

India's top varsities can now offer online degrees. Here's why it's a big opportunity for ed-tech.

Because of the rapidly changing demands of job markets, it is no longer possible to educate, upskill, or reskill only through traditional methods. Online degrees can address this gap. Tie-ups between traditional universities and ed-tech can go a long way. However, the learning and skilling outcomes have to be on a par with those of traditional classroom education.



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Vishal Kumar, who works at a real-estate firm in Noida, wanted to move to the next stage of his career — become a manager. But for that, he would have to get an MBA degree.

Problem was, he could not take a break from his job to join a course that required attending traditional classroom lectures. He wanted a flexible option that would work around his timings. A few weeks ago, he chanced upon an advertisement for an online MBA degree from Amity University — it ticked all the boxes — and Kumar grabbed the opportunity.

Kumar is not alone. Data from the latest National Sample Survey shows that the net attendance ratio — the percentage of people in an age group attending a certain level of education — at the post-higher secondary level is 19.4%.

If the country wants more people to get higher education, just building more colleges and universities is not the answer. There has to be a more effective use of online learning in conjunction with place-based learning, addressing the issues of access, cost, and efficacy of learning.

The recent Union Budget made a key attempt to address just that, announcing that the top 100 educational institutes by National Institutional Ranking Framework ranking can start offering completely online educational degrees.

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Welcoming the government's move, ed-tech company Udacity's CEO Gabriel Dalporto says, "For many years, Indian universities have not been allowed to offer more than 20% of a degree online. But as strong as Indian universities are, the number of trained technical graduates they produce every year is only a fraction of the demand both within India and worldwide."

He goes on to add that online degree programmes focus on job-ready skills by keeping the content constantly updated and offering learner support at a scale that in-person classes can't achieve.

It is no longer possible to educate, upskill, or reskill only through traditional methods. Online degrees can address this gap and tie-ups between traditional universities and ed-tech can go a long way. But, for online education to flourish, the learning and skilling outcomes have to be on a par with those of traditional classroom education.

Before going into how the government's announcement opens new and affordable avenues of learning, let's trace how this segment has developed over the past few years.

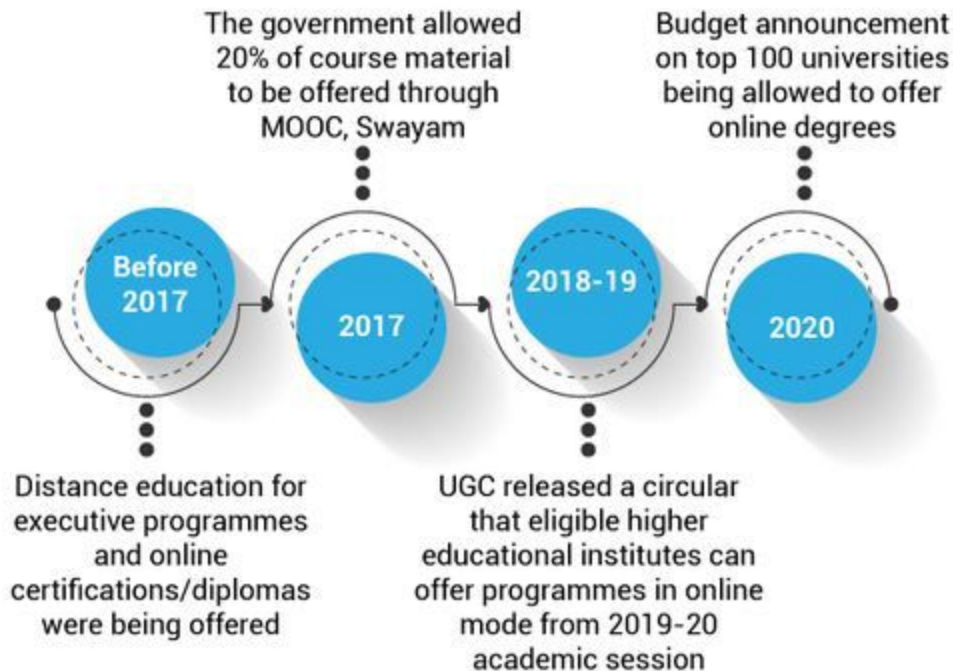
From ed-tech vs. education to collaboration

Online education has been picking up pace in India, but universities and ed-tech were often considered to be addressing two different problems.

Prior to 2017, without much regulatory support, ed-tech programmes offered either preparation material for exams or positioned themselves as self-learning modules meant for

preparation material for exams or positioned themselves as self-learning modules meant for different life stages. Universities were where people went to get degrees and placements.

Online degrees: milestones



Source: ET Prime research

A few pioneering institutes started blending online and classroom teaching in executive education. One of the early companies to adopt this technology-assisted model was Hughes Global Education, launched in 2001.

With its Interactive Onsite Learning platform, Hughes tried to replicate the experience of a live classroom, with a student in any part of the country, at a certain time, could interact freely with the professor, and raise questions. Over 30,000 students have gone through over 100 programmes on this platform.

Poulomi Ganguly, director, product and strategic initiatives at Hughes Global Education, shared the learnings gleaned over the past 15 years. First, this method offers financial and productivity benefits, bringing savings on location transfers and living costs.

Second, as the curriculum is designed keeping in mind the needs, expertise, and skills of the professionals, it is possible to provide focused and optimal learning from the faculty of premier institutes. However, the executive courses are mostly meant for people with significant industry experience. People like Kumar would be ineligible for many such programmes just because they lack the necessary experience.

Meanwhile, companies like Udacity had started building industry-aligned courses called [nanodegrees](#) to skill people for high-technology emerging jobs. But just offering the course was not enough. They found that placement was critical to make these courses viable. While they could offer certificates, college accreditation remained a dream.

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Then came a UGC ruling in 2018-19, which lent more sanctity and validity to the model. However, the minimum requirements for the institutes were such that many were not eligible to run such courses. Courses requiring lab classes were excluded, which again left out disciplines like medicine and architecture from taking the first online step.

One of the first universities to start offering online courses was Amity University. According to its assessment, of the top 100 universities, only 22 were eligible to apply. Finally, only seven got the approval of UGC's Distance Education Bureau.

"We started offering the 24 approved online programmes in November 2019. Seeing the positive response, we expect to touch lakhs of students in the next few years," says Ajit K Chauhan, chairman, Amity University Online and Amity Future Academy.

Amity is offering graduate and postgraduate degrees and diploma-level courses online, ranging from one to three years. Apart from the MBA programme, for which Kumar signed up, postgraduate degrees and diplomas in specific subjects and bachelor's degrees in arts, commerce, and computer applications are part of Amity's online stack.

Who are the possible learners?

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Who are the possible learners?

Around 80% underserved youth, as in India, is a large market by any standards. As more colleges and universities start offering online courses, who could be the new learners and what would it mean for each stakeholder?

For Amity, the primary base of applications and students is from working professionals of tier I cities. Then there are defence officers and freshers from tier II and tier III cities.

According to Ganguly, for an educational institution, this also means a key change in the way it looks at marketing its courses. Reaching the right learners, in their channel of choice is an art that institutions will have to hone as they offer online degrees.

The price differential

A key reason why many people cannot afford higher education is cost. Some specialised education-finance institutions have been stepping in to resolve this issue.

According to the latest National Sample Survey, the average expenditure for a technical or professional course across graduation and postgraduation is shown in the graphic below. Online degrees, it is expected, can help make the degrees more affordable.

**Cost of pursuing a basic
technical/professional course**

technical/professional course

Level of attendance	Average expenditure per person (INR)
Rural	
Below graduate (excluding diploma/certificate)	8,071
Diploma/certificate (below graduate level)	22,598
Diploma/certificate (graduate and above level)	39,701
Graduate	43,872
Postgraduate and above	50,512
All	32,137
Urban	
Below graduate (excluding diploma/certificate)	21,799
Diploma/certificate (below graduate level)	32,880
Diploma/certificate (graduate and above level)	81,300
Graduate	72,992
Postgraduate and above	74,068
All	64,763
Rural and Urban	
Below graduate (excluding diploma/certificate)	12,274
Diploma/certificate (below graduate level)	26,540
Diploma/certificate (graduate and above level)	64,379
Graduate	63,495
Postgraduate and above	66,824

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Diploma/certificate (graduate and above level)	64,379
Graduate	63,495
Postgraduate and above	66,824
All	50,307

Source: National Sample Survey, July 2017 - June 2018



According to Amity, at INR1.5 lakh to INR3 lakh, its online degrees are significantly more economical than regular full-time programmes.

The partnership between ed-tech and universities

Education experts ET Prime reached out to have agreed on one point: This is a chance to end the debate over online versus offline, and ed-tech versus university. Instead, there is an opportunity to build strong partnerships across universities and companies in ed-tech, technology, and marketing to offer scalable, affordable higher education.

Utter, which offers English-language learning through its app, believes the human touch is still very important and the best solution can only be built through strong university-ed-tech partnerships. It recently signed with AP Shah Institute of Technology, Thane, to create an online English-language lab, which helps students learn English for job readiness and interviews through a personalised coaching method.

“Myself x,’ is how most students introduce themselves at interviews (which is wrong). They pay upwards of INR3,000 for online resume help, but do not realise that the interview experience is as critical. Even a spelling mistake could be fatal,” says Ninad Vengurlekar, CEO, Utter. Even universities are now more open to accepting a solution such as Utter, he adds.

Meanwhile, Amity has built an in-house learning-management system which runs on the cloud. “Our content has been built on a four-quadrant approach. Videos, assessments, learning, and reference materials, and means of interactivity between learners and faculty are built into the system,” Chauhan says.

This is an internationally benchmarked system to teach learners at a distance and keep their attention and motivation within the programme intact. Such pedagogy has also been defined by UGC as one of the criteria for universities to be able to apply for running online courses.

The university follows a choice-based credit system, allowing learners to build their programme by choosing from a variety of domains. This gives the learners a holistic and deep understanding of various domains.

Assessments are continuous, with learners being tested on their previous lessons also at the end of each module. This ensures high learning outcomes. At the end of each semester, learners have to take exams at various centres via computer-based tests.

“We also have soft skills, behavioural-science, and personality-development programmes to

ensure our learners are well rounded,” says Chauhan.

Amity might have set the pieces into motion, but for many other universities that are still assessing their readiness to offer online degrees, there are companies like TeachEdison and ClassPlus, which have been offering integrated content-management systems and learning-management solutions. If the universities partner with these companies, the latter can quickly set up their degrees online and manage the entire teaching and learning process with multiple interactive features and assessment.

Udacity has partnered with LetzConnect, which will help it provide its nanodegree programmes to universities and institutions and build practitioner-level skills in young college students.

What are the issues to be addressed?

Building on the need for technological intervention, Ganguly says that understanding learning efficacy in an anytime-anywhere delivery model is now increasingly becoming important, because the target segments will range from an 18-year-old student to a 30-year-old executive. With each segment having its unique needs, the technology play has to ensure a satisfying, immersive learning experience.

She also believes that the rigour and ethics of online programmes should emulate that of classroom learning to add to their credibility.

Chauhan believes the challenge for new players will be:

- Developing content that is contextual and personalised
- Assessments that can be adapted to the learning pace of the individual
- Building these into the learning-management system
- Ability to reach out effectively to all kinds of learners

Keeping students motivated in an interactive environment is still a challenge which online educators are facing globally, he adds. It is, therefore, important to create environments of live learning and live interactions among the network of learners and faculty. For this, bandwidth and streaming facilities should also be in tandem.

Chauhan also highlights the need to monitor the security and privacy of learning materials and videos, for which universities invest a lot of time and money.

He says, since November, when Amity started rolling out its online programmes, the university has picked up several learnings. “For example, we realised that videos had to be shorter to ensure better learner attention. We also felt the need to have dedicated student-mentoring teams, which would regularly interact with the learners via chat and calls to keep them motivated. We are building chatbots to be able to help learners with academic queries while they are learning.”

According to Udacity's Dalporto, it makes sense to go digital because the cost of creating and updating offline courses is much higher. However, he says one of the biggest challenges is to change mindsets, in which the government can help by ensuring that the learning and skilling outcomes are on a par with those of traditional classroom education.

“Jobs are a big challenge in India right now and then there is recruiters’ bias, because of which they don’t see online education in the same light as offline. I hope this (the government’s) move will help resolve that,” he adds. “Finding the right infrastructure for delivery, and keeping students engaged and disciplined are the other challenges.”

While the opportunity is immense, there needs to be clear learning and skilling outcomes — on a par with physical degrees — for online education to flourish. Partnership between pedagogy and technology could show the way.

(Graphics by Abdul Shafiq)

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