

Draft

Thoughts about Post-COVID 19 Higher Education Policy

Many facts, figures and quantitative projections have come up assessing the gravity of post-COVID 19-downturn mostly from the angle of growth and hence obsessed with unknown threats to capital and compelling trade-offs. They all have anticipated economic and social consequences of the globally devastating health-crisis, unprecedentedly severe. Experts think that it is going to turn the world into another techno-economic culture. Higher education cannot be independent of the feature, structure and dynamic of the emerging alternative.

Antecedents

Pandemic crisis causing massive human resource-loss had intensified the basic contradictions in the dominant economic relations in history accounting for radical systemic transformation. Needless to say that contemporary system of higher education was not immune to the process. Different kinds of plague that ravaged the peasants of Europe during 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th centuries dissolved feudal relations into capitalism through Renaissance, Geographical discoveries, religious Reformation and Industrial Revolution. Significantly restructured in the wake of the pandemic, universities and colleges gave rise to critical thinking and pioneering discoveries, of which the theory of Isaac Newton was epochal.

Monopoly Capitalism survived the crisis of economic loss during the small pox pandemic in the late 19th century, through the development of medical education, medicinal inventions, and pharmaceutical industry. Spanish influenza of 1918-19 killed about 50 million people across the globe, which exceeded what the First World War had done during its four-year course. It deprived the dominant economy of its War booty and put the higher education into disarray for almost a decade. Nevertheless, science and technology advanced through researches leading to path-breaking discoveries and inventions all along the periods of crisis created by the great depression of 1930, the World War II and pandemic of Measles, Ebola, SARS and MERC.

COVID Aftermath

Critical political economists think that COVID 19-induced downturn precludes recovery of conventional capitalist economy. Humanists imagine the rise of an alternative based on environmental justice, social cooperation, and public trust transcending the centralized state power or global capitalism or barbarism. Some of them anticipate a post-capitalist phase of communities, not rigidly class divided, enjoying equal status at various levels in terms of livelihood practices and relations of exchange.

It appears that the global economy will continue to expand its market by capitalizing the pandemic panic and fear of life-threatening viruses, not in its conventional form, but in a new form heavily depended on commoditization of

technology and science for turning knowledge into capital. Higher education sector has already been undergoing reforms, as the dominant economy wants.

Higher Education Scenario

Pandemic lockdown has helped the world exhilarate the reforms, especially the mode of teaching and evaluation. It appears that the contingent situation will predictably divide the higher education institutions into two types:

1. One type covering humanities and social sciences taught informally through virtual mode involving less expense and meant for the general public; and
2. The other type covering medicine, pharmacy, nursing, pure sciences, engineering, and architecture taught formally through the campus mode involving more expense. Students of eminent universities have the advantage of in-face interactive learning distinct for criticality and creativity of the campus as well as the freedom of auditing the lectures of outstanding professors in the web, which make them more competent.

Lockdown-induced closure of higher education institutions will compel teachers and students to resort to online mode and along with other dictations there would be call for a *de facto* switching to the system of virtual learning. Hailed more effective, quick and less expensive, the online mode of teaching would allow all the Open and other universities to run UG and PG programmes in online mode pushing an unprecedentedly huge number of teachers into a mode unfamiliar to them.

Online teaching and evaluation would be pushed as a new normal under the pretext of the pandemic crisis. Online delivery of lessons would not be feasible in the case of about thirty percent of students at home under lockdown wanting net connectivity. It would upset objectives of access, equity and excellence in the higher education sector. Further, this massive shift to online mode would be tantamount to leaving one third of the teaching faculty redundant. This would help crony capitalist governments to cut public expenditure on higher education by replacing a considerable portion of the teaching faculty.

It is true that the age-old in-face lecture mode followed in colleges and universities has democratized mediocrity. It is also true that smart teaching under electronic sophistication can render students the latest course material as well as lectures of high profile professors including Nobel Laureates through virtual classrooms. Administering of courses online would definitely have to compromise quality unless used as a complementary alternative. However, online lessons provided by Coursera, EdX, Future Learn, Udacity, Canvas Network and many others in European languages are being used as complementary by students in great institutions famous for campus learning. Students' knowledge supplemented through online instructions by world-renowned scholars would compel the ordinary professors to be academically

more challenging in their teaching. In short, virtual higher education would never match the campus based real that is distinct for various critical aspects of rigorous learning.

Possible Transformations

Nevertheless, the COVID-induced virtual mode will bring about a series of transformations in the concept of higher education institutions, their clientele and practices. The concept of competence, outcome, teaching, learning, evaluation, quality, access, equity and excellence will be different. Competence will be e-competence, outcome will be computational, teaching will be ICT linked, evaluation will be online, quality will be e-competency related, access will be technology dependent, and equity will be a mere rhetoric.

Post pandemic higher education, particularly research, will have special focus on the emerging knowledge universes, both the macro and micro, separately as well as in combination. Independently, the macro is being explored in terms of non-classical mechanics and impact physics through new means of measurement. Combination of the macro and micro has already been there for knowing the macro through extrapolation as in the case of Geology and Cosmology. A better combine can be exemplified through the case of plasma high-energy physics and shockwave hypersonic velocity in space technology. Many science-tech hybrid areas focusing on micro space and milliseconds instead of the macro space and infinite time will gain added significance in higher education curricula. Understanding the micro universe of functional and structural genomics, gene sequences of viruses, self-replicating particles, graphene, nanotech sensors and transmitters, brain-computer interfaces and umpteen other survival-related researches will engage higher education institutions.

Disciplines will increasingly draw closer to one another in the wake of the emergence of more and more cross-disciplinary areas of knowledge. Blurring of disciplinary borders in higher education will demand cross-disciplinary literacy among teachers and adaptability among students. Growth of sciences through narrow specialisations in their turn becoming sub-disciplines of added rigidity will be forced to break the disciplinary silos and allow flexibility of choice in specialization across disciplines. Specialization giving precedence of parts over the whole impeding holistic understanding will phase out. Higher education will become more and more personal and self-directed rather than general and institutionally administered through fixed requirements and procedures.

Corporates would need science-tech graduates of innovative faculty in plenty for them to choose the best to work at low cost in their research establishments. It would be increasingly recognized that the developing world of poor quality higher education is rich in students of innovativeness. Since picking and training them as such being costly, the developing countries would be more and more encouraged to uniformly redesign their higher education to serve the purpose. Such redesigning and homogenizing reforms have already been in progress everywhere including India.

Indian Context

What could be the post-COVID residual in the domain of higher education is an important question. In India, the higher education sector would largely remain the same but will be centralized under a single regulatory authority with the number of institutions highly reduced and made uniform through homogenization of curricula, academic programmes, and learning outcomes as construed by experts in the corporate knowledge industry. A centrally monitored single online podcast of course material will be nationally imposed. Institutions would be funded selectively through 'challenge mode' pressurising them to function as centrifuges sifting out best brains trained in high power computing to work in corporate institutions of science-tech hybrid areas. Higher education institutions in the country will compete to provide teaching and learning environment appropriate for production of the graduates employable in knowledge industry. Indian higher education, not dependent on foreign students, will be least affected by the international supply chain disruption thereof. Demographically favourable from the demand side, Indian higher education institutions will not face scarcity of students and hence no revenue fall. Nevertheless, the institutional role redefined due to dependency on virtual classrooms and online transactions, the cost will be less, although the private establishments might charge heavily.

Challenges

COVID19-induced new environment necessitates a shift in perspective regarding higher education.

- Online mode is going to stay as a new normal and as the most important complementary to the present mode, if not *a de facto* substitute immediately.
- Incorporation of the online tools will not be optional anymore. Webinars and Teleconferencing will become the regular practice. All this has been happening as a crisis-driven stopgap arrangement.
- Quality online teaching/learning programmes are high-input enterprises requiring a considerable investment on technological infrastructure.
- We have to think about the ways and means of developing Online teaching tools and providing training in their effective use.
- Some of the teachers have tried online teaching in amateurish ways of their own.
- It is necessary to turn them into professionals capable of using the technology innovatively and train students how to make the best of it.
- Converting a conventional course into online mode is not an easy task. It requires professional training.
- It is important for the teachers to know that such a professional re-articulation is inevitable for not being replaced from their occupation.
- We have to design training programmes suitable for mobilizing their resources by providing a wide range of holistic solutions to the challenge of online teaching, which can make them professional indispensable in the sector.

- It is necessary to advise institutions and the Government to bring about necessary changes in the organisational structure for facilitating the new normal.
- Disciplinary silos must disappear allowing the growth of cross-disciplinary academic culture, a crucial factor for the creation of new synergies.

There may be more serious questions to be addressed. This draft is only a background document to proceed further through deliberations and expert advice.

As part of the Consultative Committee, you are requested to review the draft or even substitute it if necessary. What is much more important is the technical input relating to the challenges already enlisted as well as those yet to be added.

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