an invalid inference to say teachers are not important. The internet cannot replace face-to-face interaction. It's also very taxing on the professor to reply to students on the internet."

Bryan Caplan, a professor at George Mason University, says some internet forums offer more meaningful interaction than even elite universities. He, however, thinks the online education is very unlikely to replace traditional universities. "I am far from sure that online education will thrive in countries like India. But when there is no well-established education system and when there is a high share of qualified yet uncredentialed workers, the stigma attached to unconventional degrees will be much lower."

DU's Dinesh Singh however thinks the low conformity of such students is an asset, and not a liability. "There is nothing wrong with a person who studies online," he says.

In 2012, Harvard University and MIT had collaborated to launch EdX, a not-for-profit enterprise that offers many classes of universities like Harvard, MIT and Berkeley for free online. Other prestigious universities are soon likely to join. EdX also looks into how technology and the internet can transform learning in the future.