

A Right Blend of Online and Offline Education

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Every educational institution is reflecting with its faculty members and other stakeholders to arrive at the balanced blend between online and offline modes of teaching-learning and evaluation processes. We need to study and weigh the prospects of what will be the best combination that an institution can adopt for the benefit of the student community in its totality. We ponder over a manner that will be effective for future leaders.

Higher education institutions need to have short-term and long-term perspective plans to tackle the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector. Every crisis, natural or man-made, poses serious problems and challenges, and it is our responsibility to convert these challenges into constructive opportunities. That is what has happened in the last two and a half months during the lockdown period.

Our schools and colleges switched over to electronic modes of education to meet their academic demands of completing the syllabus and continuing education. Though the crisis was sudden, and most of these institutions were under-prepared or ill-equipped with infrastructure, they tried to convert these challenges into productive opportunities for the benefit of stakeholders, primarily students.

I can speak from my experience; our faculty members acknowledged our initiatives and involved themselves wholeheartedly in conducting online teaching and learning. The whole process has been progressing according to a plan and still continues to the satisfaction of all concerned. This encouraging experience is motivating us towards new future. We will soon face the post-COVID period. The uncertainty of this immediate future should make us start progressively reflecting in this direction.



Lockdowns have jeopardized academic atmosphere. There is an overwhelming sense of emotional damage, anxiety and uncertainty among teachers, students and their parents about classes, examinations and academic progression. We should address these issues systematically and find viable solutions to the satisfaction of all. I see two solutions to this at the higher education level - one is a short-term solution and the other is long-term. The short term one has four phases.

The first phase involves the conduct of examinations of the final (terminal) semester students of PG and UG courses. We have advisories from regulatory bodies like UGC. As per their

guidelines, we shall give 50 per cent weightage to previous semester aggregate and 50 per cent



weightage to the Continuous Internal Assessment (CIA) of the end semester. The CIA component includes an online assignment or examination based on online teaching learning conducted during the lockdown period. The process of the first phase could be completed by the end of June and the results announced by mid-July to make it possible for the final year students – either to take up their placements in industries or to pursue their further academic career. All educational institutions may have to plan this way to do justice to our final year students.

The second phase, of course concerns the intermediate semester students. We need to plan out the conduct of their

examinations. The examinations could be scheduled in the beginning of August and classes for the students could begin from the end of August. It is not right to conduct these examinations via online mode. While we assure our students of all precautions and necessary protocol measures to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19, we must ensure that students do not face any problem in future related to their career opportunities and recognition of their academic standards.

The third phase involves the admission of fresh students. Some institutions like ours have already begun the online admission-process for different courses except UG, which will start after the announcement of the +2 results, some time in July-August. The fourth phase is to begin the new session. If all goes well, the new session could begin from the first week of September. It is beneficial to discern through the collective wisdom and take appropriate decisions that suit situations.

While working out the long-term, perspective plan, one must bear in mind that technological advancement and innovations are the extension of human mind and wisdom. Teaching online is a virtual reality. It cannot replace the offline or face-to-face interactive mode. It can definitely supplement the offline mode and enrich the whole process of education. Keeping this idea in mind, we must evolve a right blend between these two – offline and online modes of teaching, learning, evaluation and even research.

In the last couple of months, the education domain has become exciting. We have seen the mushrooming of online education start-ups who are promising various digital platforms to educational institutions. They have offered themselves to handle A to Z of the activities in the institutions. They are wooing institutions through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and WhatsApp to provide live and recorded classes to the students.

We cannot allow our institutions and stakeholders to suffer at any cost. Academic atmosphere of the

temples of wisdom must be maintained. Every institution needs to collectively reflect with its faculty members and experts to gradually find a permanent solution to make education student-friendly, novel and transformative. The proportion between online and offline could be on the basis of an institution's infrastructure and facilities. The COVID pandemic has challenged us to look for alternatives and to usher in the new "normal" in terms of rethinking the modes of dissemination of education within our institutions.

There may evolve two streams of students on the basis of their choice - one stream of students who would prefer to go into the industries, so they may like to have predominantly an online type of education. The other group of students who would choose to further the academic route might like to have face-to-face and offline education. So we have to study and find what will be the best combination that each institution should choose for the benefit of our student community.

COVID 19, with its sudden upheavals has changed our routines and life styles. Work, worship, home, health-care, education and social life have all been altered. We are forced to adapt to quarantine, lockdowns, physical distancing and mental agony. Physical health has been badly affected. Our needs and the ways to meet these needs are changing. A new pattern, a new normal is emerging. It is important in the process to identify and prioritize key issues and address them effectively. Some of the areas we need to focus on are:

1. The whole institution must be prepared and ready to face any eventuality, whether natural or physical. Every crisis must be turned into an opportunity to change. We need to educate ourselves with faculty and student development programmes.
2. The academic plan must be drawn up in such a way that it is flexible and, therefore, may be modified for any eventuality.
3. The institution must be equipped to handle the crisis with immediate and eventual plans.



Immediate solution is to find ways and means to accompany the end-semester students to complete their course and move to the next stage in life.

4. The institution must be prepared to handle other intermediate semester examinations, evaluation and results.

5. Other areas to be immediately attended to are admissions and commencement of new sessions.

6. Educational institutions are the second homes of our students. So,

they should go beyond the four walls of their classroom and assist in their personal, emotional, and mental and health-care issues to promote their holistic well-being.

7. The institution must roll out a perspective plan for 5 or 10 years with a clearly spelt out vision and policy statements for the institution.



8. Educational institutions have a social identity; they do not exist in isolation. Thus, Educational institutions must network and collaborate with one another, sharing resources and taking triumphant strides with their collective wisdom. Students are our primary stakeholders, in every move that we make every plan that we chalk out, the student community, as the principal pillar of societal growth, remains the inspiring ideology of all our endeavours in the field of education.

9. Colleges and universities must focus on creative research and innovations to further augment their online and offline teaching-learning modes of education. Academia-Industry interface will provide a structured platform for collaborative efforts.

10. It is the responsibility of every institution, public or private, to promote the four Es, namely: Expansion, Excellence, Equity and Employability supplemented with a value-based foundation course and service learning.

Technology-enabled teaching-learning is evolving fast and will play a major role in the education sector in the future. We cannot restrict ourselves to only the methodology. The challenges are local and global, and they should involve our whole being and doing – transform and uplift the content of teaching-learning, our approaches, attitudes, relationships and ensure the betterment of our education and transformation of our students. This is the mission of every teacher and every temple of wisdom.

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