

## EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO COVID -19: WILL ONLINE LEARNING BE THE GAMECHANGER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION?

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### ABSTRACT

COVID -19 has been the game changing phenomenon for the world. Online Learning is being claimed as the new normal learning when the world is struggling to come to terms with unprecedented catastrophe- Pandemic due to COVID-19 Online learning which is a version of distance education is based on the premise that education should be all inclusive and lifelong. It believes in the values of equity, access and quality. Digital initiatives by Ministry of Human and Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India and University Grant Commission (UGC) were gaining acceptance slowly and steadily before the pandemic times. There had been many initiatives of digital education by Government of India like SWAYAM, SWAYAMPrabha, E-PG Pathshala, Shodh-Ganga, Shodh-Sindhu. In last few years the connectivity across India has increased tremendously. The initiation of Indian version of MOOCs -SWAYAM and its pan -India reach was possible due to increases internet penetration brought in by affordable mobile data plans. In the COVID -19 times, when the world came to stand still, the cities were shut and so were educational institutions. The educational processes also got stalled-like curriculum transaction, assessment, promotions to next grades. The emergency response to this Covid -19 situation was switching to the online way of teaching and learning in COVID -19 times, which is replication of conventional face to face teaching through virtual conferencing tools like ZOOM. This ZOOM boom was evident with more players coming like GOOGLE Meet, Jitsi and Microsoft TEAM. In this paper the challenges in online learning and some ways of address the same are discussed.

**Keywords:** Online Learning; COVID-19; SWAYAM; Motivation; Time Management, Emergency Response.

### INTRODUCTION

Education has always been looked upon as a means of emancipation and was considered as a pious profession throughout the history. Throughout history there has been quest for knowledge which should be lifelong. Open and distance education is based on the premise that education should be all inclusive and lifelong. MOOCs have also been on the premise that education should be accessible to all. It started with Stephen Downes and George Siemens when they conducted a courses entitled Connectivism and Connectivity Knowledge in 2008 they conducted a course for 25 fee paying students on the campus of the University of Manitoba and a group of and at the same time released it on web for a group of 2300 learners across the world learners all free. This sparked everyone interest and lot of people joined the idea. In 2011 Stanford joined, then Udacity and in fact, there were many course offered so that 2012 came to be known as the Year of the MOOCs by New York Times (Shah, 2020).

The MOOCs have been called disruptive technology, the way it changed the course delivery strategies. The values we see embedded in the MOOCs are also the guiding value of our Indian version of MOOCs-SWAYAM - equity, access and quality which are the three cardinal principles of the MOOCs designed and developed under the aegis of Government of India. There had been many

more initiatives of digital education like SWAYAMPrabha, E-PG Pathshala, Shodh-Ganga, Shodh-Sindhu which are reaching all the learners where they are, anytime and anyplace. Most of these need some kind of network connectivity. In India network companies like Jio had ventured in network data and are providing reasonable internet speed and data plans, leading to connectivity across nation at competitive price. The scenario of entertainment, edutainment and also access to digital resources and online learning has changed. In fact, the Indian version of MOOCs -SWAYAM could have pan -India reach due to improved internet connectivity through mobile data plans.

Digital resources, digital education, Online learning have gained acceptance slowly and steadily across the globe, especially in India. The pull and push approach by Ministry of Human and Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India and University Grant Commission (UGC), India have also helped in acceptability. In fact, the KPMG-GOOGLE report had predicted that by 2021 the online education scenario in India will see manifold increase and the business will be close to two thousand million US dollar (KPMG-GOOGLE, 2017). The major contribution will be five major areas -Primary and Secondary Supplemental Education; Test Preparation; Reskilling and Online Certification; Higher Education and Language and casual Learning (Figures below).

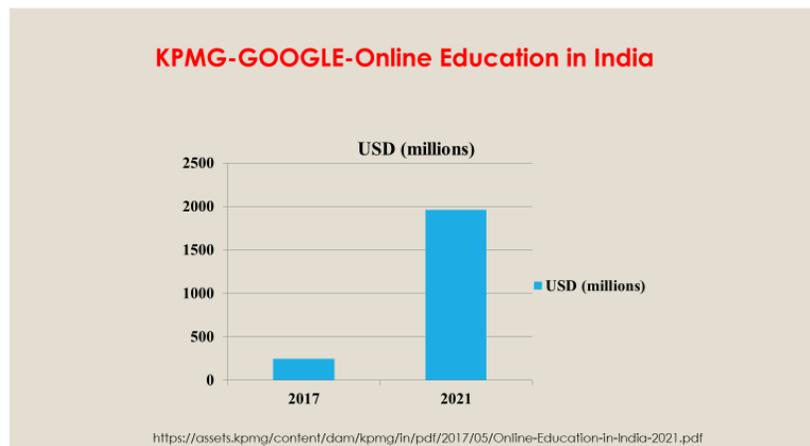


Figure 1. Online Education in India, KPMG-GOOGLE, 2017

The rise of BYJU, an education al app in field of primary and secondary supplemental education, many companies providing practice through online mock tests, reskilling through short online or blended courses, SWAYAM and online courses. The popularity of apps like Duolingo, Bolo in

language learning and you tube in casual learning is for anyone to witness the tsunami in online learning. It has further been substantiated in the multiple digital initiatives of Government of India and the rise of online assessment through National Testing Agency (NTA).

And one day the world rises to face the catastrophe- Pandemic due to COVID-19. The world was taken unaware. The feats of science have time and again given us the confidence that Man can make the things happen his way. Whether it was exploring universe, or mending human body, restoring, health, creating Humanoids like Sophie, all seemed conquerable by science. The time it stuck was festival time. Christmas, holidays people travelling across globe for holidaying and family reunions. A lot of mass movement across countries, continents was witnessed as all of it happens every year. It originated in Wuhan and from there due to travel by people spread across the world. Unlike the other virus outbreak like Ebola, it was highly contagious and the only way to stop its transmission was quarantine, isolation of affected persons and implement lock down for public to curb its spread. The measures were almost essential but dramatic, the entire cities were shut except for hospitals and basic essential services. The educational institutions being vulnerable due to the involvement of young children or the future generation as one may say, were shut down immediately. It caught everyone unaware. The schools and universities had curriculum to be completed, assessment to be done, promotions to next grades and many more activities. Like the sudden stopping of wheel, all came to a standstill.

After the stupor causing situation, leaders started to explore ways to minimize the damage and wherever possible work from home was explored, same was explored for educational institution and all eyes looked on Online Education. Online learning basically caters to learning outside the four walls of classroom, in fact wherever and whenever to all teachers and students (Verawadina et al., 2020). And suddenly online learning and distance learning, the neglected and often looked down upon approach, became the much sought-after mode of pedagogy. UNESCO (2020) came up with a list of curated resources to help learners to continue learning and teachers to continue teaching despite the covid-19 outbreak. The online learning was the savior and was extensively used to continue with teaching and learning activities in educational institutions. This was emergency response to the COVID-19 halt to our lives. The remote teaching through virtual conferencing app caught everyone's fancy and became the new norm. Everyone wanted to lure it and that can be seen in all the efforts made and more than that all the posts on social media to outshone each other in race to adopt online learning. In this rush, the thing which is heartwarming was that all were willing to adopt new ways. Some even called online learning to be the new normal. But if you peep below the online learning in COVID -19 times, we see the replication of face-to-face learning. Lecture through ZOOM. The ZOOM boom has taken everyone by storm.

Though everyone is plunging into online education in India (Saxena, 2020) and it is now being considered magic potion for higher education in this COVID -19 world. There are myriad reasons for adopting online learning but we must realize that the present emergency response to pandemic is not as per the principles of online learning. As a mode of teaching and learning online learning has many strengths and benefits of online learning.

### **Strengths of Online Learning:**

**Flexibility:** all stakeholders have flexibility and convenience in terms of access, delivery, time, location. The access to resources and the can be from anywhere, be it travel, be at home. In this pandemic times we are doing all teaching learning activities from the safety of our homes and also attending capacity building activities being organised by educational institutions. There is no restriction of time or location to study. Even the delivery of curriculum is flexible and as per the convenience of the learner.

**Interaction and engagement opportunities for all learners.** In face to face interactions, the extroverts have an edge, they raise hands and vocal are interacting ad rest are quiet and passive in discussions. In online education everyone is able to interact in discussion forum as they are interacting form their comfort zone. Also, the fear of ridiculed in classroom is also not there. The learners also get time to reflect on course topics, topics of discussion and meaning for interaction

is often emergent in online education. It is often seen that learners writing skills get better as they get time to reflect before writing a response to discussion forum.

In a regular face to face classroom the learner is engaged with the teacher as well as peer group, this engagement is not merely cognitive but affective as well. In online courses communication is asynchronous or synchronous.

Successful online programs can also lead to increased satisfaction, higher retention and enrollment for students who are able to satisfy requirements and pursue interests from home or while traveling or pursuing other opportunities.

Global access to online learning extends the base of all stakeholders. No longer are the physical boundaries there. It makes learning 24x7 and one can learn as per one's convenience, time zone and other reasons.

**Lifelong Learning:** Online learning provides of immense opportunity for lifelong learning. One can combine learning with work, family responsibility and this becomes a very potent means for capacity building.

The strengths of online learning may give a rosy picture but there are many challenges in this path. It is not as easy to design and develop an online course as it appears, in fact it is in all aspects, especially the delivery, a very challenging endeavor. It is dependent on so many factors of its success. Some of these challenges as are discussed here.

### **Challenges:**

**Course Design:** Online courses necessitate its instructional designing (Burns, 2020) which is way different from the conventional courses in conventional universities. It there is need to rethink the course design and use different strategies for teaching, engagement and assessment in the online environment (Hodges, et.al, 2020).

The course design in conventional universities build on the fixed interaction time, whereas in online it is around the clock, as online courses re offered across globe and the time duration of learner logging in increases. Here, the teacher has to set a time frame in which the learner query will be answered if it is asynchronous environment. In conventional system it is easy to build learning communities where the connect is not merely cognitive as in online environment but affective too. It becomes more challenging to build a comfortable environment for learning or a sense of community in the online environment.

In the COVID-19 pandemic situation with lock down, where everyone has boarded the online teaching learning bus in emergency. Thus, though it is serving the emergency situations but in normal times, the design of online course needs special handling.

**Technology Readiness.** A venture in online learning should have technology readiness other than being just a casual user of some technology tools. Skype is often used by academicians for interaction at some point of time. Using skype for casual interaction does not prepare them for its use for pedagogical purpose. All of us have jumped in online learning to manage the disaster called COVID-19 pandemic. All stake holders except really few who were in online learning, were caught unaware, like a non-swimmer who has watched others swim, is pushed into deep water, he/she struggles. There was huge lack of readiness which was compensated by enthusiasm of all-administrators, teachers and learners. There is faculty development programmes, webinars across India for capacity building of all faculty members in this time of pandemic. There is an urgent need to look for sustainable model. The preparedness of teachers in use of technology is very important (Verawardina, et.al.,2020).

**Technical Readiness:** It is as crucial as technology readiness. Sometimes bandwidth, infrastructure issues whereas at other times it is the software issue. This is very important as online education presumes a considerable minimum bandwidth available with learners so that they can access the

online class anytime from anywhere. Low connection affects the connect between learner and the learning online environment (Purdue University Global, 2019, Verawardina, et.al., 2020). Sometimes the connection is unstable, free Wi-Fi provided does not work, you need strong connection to work on something urgent. A ready help which can handhold and solve problem is the need of the online education. To facilitate self-help the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) can be created and all can access it at any time. Also, capacity building in area of trouble shooting also helps. Although it is not necessary to have advanced technical skills, it is important to feel comfortable using a computer and navigating the Internet. Slow connections can also make accessing course platforms and materials frustrating.

**Interaction and Engagement:** Online courses use both asynchronous and synchronous communication strategies. Discussion forum are most popularly used whereas for synchronous chats and virtual conferencing tools are used. The learners often do not find the virtual classrooms as engaging as the traditional classrooms. Sometimes learners feel sense of isolation. This isolation affects learning and at times learners struggle to understand the course curriculum and feel left behind.

A teacher has an important role to play and can use inclusive strategies to increase the probability of learner's engagement. In online learning some learners tend to develop poor study habits as the teacher and peer group reminder is missing in most of online courses. Creating a structure for the class, a community feeling (Pierce, 2019) and clearly communicating deadlines and due dates for assignments can help to overcome this challenge.

The interaction and engagement are inbuilt in the course design. It can be learner -learner; learner-content; and learner-teacher. All are important.

Time Management is very crucial for online education (Kumar, 2015). Most of online learners join it for flexibility and convenience with an aim to continue learning and enhance capacity and pursue their dream of education simultaneously. Thus, managing time becomes crucial, the bottleneck to successful fulfilling, personal, work and learning roles.

It becomes all the more crucial as a learner does not have the cues from peer in classroom to work on assignments, read and discuss. Thus, they tend to procrastinate and this necessitates by identifying the time-wasters in your schedule (Purdue University Global, 2019). The social media or browsing the internet can be time waster, then restrict usage time and duration. Also creating a to-do list for day or a week will help to finish tasks on time. In fact, ticking off what you have done so that acts as a booster. Creating and following routines help time management become habit.

**Motivation** - There is proverb saying 'You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink'. So, motivation is crucial for all learners especially for online learner. Only a motivated learner will complete task on time, stay engaged and move with the online learning class. The lesser motivation can be more detrimental in the online environment (Verawardina, et.al., 2020). Learners should be encouraged to log in daily to feel like daily communication with others. Everyday teachers should upload new things, updates, games, teasers. Teachers, peers may not be visible but communication and connect is great motivating factor in online education. Teachers or mentor's help in scheduling time-study time interaction time, quiz time and so on is very important (Pierce, 2019). Nothing is more motivating than self-confidence and esteem. They should try practicing positive self-talk (Purdue University Global, 2019) which helps on remaining focused which is need of the online learning. The inspiration to want to provide a better life for their family or pursue their dream career.

In fact, online education provides the best or only way to get a college education for many learners. However, just because you may be able to complete a college course without ever leaving your house doesn't mean that the work is easier or that there won't be any challenges along the way. Online education entails that learners know online communication etiquettes, understand their role

and responsibilities. The learning path is not easy as may appear and has to be treated as carefully as in conventional, face to face mode.

## CONCLUSION

Summing up online education can be looked upon as a ray of hope for all those who aspire for education -anywhere and anytime. It is a subset of distance education. ODL has been catering to the disadvantaged learners who could not attend regular traditional colleges due to family obligations, geographical distances and financial constraints. Presently online education has become ray of hope for all individuals in COVID -19 pandemic times. Online education has become game changer and the education, especially higher education will never be same again. It is not a panacea but a medium to make education strive through the covid times. Not only strive but also keep oneself positively engaged, not be mentally stressed. It is again a disruption in education, where educationists are foreseeing more and more of online courses being offered and accepted. Also, it is being projected that online will stay even in conventional universities in form of blended learning approaches.

It should not be forgotten that being able to access Online education is itself a privilege as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) says only 53.6% of world population has access to the internet. Are we leaving others behind in this zeal to learn in COVID -19 times? Besides access, are we thinking that the virtual lecture, sharing mere curriculum over virtual conferencing tools is

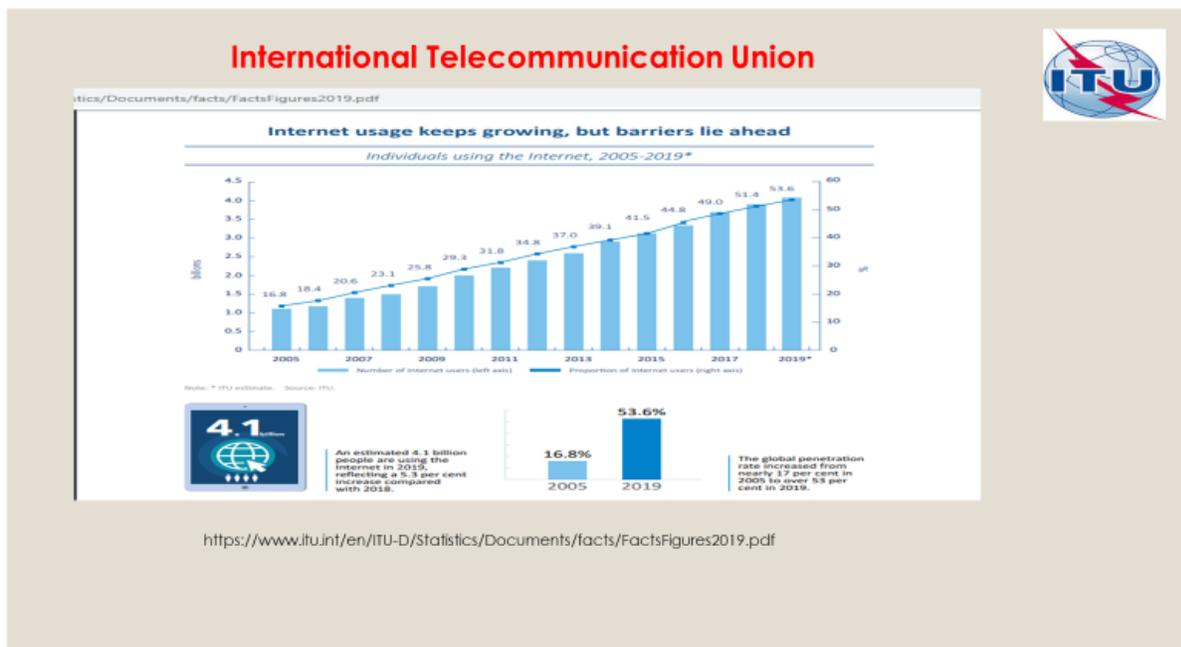


Figure 2. Source:<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2019.pdf>

education? If so, what about the urban-rural divide, gender divide? These should make us think to that online education is not panacea in this covid-19 times but an emergency management strategy (Burns, 2020; Hodges, 2020). It has the potential to solve many of educational shortcomings but if designed and developed according to its own principles. It is indeed a game changer and will definitely disrupt the way education was transacted in Pre-covid times.

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