

***Remaking Higher Education?: A Content Analysis of the Media Discourse on
Online and Blended Education in India***

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The Asian Conference on Education 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

India has the second largest higher education system in the world with 993 universities, 39931 colleges and 10,725 Stand Alone Institutions and improving higher education is a major policy priority of the government. Online education has emerged as the preferred form of education in the COVID-19 milieu. The media has served an important platform for debates on online education in India, and this debate got intensified during the two pandemic years. This paper undertakes a detailed analysis of the media discourse surrounding online and blended education in India. It identifies a focus on cost, access and learning outcomes as salient features of this discourse. The paper uses Framing theory to categorize this discourse into an “access-outcome” frame. The paper situates this access-outcome frame into a broader milieu of global discourse on online education. The authors observe that, given certain political (right-wing government) economic (neo-liberal) and social developments (rise of the new, aspirational middle class, education as product and institutions as service providers) in India, the aforementioned access-outcome frame is likely to strengthen over time with continued positive coverage by the media and enabling state policies.

Keywords: Online Education, Blended Education, Covid 19, Higher Education, Media Discourse

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Introduction

In his collection of essays on higher education, Shapiro (2005) argues that ‘a crisis in education is usually caused by a crisis in society that calls into question many existing ideas regarding the central issues of knowledge, culture, and society.’(p.7) As the current Covid pandemic continues unabated across the globe, academics and policy makers are confronted with existential questions related to the future of education, work and relationships.

‘Online learning’¹, also referred as ‘web-based education’ and ‘e-learning’ can be broadly defined as ‘the use of the internet in some way to enhance the interaction between teacher and student’. Online delivery covers both asynchronous forms of interaction such as assessment tools and the provision of web-based course materials and synchronous interaction through email, newsgroups, and conferencing tools, such as chat groups (p.293) (Curtain 2002 in Singh and Thurman 2019).

As compared to a traditional, in-person course which can deliver up to 29% of its content online, an online course usually delivers at least 80% of its content online. Blended courses with their online and in-person components constitute a middle path with between 30 to 80% of their course content delivered online (Allen and Seaman 2015)².

The Covid crisis has strengthened the case for online and blended education in India. Leading experts have reckoned that the higher education system emerging out of India’s national lockdown (state-ordered confinement of citizens in their homes from 21st March to 31st May 2020 to reduce pandemic casualties) is likely to be permanently altered by online and blended education with a two-tiered system consisting of social science courses taught online and only professional courses such as engineering taught on campus (Anilkumar 2020) Since March 2020, a number of articles in the media have focused on the merits and drawbacks of online and blended education in the Indian milieu.

This paper undertakes a detailed analysis of the media discourse surrounding online and blended education in India. The authors analyse articles published in English language print media over two years, and find that cost, access and learning outcomes are salient features of the media discourse.

Higher Education in India: An Overview

The Indian higher education system comprises of 993 universities, 39931 colleges and 10,725 Stand Alone Institutions as of 2018-19 (AISHE 2019) (AISHE 2018) making it the second largest in the world (John and Hasnain 2020). The number of universities and colleges has increased steeply from the 1970-71 base of 103 universities and 3603 colleges respectively

¹ Other definitions refer to online education as distance education which is defined by Moore and Kearsley (2012: 2) as “teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization”. See Moore, M., & Kearsley, G. (2012). Distance education: A systems view of online learning (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

² Blended learning attempts to remedy the impersonal, socially distanced nature of online learning by supplementing online lectures and activities with in-person lectures on campus while also providing access to Faculty, peers and campus resources such as libraries (Trines 2018).² See Trines.S. “Educating the Masses: The Rise of Online Education in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia,” *WENR*. 14 August 2018. <https://wenr.wes.org/2018/08/educating-the-masses-the-rise-of-online-education>

(Allen, 2015; Trines, 2018; Sheikh, 2017). By comparing these figures to pre-independent India which had only 20 universities and 591 colleges, Bhoite (2009) highlights the massive growth in higher education institutes in the country.

However, this dramatic increase in capacity including the establishment of 18,000 colleges between 2008 and 2016 at a rate of more than 6 colleges per day (Trines 2018) has proved insufficient to meet the massive education demands of a country with the world's largest cohort of young people with 600 million people under 25 years old (Jack 2018). India allocated 3% of its total GDP to education in 2018-19 (Gupta 2019). At the level of access, India requires 700 new universities, 35,000 colleges and vocational training institutions with 40 million seats to meet the growing demand for higher education (IBEF, 2017; Trines, 2018).

According to the latest All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report of 2018-19, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India was 26.3%, with the GER for males at 26.3% and the GER for females at 26.4%. India's new education policy aims to increase the GER in higher education, including vocational education to 50% by 2035. Thus, higher education institutes in India have viewed education policy primarily as a matter of ensuring greater access to the maximum number of people.

The growth of online education in India

The evolution of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that were initially free (but now monetized), without formal credit and open to students around the world has been an important trend in the overall rise of online education in recent years (Pappano 2012; Trines 2018). The global online education market is expected to register brisk growth from \$159.52 billion in 2017 to \$286.62 billion by 2023 at a compound annual growth rate of 10.26% (*Businesswire* 2018).

In keeping with global trends, the Indian online education market is poised for brisk growth from \$250 million in 2016 to \$2 billion in 2021 with paid users also rising rapidly to 9.6 million (Paliwal 2020). More optimistic estimates project the overall online education market size to expand by \$14.33 billion from 2020-2024 (*Businesswire* 2020). Ed-tech start-ups in India are projected to grow rapidly from \$39 billion in 2018-19 to \$220 to \$360 billion by 2026 (Nagarajan, *Frontline*, 2020).

Online learning corporations such as Coursera, which currently offers 3,800 courses for free (*Times of India* 2020) regard India as a 'high-focus growth market' (McKenzie 2020) India currently accounts for Coursera's second largest revenue stream with 1.5 million out of the total 21 million registered users worldwide (*Economic Times* 2016) and is the world's third largest online market with 1.3 million distance learners (*Indian Express* 2016).

India's finance minister recently launched the PM eVIDYA programme to bring together existing on-air, online and digital education programs (Farooqi 2020) thereby providing "multi-mode access to digital/online education" (Nagarajan, *Frontline*, 2020) and permitted the country's top 100 universities to start online courses without state permission by May 30 (Nagarajan, *Frontline*, 2020).

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by the epistemological framework of constructionism that posits that 'meaning is not discovered, but constructed, and different people construct meaning in multiple ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon' (Crotty, 1998:9). By examining the emerging media discourse on online and blended education, we have attempted to shed light on the construction of the problem of higher education (high costs, lack of access and poor learning outcomes), and recommended solution (online and blended learning).

Framing theory is summarized to lay the theoretical base to later understand and organize the dominant meanings ascribed to higher education (especially online education) in the contemporary media discourse in India. Framing's power lies in its explanatory assumption that most discourses consist of texts, catchphrases and metaphors, visuals, moral appeals, slogans and symbols. Actors looking to advance an agenda are able to compile elements of such discourses into 'packages' of meaning or 'interpretative packages' (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) that compete to influence public opinion and policy. Such assemblages of meaning are called frames.

A particularly important part of the framing process 'involves selection and salience.' (Entman 1993). For a stakeholder looking to advance a particular agenda, to frame is to 'select some aspects of a perceived reality and to make them more salient in a communicating text.' This highlighting and privileging of certain aspects in the complex terrain of reality over others is done to 'promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman 1993).

According to deVreese (2005), framing involves a 'communication source presenting and defining an issue' and is also concerned with the manner in which communicative processes result in the construction of certain meanings. Contesting parties often generate counter-frames through the 'dialectic' process of contestation with their rivals (Price, Nir, and Cappella 2005).

Frames are akin to 'objects people possess in their heads' which allow them to make sense of reality (Hulst and Yanow 2014). These 'objects' or mental structures 'that shape the way we see the world' (Lakoff 2004) are also understood as 'anticipatory schema' which is a product of people's life histories, psychological inclinations and interactions in society (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) (Baresch, Hsu and Reese 2012) (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford. 1986).

The concept of framing has been used in a wide range of studies including the framing of immigration by political parties in Western Europe (Helbling 2013), influence of sex on sports coverage by male and female sports journalists (Kian and Hardin 2009), and framing of homosexuality in Singapore (Goh 2008), paid domestic work in Spanish state discourses (Peterson 2007) and framing by the news media of mass shootings and serious mental illness in the US (McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski and Barry 2014).

Methodology

The paper conducts an analysis of the contemporary media discourse on online and blended education in India. Following Foucault (1977), Ball (2006) argues that discourses are about 'what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what

authority, thereby creating certain possibilities for thought.’ (p.14) By examining the current discourses surrounding higher education in India, the authors aim to shed light on the ways in which online and blended learning is being normalized.

In this paper, contemporary discourse in media refers to English language articles published in newspapers, digital news outlets and websites of English news channels³. As we argue earlier in the paper, the subject of online and blended education attracted an unprecedented amount of attention in the media when the pandemic forced schools and universities to switch to remote learning in March 2020. And, hence, for this paper, we have chosen the articles published in the time period of March 1, 2020 till March 2022. However, we acknowledge that this is an emerging discourse, and future studies can shed more light on the ways in which media representation of online and blended education changes the landscape of higher education in the country.

The authors covered all the articles that focus on the issue of online and/or blended education in higher education in India. Search terms such as ‘online education in India’, ‘e-learning in universities’, ‘blended learning in higher education in India’, ‘digital education in Indian universities’, and ‘online learning in higher education institutes in India’ were utilized to capture a wide range of articles published in newspapers, digital news outlets and websites of news channels. The search resulted in a total of 80 articles published on this topic in two years.

Influential sections of the education elite including university vice-chancellors, deans, professors, administrators and education company leaders are featured in such articles, providing a cross-section of elite opinion on online education in the COVID-constrained milieu. Other articles comprising the media discourse also rely on the key conclusions of recent surveys conducted by major universities that look at the efficacy of online classes in Indian higher education institutions (HEI). Finally, the views of the state elite including Chairman of the University Grants Commission (UGC), Education Minister and Prime Minister are also covered in some articles.

The authors carefully read the articles without any pre-defined categories, and noted the messages, and nuances in each article. A thorough qualitative content analysis involved searching for themes and patterns in the articles. Comparisons and contrasts between and among articles was also done in order to enhance understanding (Altheide & Schneider 2013). We also paid attention to more subtle and implicit meanings in the articles that sought to both endorse as well as criticize online and blended education. In the next section that lays out the findings, the paper discusses the features of the media discourse on online and blended education in India.

Findings

Contemporary media discourse on Online Education

The dominant contemporary media discourse on online education in India has framed it as the ‘need of the hour’ (Tribune 2020), ‘saviour’ (Gankar 2020), ‘the future of education’ (India Today 2020), and a ‘new normal’ (Tribune 2020; Goyal 2020). Online education is seen as a solution to four problems; a) equitable access, b) optimal learning outcomes, c) cost of

³ These channels include Times Now, CNN-IBN, NDTV, Republic TV and India Today.

delivery and d) flexibility. Commentators have listed several benefits of online education including reduced costs, ability to transcend the limitation of the physical infrastructure, involvement of faculty from across the world, and flexible learning schedules (India today, 2020).

Cost, access and flexibility

The leading discourse in the English language media has framed the higher education problem in the country as primarily one of access, and has endorsed a new mode of education (online) with its associated technological infrastructure (high speed internet) as an important and necessary step towards increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio in Universities and colleges. Multiple articles in the media have elaborated on the role of online education in solving the problem of access in higher education. Articles have quoted founders of Ed tech companies who have enthusiastically called for universities to embrace online education. For instance, one of the pieces in Business standard quotes Ronnie Screwvalla, founder and chairperson of UpGrad who believes that online learning can enhance India's poor gross enrolment ratio of 26 %, and ed tech companies have the potential to 'take higher education to tier 2, 3 and 4 towns and even rural India'. In another article endorsing the blended model, Singal (2021) quotes Raghav Gupta, Managing Director, India and APAC, Coursera believes that a blended model will 'allow universities to scale, combining the benefits of on-campus and online programmes to serve a vast student population'.

The discourse surrounding online learning has also focused on the issue of cost, with commentators arguing that online programs involve lesser fees and reduced relocation costs for students (Singal, 2021), and students also end up saving on rent, hostel fees and study material (Kumar, 2021, The Hindu). Commentators have added that these reduced costs via online education has the potential to enhance the social mobility of those who could not easily access quality education from premier HEIs (Kumar, 2022). Evidently, commentators in the media have also championed the new educational policy for its thrust on developing digital infrastructure for a future in which online and blended learning will have significant presence in higher education across the country (Goyal, India today).

Some of the articles in media also quote academics who championed the move towards online education during the pandemic. In a piece in the Business Standard, Farooqui (2020) quotes Rupamanjari Ghosh, Vice-Chancellor, Shiv Nadar University, who insists that while 'conventional face-to-face education will not become obsolete', blended model is the future because online learning 'offers flexibility, cost savings, standard-quality content, and knowledge management to the students.' Other articles written in the media by influential academics make a similar case. M Jagadesh Kumar, the Vice-Chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University who insists that campus-based 'antiquated classroom practices can be buried' post the pandemic, and argues that the 'time has never been better for HEIs to re-invent themselves' by adopting online education. He adds that although the current Internet penetration rate in India is 50%, it is rapidly rising due to National Broadband Mission's (NBM) concerted efforts to provide access to each village by 2022 (Kumar, *Hindustan Times*, July 23, 2020).

Articles in the media also allude to the cost advantages of online education as virtualized classrooms have the ability to achieve the goal of equality and equity via lower costs (Ramaswamy 2020). It is claimed that learning outcomes and skills can be transferred at a low cost in an IT-enabled environment to a larger number of students than the traditional

classroom. An important enabler of this IT-environment is seen to be achieved through massive investments in the telecom infrastructure to ensure ‘seamless connectivity’ (*The Economic Times*, September 21, 2020).⁴

Moreover, the flexibility afforded by online has been emphasized in multiple articles published over the past two years. Online education allows a child to study at their own pace and also gives them a chance to personalise their curriculum, neither of which is possible in a typical offline learning system (India Today, 2021).

Overall, online education’s cost advantages are linked to a combination of technological, pedagogical and organizational innovations. And finally, online education boosters in the media have also emphasized the perceived nimbleness and increased plasticity of online education which enables the provision of several ‘significant and unique affordances’ that allow for ‘customization of learning, remote collaboration, just-in-time scenarios, continuous assessment and blended learning’ (Wilcox et al 2016). This flexibility is seen as a crucial enabler to prepare students for the new ‘gig’ economy with its contractualized, temporary jobs. For example, P.B. Sharma, Vice Chancellor of Amity University has positioned online education as the ideal solution for a future job market which may increasingly require ‘working from home, sharing the workforce time for multiple tasks and even working for multiple employers.’ (Wadke 2020). Such a gig economy needs a gig education model based on an ‘anytime, anywhere, anyone’ approach, to be delivered by online courses (John and Hasnain 2020). Proponents also point out the ‘zero misses’ advantage of online education since teaching content can be recorded for later reference (Arora 2020).

Learning outcomes

The discourse surrounding higher education also covers the issue of learning outcomes, with commentators asserting that satisfactory learning outcomes can be achieved in higher education without either the traditional campus or classroom-based, face-to-face discussions (Deshpande 2020; India Today 2020; Majumdar & Pathak 2020). Attention is drawn to the sub-optimal learning outcomes in Indian universities due to student passivity in the existing physical mode of education. The ‘visiting faculty model’ of universities inviting outside experts to the physical campus to teach in a ‘concentrated burst’ is also criticized for its sub-optimal learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are claimed to be maintained or even enhanced with online education while also ensuring democratization of access (Jesudasan 2020).

This discourse in the media has been helped by a shift in the policy which allows universities to adopt online courses without prior permission. According to UGC, “higher educational institutions having an accreditation score of 3.26 (in a scale of 4) and above or having a rank in top 100 best university category of National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) shall be permitted to start full-fledged online programmes without prior approval.”

⁴Massive infrastructure construction including 3 million kms of optical fibre cables, doubling of towers to 1 million and increasing speeds of up to 50 Mbps have been identified as factors favourable to the exponential growth in online education (Kumar, *Hindustan Times*, July 23, 2020).

Articles quote research to bolster their point about the effectiveness of online learning. Here is an example from an India today article written by a founder of an Ed Tech company (2021):

Some research shows that on average, students retain 25-60% more material when learning online compared to only 8-10% in a classroom. This is mostly due to the students being able to learn faster online; students engaged in e-learning require 40-60% less time to absorb a concept than they do in a traditional classroom setting.

Another piece by the vice chancellor of KREA university quotes a 2017 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research in the US confirmed that “students performed just as well with blended learning—where online learning supplements, and not replaces, conventional instruction—as they did with traditional classrooms. It’s there, it works, and yet there has been no compelling reason for universities to embrace it—until now.”

The appeal of blended education

Alongside the dominant discourse with its tone of digital triumphalism around the future of online education, lies an alternative discourse also comprising of diverse commentators that has expressed reservations about the capacity of online education to achieve its claimed goals of access, outcome, cost savings and flexibility. These reservations stem from the very nature of online education including its greater dependence on technological infrastructure for smooth functioning in a country where there is a massive digital divide that maps on to deep class, caste, gender and language divides.

India’s rising but still inadequate internet penetration rate of 31% with a total of 409 million users as of 2019 (Farooqui 2020), is identified as one of the major reasons for creating an enormous digital divide. Further, the digital deficit is fractionated into an access-deficit of internet connections across urban and rural households (42% versus 15% with overall connections at 24%) (Wadia 2020) and a computing device ownership deficit across urban and rural households (23.4% versus 4.4% with overall ownership at 11%).

Commentators have noted that very few Indian universities have reliable internet connectivity, secure access to the internet and the required bandwidth (John and Hasnain 2020). Several survey results are quoted in major agenda-setting newspapers such as the *Indian Express* such as the one by the All India Democratic Students’ Organisation involving 3980 engineering students from 210 colleges using online learning with 97.1% not in a state of readiness to take exams, 91.2% unable to follow classes being conducted and a majority 77.3% not being able to attend classes (D’Souza 2020).

Only around a quarter of Indian households were even able to access the Internet including through smartphones with the figure even lower for rural households at just 15 out of 100 (Nagarajan 2020). Criticism has also been levelled at the heavily technology-dependent evaluation system required for online education courses and their misalignments with the Indian milieu. Delhi University’s online final exam where students have complained of website crashes, difficulties in answer submission, non-working of grievance cell email addresses, privacy intrusion and double-submission of assignments on intermittently working submission portals has been highlighted (Singh 2020).

Thus, online education is seen as a technology-heavy mode of education requiring large system-wide requirements including accessible and reliable internet, reliable electricity, availability of laptops and mobile phone devices and cheap data plans. A deeper critique is levelled at the very nature of online (excluding blended) education as ‘monotonous and exhausting to talk to a computer screen with occasional interruptions by disembodied voices’ (NDTV.Com 2020) with limited capabilities of technological fixes to overcome this disembodied structure.

In this context, the discourse on blended education arises as a ‘bridge’ discourse between dominant discourse supporting online education and the more subordinate discourse expressing reservations over its capacity to bridge the digital divide in the country. Blended education has been repeatedly supported in order to not completely compromise the ‘psychological and the physiological’ benefits of a traditional education. It has been suggested that blended education be embraced as the ‘new normal’ with an important part focusing on ‘skill-based learning’(Basu, *The Economic Times*, September 28, 2020). In another article endorsing the blended model, Singal (2021) quotes Raghav Gupta, Managing Director, India and APAC, Coursera believes that a blended model will ‘allow universities to scale, combining the benefits of on-campus and online programmes to serve a vast student population’.

The potential of hybrid approaches such as blended education in permitting ‘more cost-effective and efficient utilisation of brick and mortar resources’ to maximize institutional capacity, increase GER and enhance quality has been discussed at length in print media (Basu, *The Economic Times*, September 28, 2020). Blended learning has also been justified on the grounds of flexibility it accords to students in terms of schedule, location independence, affordability, accessibility and increased scope for parental guidance and constructive intervention (*Telegraph*, October 20, 2020). The commentary has also criticized online education as being responsible for ‘bored students and exhausted teachers’ and the need for blended education to provide students vital in-class and peer-to-peer socialization to create confident learners (Pawar et al, *India Today*, July 2, 2020).

Blended learning in particular has been projected to endure past the Covid-crisis as it offers cost savings, flexibility of learning, quality course content and management of learning resources that facilitates ease of student learning (Farooqui 2020). The discourse has also focused on the appropriate role for online education with some arguing that the right role of online education is in a blended format to ‘supplement, support and amplify the techniques of face-to-face evaluation’ (Deshpande, *The Indian Express*, May 27, 2020).

Discussion

This paper looked at the media discourse on online and blended education in India from March 1, 2020 till March 2022 using a variety of search terms, and focusing on a cross section of outlets. It found that the shape of the discourse by proponents of online and blended education skews towards a focus on maximizing access to the largest possible cohort of learners (at low cost) while also maximizing learning outcomes. Using the framing theory, this paper organizes this ‘access-outcome’-centric focus of the discourse into an *access-outcome* frame. The frame can be understood as the result of a particular constellation of enabling factors in India. These include; a) the constraints imposed by the pandemic on traditional, campus-based education, b) the preexisting (albeit slower) growth of the ed-tech industry in the years prior to the pandemic, c) the increased adoption of neoliberal economic

policies (including the corporatization of education) by Indian government since 1991, d) the rise of an ‘aspirational’ Indian middle class which views education as a product and institutions as a service provider, the e) election of a right-wing government pursuing more market-friendly policies since 2014 and f) positive media coverage by an increasingly corporatized media. This constellation of enabling factors and the reinforcing feedback loops they have engendered are likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future, strengthening the access-outcome frame and its push for online-blended programs in higher education. The only recent complicating factor loosening the aforementioned constellation is the relaxation of constraints in the pandemic’s aftermath and the return to campus-based education which has slowed the tremendous momentum of the thrust towards online education. As variants of the COVID-19 virus keep surfacing, the return to lockdown conditions could reinvigorate the aforementioned momentum. Furthermore, the path dependency created by various initiatives such as the National Digital University (understood as the concrete manifestation of the access-outcome frame) is likely to influence the shape of education discourse, reinforcing support for the *access-outcome* frame as well constraining the policy options of future governments from breaking out of the frame.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we show that both the advocates as well as sceptics of online and blended education tend to view education through an ‘access-outcome’ frame which focuses on maximizing access to education while also ensuring satisfactory learning outcomes at a low cost. In a discursive environment dominated by such access-outcome-centric thinking, opposition to online and blended education will need to find ways to de-privilege the weightage accorded to access and outcome and to elevate alternative values that re-center the importance of traditional, campus-based education. Some of these values can include highlighting the benefits of the physical campus for increased female autonomy in a conservative society such as India (i.e. taking up residence in female hostels), the minimization of the digital divide resulting from in-person transfer of knowledge and mentorship between students (including poor and marginalized students, availing of affirmative action) and experienced professors, and finally the weakening of the caste and gender divides caused by the physical sharing of common facilities (dining, hostel, etc.) by students from across the socio-economic strata.

The consolidation of the aforementioned and other alternative values into a coherent alternative imagination and discourse would perhaps help to re-imagine online and blended education as an important (but ultimately secondary) tool supplementing the pivotal role played by the primary, in-person education system. Until such a time as this alternative imagination develops, the access-outcome framing of education and its constellation of enabling factors is likely to hold sway.

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