

How a digital university can transform India's education system

The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly affected the education sector. But even before the pandemic, building new brick-and-mortar universities was an expensive proposition. The lack of an adequate number of universities meant limited options for aspiring students. These challenges and the need to integrate higher education with the knowledge economy motivated universities to pay attention to the reforms required in the way we impart higher education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 laid the path to address these challenges.

The surge of digital technologies has inspired us to reimagine teaching-learning methods, university governance systems, higher education goals, and how future universities are perceived by employers.

There is an increasing recognition that the current university model is rigid and that traditional universities have failed to customise education to take care of needs, interests, financial capabilities, and diverse cognitive abilities of students. Therefore, educators and policymakers feel that we must create flexible educational systems to provide customised high-quality "anytime/anywhere" education. Such pre-packaged education by academics would help us achieve the economies of scale required in India.

With emerging technologies driving information economies, it also becomes necessary for those employed to acquire new skills relevant to their changing roles. Unfortunately, the current model is of little help.

If universities have to remain relevant for students, they need to recalibrate their functioning to resonate with the priorities of their non-working and working students. Thanks to the steps taken by the Union ministry of education during the pandemic, we are addressing the challenges faced by students through a fusion of digital media and information technology for online education.

With the launch of Digital India by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on July 2, 2015, India has become a global pioneer in deploying national-scale public digital infrastructure and services in welfare, health care, education, and finance. This has brought a transformative change in governance and delivery for realising "antyodaya" (last in line) by

ensuring social justice, equity, respect, and equal opportunities for all, particularly the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities, the poor, the disadvantaged and rural populations. In addition, these technology-enabled schemes have enhanced the "ease of living" for all Indians.

In Budget 2022-23, finance minister (FM) Nirmala Sitharaman announced the establishment of a digital university. This is a decision of great significance. A digital university will provide better access to high-quality higher education in multiple languages. This aligns with the vision laid out in the NEP of accessible, affordable, and equitable higher education.

The digital university can integrate all the components of the learning value chain, from the admission process to providing learning material in the digital format, online interactions, continuous evaluations, and awarding of degrees. Since the digital university will be built on a networked hub-spoke model, it has several advantages. First, it can develop cutting-edge information and communications technology platforms and digital content, using emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, machine learning, virtual reality, augmented reality, and blockchain.

Second, the digital university can also integrate existing capabilities such as SWAYAM, SWAYAM-Prabha, ePG-Paathshaala, eGyanKosh, National Digital Library, and Virtual Labs into one organic entity.

Third, this hub will, in turn, collaborate with the best public higher educational institutes, such as the Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management, and central universities to provide an affordable world-class teaching-learning ecosystem.

As India observes the occasion of "Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav", the establishment of the digital university has the potential to place India as an important provider of higher education to students in India and the world.

If there ever was a time to establish a digital university in India, it is now.



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The views expressed are personal