

Blended learning won't work

Educators wish to embrace the UGC's new proposal but the ground reality is different

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A recent circular by the University Grants Commission (UGC) proposes that all higher educational institutions (HEI) teach 40% of any course online and the rest 60% offline. The concept note circulated by the UGC argues that this "blended mode of teaching" and learning paves the way for increased student engagement in learning, enhanced student-teacher interactions, improved student learning outcomes and more flexible teaching and learning environments, among other things. The note also enlists a few other key benefits such as increased opportunity for institutional collaborations at a distance and enhanced self-learning accruing from blended learning (BL).

Another claim is that BL benefits the teachers as well. It shifts the role of the teacher from being a "knowledge provider to a coach and mentor". The note says this will enable teachers to have a greater influence and effect on students' learning. Further, as against traditional classroom instruction which is "teacher-directed, top-down, and one-size-fits-all", BL is "student-driven, bottom-up, and customized". The note adds that BL introduces flexibility in assessment and evaluation patterns as well. Educators wish to embrace the forward-looking proposal but the ground reality is different.

Challenges

The latest All India Survey on Higher Education (2019-20) report shows that 60.56% of the 42,343 colleges in India are located in rural areas and 78.6% are privately managed. Can these colleges successfully implement BL? And what would be the cost of such education?

Only big corporates are better placed to invest in technology and provide such learning. Second, according to datareportal statistics, Internet penetration in India is only 45% as of January 2021. This policy will only exacerbate the existing geographical and digital divide resulting in the exclusion of a large number of rural students. Third, BL leaves little room for all-round formation of the student that includes the development of their intelligent quotient,

emotional quotient, social quotient, physical quotient and spiritual quotient. What is the guarantee that BL will enhance interactions between students and teachers that lead to personality development, character building and career formation? The listening part and subsequent interactions with the teacher may get minimised. Also, the concept note assumes that all students who enter the arena of higher education have similar learning styles and have a certain amount of digital literacy to cope with the suggested learning strategies of BL. This is far from true. Education in India is driven by a teacher-centred approach. Expecting these students to switch over quickly to collaborative and technology-enabled learning will be stressful for them and may accentuate the existing dropout rate in higher education.

Recommendations

Given these challenges, it is worth considering a few recommendations. The government should ensure equity in access to technology and bandwidth for all HEIs across the country free of cost. Massive digital training programmes must be arranged for teachers. Even the teacher-student ratio needs to be readjusted to implement BL effectively. This may require the appointment of a greater number of teachers. The design of the curriculum should be decentralised and based on a bottom-up approach. More power in such education-related policymaking should be vested with the State governments. Switching over from a teacher-centric mode of learning at schools to the BL mode at the tertiary level will be difficult for learners. Hence, the government must think of overhauling the curriculum at the school level as well. Finally, periodical discussions, feedback mechanisms and support services at all levels would revitalise the implementation of the learning programme of the National Education Policy 2020, BL, and lead to the actualisation of the three cardinal principles of education policy: access, equity and quality.

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