

An International Registered Peer Reviewed Bilingual Research Journal

**SATRAACHEE**

ISSN 2348-8425

**सत्राची**

**शोधांक -1**

**A UGC-CARE Enlisted  
Peer Reviewed Research Journal**

**Year 11, Issue 27,  
Vol 39, No. 3.  
April-June, 2023**

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# Innovating Through Adversity: India's Digital Initiatives During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## **Abstract:**

*The COVID-19 outbreak urged the educational institutions to adopt alternative methods of teaching and learning for the continuity and maintenance of quality education. In India, the pandemic had a major impact on higher education (HE) and it convinced educational institutions to adopt E-learning who earlier were not willing to adopt it. It made the system realize and accept new methods and approaches of teaching-learning like flipped classroom, blended approach of learning etc. The current study provides an overview of the role of E-learning by highlighting the various digital initiatives taken by Government of India especially during and after the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** Digital initiatives, E-learning, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, COVID-19, Higher Education (HE), India

## **Introduction:**

The National Education Policy (NEP-2020) highlights the importance of the Digital India Campaign for transforming India into a digitally empowered society. The policy claims that education will play a critical role in this transformation and calls the relationship between education and technology bi-directional [1]. Education plays an important role in human development and the higher education is a central venue for the construction and development of new knowledge and the digital technologies act as essential means for achieving this potential. The digitalization in higher education empowers the higher education institutions (HEIs) in attracting more and more students, making the teaching-learning effective and

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improve the overall process of teaching and learning. With the growth of technology, the digital resources in India have become increasingly available to students, providing students with new opportunities to access higher education. In the year 2020, after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the world, the Government of India (GoI) had to close all the educational institutions and to sustain higher education, it encouraged the HEI's to adopt alternative methods of teaching learning using E-learning practices. The pandemic convinced educational institutions to adopt E-learning who earlier were not willing to adopt it. E-learning approach is adopted by HEIs in traditional or face-to-face mode to facilitate teaching and learning through internet or intranet technologies. Anytime, Anywhere and Anyplace are the three essential characteristics of this approach. It promotes independent and active learning and enables use of efficient means of delivering course material to students. Students can interact with their peers around the world because it makes education open and accessible to a wide audience. E-learning can adjust to the needs of everyone and offers cost-effective education and flexibility in terms of time, place and pace. The HEIs are using E-learning to be in line with the future 21<sup>st</sup>-century technologies. Research claims that learning that takes place through E-learning platforms increases the retention of information among students [2]. It makes learners self-directed where they can learn synchronously or asynchronously at any time [3]. E-learning makes the learning experience more engaging and memorable by making it possible to include a range of multimedia resources such as interactive quizzes, podcasts, videos etc. In a survey by “Wiley’s annual Voice of the Online Learner”, it was revealed that around 94% of students have a very positive view of online learning, and 83% of students showed their interest to learn again through online mode [4].

### ***E-Learning During Covid-19 Pandemic in India***

Just like in any other part of the world, the Indian HE experienced both challenges and opportunities due to COVID-19 pandemic. With the shift to E-learning from the traditional mode of education, the usage of technology increased HEIs invested and encouraged use of new technologies to support remote learning. During the pandemic, the HEIs conducted virtual classes by using various platforms like Google Meet, Zoom, MS Teams etc. The faculties of HEIs recorded lectures and posted them online for students and thus enabling students to study and learn at their own pace. This flexibility and convenience for students proved helpful to not only to show learners but also to those students who faced internet issues. The faculties also made the best use of the digital initiatives implemented by GoI especially in the field of higher education. They encouraged students for submitting assignments electronically and adopted online assessment methods to assess the learning progress of students. E-content plays an important role in E-learning. Realizing this, with the advent of the pandemic, the University Grants Commission (UGC) made exemplary efforts to spread awareness about various digital initiatives of GoI and to increase their usage among students and teachers. Among these initiatives, providing access to “Study Webs of Active Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM)” online courses “(<http://storage.googleapis.com/uniquecourses/online.html>)” without registration was a very need based and praiseworthy decision. The website was made available to students free of cost. Due to this step, there was a massive rise in enrolment of students in SWAYAM and it reached 1.1 crore between the time period of July 2019- January 2021. Around 24110 e-



content modules related to 87 undergraduate courses were made available online to students on the website of Consortium for Educational Communication (CEC) “(<http://cec.nic.in/>)”. Another useful digital initiative which helped both teachers and students of HEIs during Pandemic was e-PG Pathshaala “(<https://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/>)”. It hosted interactive and high-quality e-content. Around 23,000 modules containing e-texts and videos in 70 PG disciplines were hosted on this website. In May 2020, the “Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD)” now “Ministry of Education (MoE)” through the National Digital Library of India (NDLI) created a special collection namely “Corona Outbreak: Study from Home”. The collection aimed at enabling the teachers and students to have access to the educational literature during the pandemic. In addition to this, the MoE & IIT Kharagpur released “Consolidated Covid-19 Research Resource Repository. The access to the repository was enabled through NDLI. The repository contained collection of academic and research content for teachers and students which consisted of latest scholarly publications, documents, videos, journals, conferences etc. As an immediate response to the pandemic, the Central Institute of Educational Technology (CIET) has initiated a series of webinars for the professional development of teacher and students from April 2020. Till date, it has conducted 800 webinars on various aspects of integrating technology in teaching learning. In order to benefit the teacher and students, the CIET has maintained the video links and presentation of all the conducted Programme on its website (<https://ciet.nic.in/pages.php?id=webinar&ln=en>). Another praiseworthy initiative of GoI in the year 2020 was the launch of a national program “VidyaDaan 2.0” which aimed at developing and contributing E-learning content and getting a chance to be recognized nationally. The program brought together organizations and academicians to develop and contribute enriched curriculum-aligned E-learning content. The contributors can contribute E-learning content in a variety of forms like e-texts, videos, animations etc. Due to the growth of online learning during the pandemic, various national and foreign investors realized the capability of the EdTech market and invested in India-based E-learning and EdTech startups. Due to this, around 9000 startups emerged in India for delivering learning solutions to students, teachers and educational institutions [5].

### ***E-Learning after Covid-19 Pandemic in India***

The COVID-19 pandemic which started in the year 2020 has put over 1.2 billion children out of their school. As a result of the pandemic, the education system has changed dramatically where E-learning platforms have seen a distinctive rise. The pandemic accelerated the adoption & implementation of E-learning around the world. It also paved the way for colleges and universities to move their traditional classroom-based teaching learning to online platforms. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 also emphasizes on establishing a hybrid education system in India which will empower the education system with interactive and innovative technologies [6]. In February 2023, the SWAYAM topped among E-learning platforms by 2.4 crore enrolment and 26 lacks completing the courses. The ratio between males and female enrolment was 40:60 [7]. In 2021, UGC notified that the HEIs are allowed to teach up to 40% of syllabus of each course through online mode and rest 60% can be taught in offline mode (other than SWAYAM course). The UGC in September 2022 notified that the degree obtained through online and distance mode will be treated as equivalent to those degrees acquired through the conventional mode of learning. This step will help many students who

wanted to enroll for various courses but could not do because of residing in isolated or far interior places. Such a need based decision will empower them to pursue the course of their interest by saving their valuable time and reducing their travel expenses. Further, in the year 2022, the UGC amended the guidelines for Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programme aiming at making online learning easier for international students and encouraging them to enroll in Indian Universities [8]. The students who enroll for various programmes through various E-learning platforms and complete the programmes are being issued credits for the course. These credits are stored in “Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)” which is a student-centric facility to be implemented at the University level across India. The initiative aimed at enabling student mobility across HEIs and allowing the student to move across various streams and HEIs. The ABC will act like a bank for students where the students can pursue online degree from various Universities in India and earn credits which will be stored in the bank [9]. The CIET also started to conduct various workshops, webinars and training programmes from March 2021 on the website (<https://ciet.nic.in/workshop-training.php>). Till today, CIET has conducted 42 workshops and training programmes on topics such as ICT integration in teaching and learning, e-content development, use of educational software and tools, digital storytelling, and online assessment, among others. The CIET is continuously carrying out training programmes. The Union Minister for Finance & Corporate Affairs, GoI, in the Union Budget 2022-23 while presenting the Union Budget 2022-23" announced that a digital university “DESH-Stack eportal” will be setup in India for online learning providing world-class quality universal education. The university will provide a personalized learning experience to students. High quality e-content will be developed in all spoken languages and delivery of it will be made possible through digital teachers [10]. The ministry also announced that all states will be urged for setting up physical libraries at the panchayat levels so that the access to the resources of national digital library is ensured. By 2026, it is being project that India will face a scarcity of 14-19 tech professionals. The scarcity of tech professionals can be efficiently bridged by offering blended learning as it is cost-effective and a better method to produce skilled manpower [11]. In a related study, it was found that around 66% of learners were satisfied with online learning and around 76.47% of participants responded that the blended mode will be the future of learning. As high 88.92% of participants suggested that government should provide high-quality video conferencing facilities to students for free [12]. In a similar study conducted by Manjareeka et al., (2022), around 72.3% of teachers believed that videos or animation can raise the attention among students. However, 86% of teachers felt face-to-face learning is better than online mode of learning and also believed that the online mode of learning cannot be a substitute to face to face learning [13].

### **Conclusion:**

COVID-19 pandemic has made us realize that a holistic approach to education is needed because it considers the student’s academic, social, and psychological well-being. By prioritizing a holistic approach, educators can better support students through the challenges like that of the recent pandemic and prepare them for success in their future lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has actually tested the resilience of HEIs in executing E-learning. The convenience, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness make E-learning an attractive option for both

students and teachers. Thus, the E-learning platforms will continue to find its audience ensuring flexibility and providing new learning possibilities to students. In future, it is expected that E-learning will become even more prevalent and impactful in education. The E-learning platforms are strong enablers for learning but it would not reduce the importance of a teacher in the teaching-learning process and rather it would re-shape the role of teacher in higher education. Thus, the digital initiatives taken up by GoI during and after pandemic stood as a strong backbone support to both teachers and students of HEI's.

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