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Economic Interests of Online Education

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to probe in to the politics of Online education. Online education is popularly viewed as innovative methods to support education across the world. Our younger generation is well dovetailed in to the style of life proffered by technology. The enthusiasm of governments is evi-dent in promoting technologically sound education system. Governments across the world spend huge amounts to accumulate digital tools and supporting system, training teachers etc. Is this initial spending emanate from the economic rationale of 'automating production for better output'? This article argues that the online solutions for educational problems is not an educational idea but a business idea.

Keywords : Online Education, MOOCS, SWAYAM

Introduction

Why should we digitalise our education system? An oft repeated argument is that digital education could serve more effectively than the teaching of a teacher. There can be a second argument in favour of technology that they are consumer friendly or user friendly tools for learning that best fit to the tastes of modern google generation. It is true that the new generation wield technology much bet-ter than the old. That means that the new generation possess absolutely distinct skills than their previous generation. This skills has grown in to the form of strong identity that unify the new generation.

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Those children who are born in between 80's and 90's are called as digital natives (Prensky 2001), Net generation (Tapscot, 1998) or web generation (Hartmann, 2003). Our students are immersed in the various avenues of digital entertainment like video games, digital camera, youtube etc. A new value system has emanated that steer the society to place digital tools at the centre of social life. Orienting oneself to these value system is very important to thrive in the digital society.

New skills and competencies

Industrial society fostered punctuality, repetition and obedience through education. Digital society heralded a new era in education with its focus on virtues such as temporal and spatial flexibility, indi-vidualised products, and personal control (Feenberg 2002). These virtues help the digital society to rear up a generation that can carry forward the digital environment to the next generation. The idea of equity and social justice is claimed to be addressed through digital learning environment through its ubiquitous nature and customisation for using at ones own pace for the purpose of learning.

Technology made our life more easy, effortless and faster. Automation of office system and public spaces play significant role in ensuring the rights of the citizen. Children enjoy learning through technology as it is appropriate to their interest and tastes. Teachers believe that technology ease their job by providing more vivid experiences to students through enriching multi sensory impressions of animations and videos. Students love learning with the support of digital technology as it well fit to their skills, tastes and interests. Schools deem it as a privilege to provide digital tools that contain the software packages exclusively targeted to attain the curricular objectives.

Covert interestes

As every one believes good about something odds are there for overlooking some of the important issues related to it. Is there a stealthy alliance between economy and digital initiatives in education? It is a fact that all across the world the governments are withdrawing from economic responsibilities of education. Unprecedented fee hikes, call for autonomy, pressure for resource mobilisation through research and consultancy, promotion of educational loans are some examples where governments strategically put forward changes in education system. This is the context in which the ubiquitous digital system proffers support for the education systems all over the world. In fact the support offered by the digital technology through online mediated learning environment is not educational in nature but economic. This article is an attempt to further elaborate this argument.

The draft National Policy of education (2019) proposes that the Raising Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to 50% as one of the most important objective of the policy. According to All India Survey on Higher education (AISHE, 2016-17) the present GER is just 25.2%. That means just 25% of the eligible population only have access to higher education in India. In real numbers there are 35.7 million students pursuing higher education in India. The total number of teachers for teaching 35.7 million students is just 13,65,786 (AISHE 2017). According to University Grants Commission (2019) there are 3 lakh vacancies in higher education institutions managed by the state and central governments (https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/fill-up-3-lakh-vacancies-in-6-months-ugc-to-education-institutes/articleshow/69657491.cms). If there are 3 lakh vacancies when there is only 25% enrolled, what would be the total number of vacancies needed to accommodate 50% GER? This is a haunting question for the government while looking from the economic point of view. This plight is common for governments across the world. Ensuring access to education with very little to spend is a puzzle for governments. Technology proffers education with less cost with liberal means of access. Here is where a huge educational challenge finds an economic solution with the support of technology.

Expenditure of course is an issue as there are multiple welfare issues to be attended, which are equally pressing the governments. The budget allocation for education sector is just 3.3% of the total budget expenditure, which is almost same as the last year in terms of percentage share. Despite the Modi government's enthusiasm for promoting higher education, the irony is that the total out lay for the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA), which converted grants to loans and may surrogate UGC in near future, has been reduced from Rs 2750 crore last year to 2100 crores this year. It is flabbergasting to note that the actual amount spent by the HEFA last year (2018) was just 250 crores. The decline of funding for education is not only happening in India. It appears to be a global phenomenon. All across the world digital technology and online resources are used to fill the gap of falling public spending on education. The exponential growth in enrolment of students across the education system pauses serious challenges for governments. Accommodating all the educational aspirants to institutionalised education system demands too much of financial resources from the governments. This is the contexts in which automation of education has become a real problem solver for the governments.

MOOC and the question of equity in education

One of the most popular form of automated education in India is Massive Open Online Programmes (MOOC).MOOC programmes are offered free

of cost through online. Anybody who have an internet connection can access the programmes offered through MOOCs. Students can attend the courses offered by the faculty members from premier institutes with out any hassles and restrictions of admission. They neither have to be physically present at the institutions of these great teachers to attend the programme. As the programme allows students to pursue any number of courses with out any restriction, even working force also can make use of the wonderful opportunity offered by the MOOC. Beyond these benefits at individual level it helps to achieve lofty aims like access, equity and quality, as claimed by government of India in the website of SWAYAM. The administrators and academics strongly believe that easy accessibility with the help of ubiquitous internet technology and absolutely free of cost attributes of the programme will democratise education in a radical way (Lewin, 2012; Skiba, 2012; Dillahunt, Wang, and Teasley, 2014) and free itself from the neoliberal interest of profit motive in education. MOOc as an alternate to privatisation of education is also prevelent among the people.

In India MOOC programmes are offered through SWAYAM a digital platform established by the government exclusively for the purpose. The basic purpose is to achieve the three cardinal principles of Education Policy viz., access, equity and quality. Also it claims that it facilitate the best teaching learning resources to all, including the most disadvantaged and it seeks to bridge the digital divide for students who have hitherto remained untouched by the digital revolution and have not been able to join the mainstream of the knowledge economy.

As the vociferous support over the MOOCs is settled it is very important to meticulously evaluate the substance of claims attributed to massive automated education programme. The popular beliefs spread about the MOOCs acts as a limit situation to understand how far it do justice to the claims attributed to it. Many studies have pointed out the disappointing performance of MOOC for all its proclaimed potential, citing completion rates (Roth, 2013; Jordan, 2013) and poor software design (Gibbs, 2014), potential effects on face-to-face education (Rice, 2013), and abundant student grading (Krause, 2013) as evidence of the need for the field to take MOOCs seriously. Inspite of all these criticism, MOOC is increasingly under the shadow of its politics of cost reduction. A closer analysis shows that MOOC is not an educational solution but an economic solution for the government.

Students in a MOOC course do not need any additional built up area as they get educated through their digital tools. In fact MOOC courses cut the delivery costs of education in a revolutionary fashion. MOOC instructors

prepare written documents and digitalise the script with the support of all the possibilities of video editing and digital tools. When compared to traditional classroom setup the economies of scale in the recurring and nonrecurring expenditure yield tremendous fall in cost of the delivery of education. The added advantage is the reusable digital materials, that doesn't need any space for shelving, and lower cost in the form of salary and other benefits to the regular teaching staffs appointed in the institutions. The amazing flexibility offered is that the MOOC programmes did not insist that the producer of the study materials and its presenter need not be the same. Hence it may open up, or already opened, a specialisation in terms of those who write academic content and those who present the same in the form of a video lesson with charismatic appearance and wonderful accent in the dominant language. The MOOC can raise the enrolment in higher education by providing a variety of courses available at the disposal of the learner. Due to abundance of courses in MOOC the student is almost in a digital supermarket, who can make selection of a course that goes well with his interest, of course at his own risk as well. This lowcost means of enhancing enrolment is considered as the key to social justice for governments now.

Future of teachers in automated education

Technology as a threat for teachers is an exhausted debate. Pandits have cogently convinced as how teacher is necessary, even more than traditional system, in a classroom. As technology has not done much harm to teachers MOOC courses does show promise. Its facilities like attending classes and lectures anywhere and at any time and also the big advantage of login as an evidence of attending lectures through MOOC platform give considerable advantage over traditional classrooms and teachings of teachers which are constricted to time and space. With more advancement and professionalisation of MOOC programmes varied learning experiences for satisfying different learning styles of learners can also be produced. As there are varied learning experiences in the same content that satisfies different learning styles, MOOC overcome an important limitation of the teacher in classroom. As there are softwares being developed for grading the essay type answers of students as what is pointed out by Peter Foltz and Thomas Landauer claim in describing their "Intelligent Essay Assessor," based on a technique called "Latent Semantic Analysis" (Foltz, 1996). Coming to the latest development, Wilson and Czik (2016) reports that Automates Essay Evaluation softwares are being popularly used in United States. This kind of assessment tools are going to make revolutionary change in Indian affiliating Universities where announcement of results on time is in topsy

turvy. Just 20 hours of packaged instructional courses in MOOC could handle a four credit course for a whole semester handled by teachers in a classroom. Weekly question answer sessions and discussion forums could give a human touch and added support to the MOOC learners.

Similar to the criticism raised by Feenburg (2002) against automated education, MOOC courses separate content from the educational process. Further the first dimension, content, itself get separated as generation and presentation. MOOC provides freedom for the course administrator to get contents from the experts and get them presented by another 'expert'. This makes the content an adopted product and presented according to the understanding of the presenter which often will be unlinked from the context in which the content is germinated and written. In Indian context, many University faculties who offer MOOC programme would find it really difficult to interact with the number of students who register for the MOOC programme. A teacher who have nearly 500 students for a MOOC course would need at least 5000 minutes for grading an assignment if he/ she spend 10 minutes in average for a single assignment. The number of assignments, the interactive sessions in regular intervals and other requirements for the conduct of the programme force the teachers to seek the support of other inexpensive human resources to bolster their horrid chore.

The cost reduction strategies of MOOC programme enables the course administrator to surragate himself with less expensive personnals and create a system for discussion and interaction with the students. This virtual solution to highly expensive time and energy of an 'expensive Faculty' could even substitute campuses in future. Students should be able to select a course from the self of a supermarket of courses and earn their credits ever meeting their faculty members and fellow students.

Technology as a threat to teaching profession is an old debate. Is it likely that the advent of MOOC in large scale would it obliterate the existing teachers? It is very difficult to remove the large number of teachers working in higher education system, not due to the fact that their present form is inevitable for the managing and progress of automated education, but due to moral and organisational factors that may cause big blow to such decisions. The usual logic of the government while raising the fee structure of higher education institutions work here as well: the fee increase is not applicable for the existing students! That means that fees will not be raised for the present students but definitely for the future students. The same logic is applicable for the teachers in case of automated education. Any form of automated education, say it be MOOC or any other form, is not going to reduce the number of teachers working in higher education institutions at present, but

definitely those who wish to join the profession in future. Though this is an alarming issue the idea of educational re-formers to propose automated education as a self pacing individualised solution for learning a as a pretext for cost cut is an issue that evade from discussions related to automated education.

The reforms happening in Indian higher education are based on the binary of traditional method of education with the online and MOOC mode. For pushing teachers and students to accept the power of quality education entailed by automated education reformers has used the trio of legitimacy, economic advantages and aspirations of teachers together. The Draft NEP (2019) and UGC 's seventh pay revision document pay high respect and legitimise contributions in MOOC as an important criterion that determine the quality of teachers. The high remuneration for involving are a real attraction for the teachers to contribute their time and energy for in the MOOC programmes. As points are allotted for content writing, presentation and coordination of MOOC programmes teachers look forward to contribute in the MOOC programme as a source of their credit points for ensuring their promotions in future.

Conclusion

The key idea around which the whole rhetoric of the benefits of automated education is built up is based on the need for increased virtualisation of education system and the demand based courses and programmes offered by the educational consumers. This essentially points to the obsoles-cence of traditional campus and teaching methods (Feenberg 2002) which are confined to time and space. As the advantage of Automated education is often expressed in terms of convenience and economies of scale, it does not take advantage of an interactive learning environment that is organic in its nature. It simply extends the logic of production function by pumping in a volley of video lessons and other assignments in a ritualistic manner. This cost saving has the effect of isolating the student from the learning environment and alienate the learner from the learning process.

The future of the automated education is so bright. New virtual universities may emerge so as to address the problems of equity and access to education. In India, there are discussions going on about converting Council for Educational communication (CEC), an important organisation under UGC, as a virtual university, probably the first one in India. Undoubtedly the automated education system through the virtual universities will be a great blessings for those labour force to update their skills that help them to make themselves worthy in capitalist economies. Of course the dropouts

from rural areas also will have advantages in the form of continuing their education through virtual universities and automated system of education. But substituting the real campus life and experi-ences of the students in real classroom just because we have more money saving ways of educat-ing our younger generation is a business way of looking at education. If we continue to entertain Business solutions for educational problems, we must brace for a shock, not far from now!

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