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## **Editorial: Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education**

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Education sector is facing tremendous challenge of survival amid the Covid-19 pandemic just as other sectors are reeling under crises of sorts. According to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, 14.04 lakhs teachers are engaged in 53,620 institutions in the field of higher education in India. Also, 3.74 crore students were registered for higher education in India in 2018-19. Interestingly, about 91 lakh students pass out every year from colleges and universities. According to India Skills Report 2020 by Wheebox, about 46% of the students who passed out from colleges are found employable in comparison to 34% in 2014. Although the number of employable students in India is steadily increasing, it is likely to be adversely affected as real-time learning has stopped randomly due to Covid-19 scare. Apart from missing the classes or attending the monotonous and over-straining online sessions, students are also skeptical about examinations. The UGC has shifted its stand on examinations several times, causing uncertainty and distress.

It is difficult to conjecture the mental stress of the final year students who are not sure whether they will get the degree and eventually a suitable job commensurate with their qualifications. The situation is getting worst day by day as the Covid-19 spreads its wings far and wide. Many people are being laid off in the name of cost cutting or forced to work from home without any infrastructural support from their respective organizations. Demand for the workforce has decreased drastically as most of the industries are working at less than optimum capacity like tourism, travel, hotel, aviation industries etc.

It is alarming but true that a number of companies have withdrawn placement offers given to the institutes of national importance. No wonder, fate of students of tier II and tier III colleges is even worse. In 2018-2019, there were only 127 institutions of national importance, 993 universities, 39931 colleges and 10725 standalone institutions. On top of this, the stress of the parents whose children have taken the education loan is also adding to the misery. Given this, the government should take responsive steps in the interest of students in the matter of education loan. Also, in the case of online teaching-learning or assessment, the government should take special care of rural sectors and the disadvantaged segments.

In times of crisis, apart from the initiatives of the government, steps should be taken at the individual level as well. Parents are required to provide emotional support to their children so that they do not have any depression or distress, and faculty should guide students and boost their morale as their duty. If there is a time gap or delay in placement; then students should

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remain engaged in an opportunity like a project, internship etc. Colleges should keep in constant contact with their students, and motivate them for self-employment, provide information about various self-employment and start-up schemes implemented by state governments and the central government.

At the moment, while the boycott of Chinese goods and services and the indigenous emphasis is catching up, these students can easily be inspired for many new possibilities. *Jamavanta* once reminded *Hanuman* about his forgotten powers, and then he soared hundreds of *Kosas* (a unit of distance in traditional Indian scriptures) after he realized his skills. In this hour of tragedy, our youth need *Jamavanta* who can remind them of their powers and abilities, which can help them overcome their fear and doubt and inspire them to try out unique business ideas to meet the new kinds of needs which emerged in the wake of Covid-19 crisis.

Already, several steps have been taken by the Ministry of Human Resource Development to provide relief to the students, including provisioning online education, course content rationalization and ease of assessment/examination. Amid Covid-19 side effects, the education sector has emerged as an area where the challenges are converted into opportunities for improvement. Now, this Covid-19 drives us to have the digital boom. What we anticipated to attain in the next five years, has been made possible in three months. Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest has been quite apt in the education sector as they have made a rapid shift from classroom teaching mode to online teaching-learning platforms like Udemy, Teachable, WizIQ, Skillshare, edX, Microsoft Teams, Zoom have not only attracted teachers and students but also defined and set their roles in skill development.

Online education is being done in three ways. Firstly, learning and adopting digital software and platforms by teachers and students; secondly, the preparation of academic notes, video and audio educational materials; thirdly, use of the digital platform for assessment and evaluation. Traditional classroom and teaching system has changed with redefining roles during online classes. Sending notes to students as PPT and PDF files, recording their videos and audio and explaining notes is a new arrangement. On software like Zoom, teachers are now demonstrating their technical abilities to students by sharing screen and showing PPTs. Students and parents are also adopting a new system and feeling safe at home. Students were given hands-on knowledge through virtual laboratories with digital classrooms on the online platform by several institutions in the country.

Along with this, the students also got an opportunity to gain practical knowledge of industries through virtual industrial tours and discussion with successful entrepreneurs. There was a phenomenal growth in online workshops, webinars and learning sessions and huge number of students participated in the short-duration certification programmes. This trend was visible even in small towns and remote areas with weak internet connectivity. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) also triggered and accelerated the growth of higher education in India.

One of the common complaints of most of our academic colleagues is that they have mastered teaching and observing their understanding by seeing the faces of the students in the class. Still, the online system has made this art earned in these years meaningless. Webinars organized by YouTube and educational institutions have certainly provided some relief. Use of multiple forms such as Google Forms, preparing multiple-choice questionnaires to evaluate students and submit assignments on email and WhatsApp, has now become an established system in the last couple of months. Apart from this, the online platform is also being used extensively in counselling students and career guidance.

Digital skills development of teachers has emerged as a priority. The government is also now better understanding the digitization of education and its resultant challenges. Efforts to find solutions to address the issues such as technical gap, digital divide, network problems will further strengthen the online education system of India. Policymakers need to provide free Wi-Fi to millions of villages; which is far more important than the providing free Wi-Fi at the airports. The foundation of one lakh smart villages can be laid at the cost of 100 smart cities.

Due to severe macroeconomic impacts of the Covid-19, the Government of India has announced a stimulus package of INR 20 trillion, which will further boost the economy. The government is expected to intensify the efforts made to augment online education, and there is a need to promote effective educational practices that increase the mental and ethical capacity of students in the present scenario. The central and state government needs to adopt quick steps for the holistic development of online education to create a resurgent India. It is imperative that the Government of India brings out a comprehensive national policy on blended mode of education instead of issuing spasmodic circulars and office-orders with short-term view. The sooner it happens, the better for all the stakeholders of higher education.