

Blended Learning: Issues and Challenges Related to Indian Higher Education System

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Abstract: Democratic cultures emphasize the equality of all individuals. Equality signifies that all individuals are treated equally, have equal chances, and are not subject to any kind of discrimination. In a democracy, education is crucial to building an egalitarian and just society. In recent years, we have all witnessed that the quick spread of COVID-19 has had negative effects on every aspect of life, including education, which is by far the largest sector affected by the pandemic. The closing of educational institutions and the decision to shift traditional classrooms to digital platforms are not only increasing learning inequality among students but are also forcing a large number of students, especially those from remote areas, to leave their educational institutions due to the digital divide. The University Grants Commission, in its concept note on "Blended Mode of Teaching and Learning," in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, recommends that all higher education institutions should follow blended learning, in which up to 40% of a course is taught online and the other 60% using traditional, offline methods. This article seeks to explain the concept of blended learning and to identify various issues and challenges relating to its implementation, as well as to examine whether India, as a democratic nation, is prepared to implement blended learning in reality.

Keywords: *Blended Learning, Democracy, Digital divide, Higher Educational Institutions, Inequality, India.*

Introduction: If individuals are not democratic by nature, then education must undoubtedly play an important part in the process of transforming people into democratic citizens (Cook & Sharon, 2006). Without educated and well-informed citizens, a democracy cannot succeed. A healthy democracy requires equal access to education for all citizens, and a democratic government like India must ensure that all citizens have equal access to that opportunity. Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the sudden or forced switch from face-to-face traditional schooling to technology-based online learning has exposed greater access, opportunity, and resource disparities in the country. The impact of the pandemic on education reflects decades of neglect and the failure of the governmental apparatus to reach various categories of disadvantaged populations, including rural communities, urban poor, people with disabilities, and women from marginalized sectors and socially stigmatized communities. (Nehal, 2020). Although it is true that our experience with the COVID-19 epidemic has provided us a chance to become digitally literate, to host webinars, and to get familiar with digital learning tools (Dubey, 2021). But the transition to blended learning cannot be a panacea for the educational system in India. Our education technology suppliers face the challenge of creating accessible solutions for every student. On the other side, it is theoretically conceivable for students with limited flexibility and resources to get a world-class education using a single

internet connection through online learning. This has prompted the University Grants Commission of India to submit fresh suggestions for the implementation of a blended learning strategy, including the recommendation that up to 40% of instruction take place online. However, the delivery of education over the internet has several drawbacks, particularly in a developing country like India (Rajput & Swain, 2021). As a result, before plunging headlong into this blended learning approach, we must evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of this system; and also examine the issues and challenges to the actual implementation of blended learning in India.

The Concept of Blended Learning: The growth of digital learning platforms has had a big effect on educational institutions and has pushed the old ways to the back of the line. However, there are demands for both technology and conventional ways of instruction. As a consequence, the term "Blended Learning" was coined to describe the practice of incorporating digital learning resources with more conventional classroom-based instruction. Blended Learning, according to The Oxford Dictionary, is a kind of education in which students study through electronic and online media in addition to conventional face-to-face instruction. The term "Blended Learning" does not just refer to a blend of online and face-to-face learning; rather, it describes a carefully orchestrated set of activities that take place in both modes. The most significant aspects in this combination are learning goals and a learner-centred educational environment (UGC, 2021). To engage all sorts of learners, blended learning can cover all the bases, including those who study best in a structured setting with a teacher face-to-face, as well as those who learn best in a semi-autonomous, computer-based learning environment.

Blended learning models are recommended by National Education Policy 2020 because to the advent of digital technologies and the growing relevance of using technology for teaching-learning at all levels, from elementary school to higher education. While the NEP-2020 promotes digital learning and education, the necessity of face-to-face learning is explicitly acknowledged.

Important characteristics of Blended Learning environment are (UGC, 2021):

- a) Enhanced student involvement with learning.
- b) Improved teacher-student interaction
- c) Accountability for education.
- d) Management of time and adaptability
- e) Improved student academic achievement
- f) Improved institutional standing.
- g) More adaptable teaching and learning environment More conducive to independent and ongoing study
- h) Improved possibilities for experiential learning.

Some important elements of Blended Learning are (Ramya,2020):

- i. Face-to-face instruction:** Blended learning allows for face-to-face instruction in which students have adequate opportunity to connect with their professors and are consequently impacted by their personality, behavior, and values. In-person engagement facilitates synchronous communication. Teachers and students may get quick feedback, which is beneficial to the teaching and learning process. Face-to-face connection is very motivating for both instructors and students, and adds a human element to the process.
- ii. Peer group involvement:** On campus, students learn via formal and informal ways. Many desirable life skills and social ideals are honed via informal interactions with peers. The college/university campus offers several opportunities for this via playground activities and social interaction during spare time.
- iii. Group discussion and idea exchange:** classroom instruction not only gives students with contact with professors, but well-designed tactics also provide students with opportunities to engage in conversations with classmates on various areas of the course and share ideas. This helps pupils gain self-assurance, overcome hesitation, acquire the ability to communicate effectively, and improve their listening skills.
- iv. Accessing an electronic library:** In blended learning, accessing and using e-library is a component of ICT-supported instruction. In the conventional model, students have restricted access to the college library, but the digital library provides them with access to a variety of books relevant to their topic and covering several subject areas. This broadens their perspective and enlarges their understanding.
- v. Virtual Classroom:** A virtual classroom allows students to study at any time, from any location, and from any instructor. It doesn't matter where you are in the world if you can participate in a virtual classroom meeting with your other students and your instructor. Students may also learn from other specialists and broaden their horizons by exchanging information with them. Students that use this method will be able to compete with their counterparts in any area of the globe, and they will also have a multicultural perspective.
- vi. Webinars:** Webinars are an ICT-supported component of blended learning. It implies that students engage in seminars on various areas of interest to them over the internet. All participants are connected using accessible software such as Skype, Google Talk, zoom, etc., and then deliver their papers and engage in discussions via video conferencing.
- vii. Observing expert lectures on YouTube:** Blended learning enables students to benefit from the expertise of the course material they are studying by allowing them to conveniently access YouTube lectures by notable experts in many disciplines. In addition, colleges may post videos of their own instructors' lectures, allowing students who are unable to attend class to use this resource and profit from the instruction.

When all of these elements are combined into a single framework, this is known as blended learning.

Blended Learning Prerequisites: Blended learning is not a simple process to undertake. It involves specific basic preparations in all aspects of the teaching and learning process, including the instructor, the student, the designing of material, and the infrastructure. The following are the fundamental conditions for successfully adopting blended learning(Ramya,2020):

I. Fully skilled teachers: Although blended learning is student-centered, well-trained instructors play a significant role. Teachers should be well-versed in the notion of blended learning and possess the skills necessary to combine traditional and modern techniques. They should be educated to create digital material so that it may be accessed online by students. They should be well-versed in internet navigation, internet terminology, and any websites that might be valuable to pupils when they are studying online. Teachers should be able to use blogs, YouTube, and video conferencing and social networking tools such as Skype, Google Talk, and Zoom for instructional reasons.

II. Teachers with a positive stance on change: the blended learning process requires teachers with a broad perspective, who are adaptable and willing to embrace change, and who are highly inventive and dynamic.

III. Infrastructure: A college's ability to provide blended learning relies heavily on its computer labs, which should be equipped with enough computers to accommodate the whole class, as well as access to the internet, ideally through a campus-wide Wi-Fi network.

IV. Internet access on private Computers: Students should have minimum hardware support for online and offline learning at home, in addition to a college campus that is fully ICT friendly. This requires an optimistic outlook and well-planned government investments. To ensure that this form of online courses can be employed in the event of an emergency. Students would not have a more difficult time adapting to the new conditions.

V. Conscious and Supportive Parents: The parents should be made aware of this creative approach to education so that they are prepared for it, support their children's participation in blended learning, and recognize that this shift from conventional teaching is helpful for their children.

Advantages of Blended Learning: Blended learning is very flexible. Most importantly, it applies to any curriculum that retains conventional educational ideals while using digital media. Students, academics, and policymakers recognize the need for flexibility. Only a well-designed blended solution can seamlessly move students from classroom to computer and vice-versa. Recently, several worldwide learning platforms have incorporated blended learning, making it one of the most popular learning methods. The following are some of the most important advantages of a blended learning (UGC,2021):

1.Opportunity to work together from far away: Blended learning will make it possible for students to collaborate from afar in an intellectual endeavour.

2. Increased flexibility: Technology-enabled learning makes it possible to learn at any time and in any place. This means that students can learn without being limited by time or place, but they may still benefit from in-person interaction.

3. Increased interaction: BL provides a platform to allow increased connection between students and professors, as well as amongst students themselves.

4. Enhanced learning: Additional learning activities may help students reach greater and more meaningful levels of learning by increasing their level of engagement.

5. Learning to be virtual citizens: Learners develop their capacity to project themselves socially and intellectually in an online community of inquiry as part of their preparation to become virtual citizens. Blended courses assist students in mastering the skills required to use a range of technologies, which are increasingly vital for lifetime learning.

6. Learning materials and experiences may be made more dependable, repeatable, and reproducible with the help of Blended Learning.

Issues and Challenges: The implementation of every new policy is fraught with hurdles, and BL is no exception. The following concerns and issues are the most significant barriers facing Indian higher education; without resolving them, blended learning cannot be implemented in practice.

1. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (2019-20) report, 60.56 percent of India's 42,343 colleges are situated in rural parts of the country, and 420 universities are located in rural areas (AISHE 2019-2020). Due to the digital divide, these higher education institutions in rural areas will not be able to keep up with this proposed policy of blended learning as well as they could. Only large corporations and urban universities and colleges are in a position to invest in technology and give such education. More than 70% of the Indian population lacks access to high-speed internet, which is a major issue that has to be addressed. Even while India has already completed the digital revolution's great leap, there is still a long way to go to connect the disconnected. According to a survey by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), broadband penetration in urban India is 93%, whereas it is just 29.3% in rural India. (Shruthi et al., 2021).

Across the country, urban areas have a median of 106 connections per 100 residents, while rural areas have only 30. There is an unacceptable gap between urban and rural India when it comes to access to digital technology.

The following is the state-by-state comparison of the number of rural broadband users, which reveals significant regional disparities.

There are over 40 million rural broadband subscribers in Uttar Pradesh, compared to 3 million in Jammu & Kashmir. Following this state are Bihar, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh. Jammu, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, and Assam are the states with the lowest number of rural Internet users. There is a need for increased broadband connection penetration in these states (Gurudu, 2021). As of the most recent "The Indian Telecom Services Performance Indicators" reports published by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) on Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh. Jammu, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, and Assam are the states with the lowest number of rural Internet users. There is a need for increased broadband connection penetration in these states (Gurudu, 2021). As of the most recent "The Indian Telecom Services Performance Indicators" reports published by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) on January 10, 2022, the number of internet subscribers in rural and urban areas of India at the end of September 2021 was 336.60 million and 497.69 million, respectively. In a written response to a question in Lok Sabha, the Minister of State for Communications, Shri Devusinh Chauhan, emphasized the following steps taken by the government to improve digital outreach across the nation:

- i. The Government and Telecom Service Providers (TSPs) deliver Mobile/Broadband/Internet services in uncovered villages throughout the nation in phases. The government, with funding from the Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF), has schemes such as the Comprehensive Telecom Development Plan for North Eastern Region, Left Wing Extremism (LWE) Affected Area schemes, Aspirational Districts Schemes, Comprehensive Telecom Development Plan for Islands, etc., to extend mobile connectivity by erecting towers in the country's unconnected villages.
- ii. All Gram Panchayats (GPs) in the nation will have access to high-speed Internet through the progressive implementation of the BharatNet initiative. Service providers may utilize the infrastructure developed by the BharatNet initiative to provide broadband and Internet services. BharatNet's reach has recently grown to include all inhabited villages in the country, not just GPs. The aim of the National Broadband Mission (NBM), which was launched on December 17th, 2019, is to speed up the development of digital communications infrastructure, close the digital gap, promote digital empowerment and inclusion, and make high-speed Internet available to everyone at a price they can afford. A Prime Minister Wireless Access Network Interface (PM-WANI) framework has been introduced to enhance the expansion of broadband services over public Wi-Fi. The PM-WANI framework enables the deployment of broadband through a distributed architecture and function unbundling. Under this structure, entities do not need to get a license or pay the government any fees. The government is implementing a number of programs with the assistance of the Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF) in order to expand broadband service in rural and remote areas of the country. The total amount of money that has been earmarked for this purpose over the course of the past five years and the current year up until February 2022 is approximately 31529 crores (Ministry of Communications, 2022).

2. A government report reveals that India lags behind numerous nations, notably Brazil and China, in terms of the student-teacher ratio in higher education. The ratio of 24:1 in India is less than the ratio of 19:1 in Brazil and China. India's student-to-population ratio is the lowest of the eight nations analyzed, compared to Sweden's 12:1, Britain's 16:1, Russia's 10:1, and Canada's 9:1. According to a study from the Ministry of Human Resource Development, a low teacher-to-student ratio not only results in the overburdening of a limited number of instructors but also has a negative impact on the quality of academic research conducted by these professors. Due to rising student enrolment and stagnant recruiting efforts, the teacher shortage has become steadily more severe in recent years. Despite a rise in the number of students attending higher education institutions from 32.3 million in 2013-14 to 36.6 million in 2017-18, the overall number of teachers in the country has decreased, from 13,67,535 to 12,84,755, according to the ministry's All India Survey on Higher Education. It is estimated that there is a shortage of approximately 5 lakh teachers in the country's higher education system (including both public and private universities). "There is a shortage of academics in India, with 6,600 open positions in the nation's key universities (a deficit of 33 percent). "There are 35% and 38% of open positions at IITs and public institutions, respectively China, in terms of the student-teacher ratio in higher education. The ratio of 24:1 in India is less than the ratio of 19:1 in Brazil and China. India's student-to-population ratio is the lowest of the eight nations analysed, compared to Sweden's 12:1, Britain's 16:1, Russia's 10:1, and Canada's 9:1. According to a study from the Ministry of Human Resource Development, a low teacher-to-student ratio not only results in the overburdening of a limited number of instructors but also has a negative impact on the quality of academic research conducted by these professors. Due to rising student enrolment and stagnant recruiting efforts, the teacher shortage has become steadily more severe in recent years. Despite a rise in the number of students attending higher education institutions from 32.3 million in 2013-14 to 36.6 million in 2017-18, the overall number of teachers in the country has decreased, from 13,67,535 to 12,84,755, according to the ministry's All India Survey on Higher Education. It is estimated that there is a shortage of approximately 5 lakh teachers in the country's higher education system (including both public and private universities). "There is a shortage of academics in India, with 6,600 open positions in the nation's key universities (a deficit of 33 percent). "There are 35% and 38% of open positions at IITs and public institutions, respectively," the report said (India Today, 2019). Over 2,800 faculty positions are lying vacant at 23 Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) campuses across the country. "At present, the sanctioned strength of faculty in IITs is 8,856, out of which 6,043 are in position, while 2,813 are lying vacant," Human Resource Development (HRD) Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' informed the Lower House in a written reply. Moreover, of the 7,413 faculty positions at the National Institutes of Technology (NIT), 3,211 are vacant. There are as many as 36% unfilled faculty positions in India's top eight IITs. There are 65,824 students at the IITs in Mumbai (IIT Bombay), Delhi, Guwahati, Kanpur, Kharagpur, Chennai (IIT Madras), Roorkee, and Varanasi, but only 4,049 professors to fill the 6,318 approved jobs. Chandrashekhar Gaud of Neemuch, who is an RTI activist, says that this information came from the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Vacant seats as according institute (India Today, 2018):

(i) IIT Kharagpur: 46 per cent posts vacant

(ii) IIT Roorkee: 42 per cent

(iii) IIT Kanpur: 37 per cent

(iv) IIT Delhi: 29 per cent

(v) IIT Madras: 28 per cent

(vi) IIT Bombay: 27 per cent

(vii) IIT Guwahati: 25 per cent posts vacant

(viii) IIT Varanasi: 52 per cent posts vacant.

3. There are two viewpoints on technical and infrastructure challenges with regard to blended learning. First, an institution or class must build the appropriate infrastructure. Do they have IT staff? Can it allocate funds or invest in an experimental case? Secondly, the acquisition of software and hardware for blended learning programs might be expensive. Especially if you are dealing with a huge campus or many locations.

4. There is a need for professional and trained technicians; highly trained expert professors; well-equipped libraries; and simple access to internet service. Moreover, there is a dearth of fully equipped libraries. Some of the challenges associated with education come from factors such as educators who are unable to keep up with advances in their own fields. At the same time, our students don't have the right skills in the area of technology, and it's too expensive for them to get online.

5. Feedback from several stakeholders: In a press release dated June 6, 2021, the All India Federation of University and College Teachers' Organisation (AIFUCTO) requested the commission to retract the project proposal, claiming that the proposal "threatens the autonomy of universities and higher education institutes." If the concept note is adopted, the whole education system would be at the mercy of market pressures, the AIFUCTO added. It will "ultimately demolish" public colleges and universities and will harm the marginalized section of society.

While submitting their feedback on the concept note of the proposed blended mode of teaching, several stakeholders opposed the said proposal. Several teacher organizations in Kerala have opposed the decision by the University Grants Commission to go for blended learning.

Jogy Alex, president of the All Kerala Private College Teachers' Association, described the initiative as "anti-people" and stated that the new regulation negatively impacts poor and rural pupils in a country where the digital divide is a dreadful reality. "We fear that blended learning would further widen the digital divide among learners. It would eventually disrupt the advantages earned through the face-to-face mode of teaching on the campuses," N. Manoj, president of the Association of Kerala Government College

Teachers," was quoted by The Hindu as saying. The president of the Government College Teachers' Organization, K. Anilkumar, says that students from low-income areas did not have access to digital education during the time of the epidemic, and that blended learning will make the digital divide even worse.

Blended learning in higher education, according to Premachandran Keezhoth, general secretary of the Kerala Private College Instructors' Association, will promote technocrats over teachers by pushing the digital medium in such a significant manner. Under consideration of the 40% digital form of teaching and assessment, the decision would also impact the appointment of new faculty members in colleges. According to N. Manoj, the president of the Association of Kerala Government College Teachers, blended learning would eventually undermine the benefits gained via the face-to-face form of teaching on campus (Krishnakumar, 2021). Two Jadavpur University teachers' groups urged the UGC that the government must create digital infrastructure. Sixty percent of Indian institutions and 40% of universities are in rural locations with poor network access. Jadavpur University Teachers' Association (JUTA) says the digital divide is apparent across gender, caste, religion, geography, and income (Newslick Report, 2021).

Conclusion:

According to the government of India's National Education Policy (2020), unless online education is blended with experiential and activity-based learning, it would tend to become screen-based with insufficient emphasis on the social, cognitive, and psychomotor aspects of learning. The National Education (2020) also asserted that blended learning should be immersive and activity-based. It is not only a blend of online and face-to-face modalities, but rather a combination of purposeful activity in both. However, the benefits of online/digital education cannot be utilized until the digital gap is removed by deliberate initiatives, such as the Digital India campaign and the accessibility of affordable computer devices. It is crucial that the use of technology for online and digital education effectively addresses the issues of equity (NEP, 2020). The challenge of delivering high-speed internet to more than 70 percent of India's population is also important and must be addressed (Shruthi et al., 2021). Absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt, there is a need for a time-bound, cost-effective learning process in the Indian Higher Education domain to cope with the international standards, and blended learning can be the flagship of the Digital India effort in higher education. (Dubey,2021). But before putting the "Blended Learning Mode" into practice, it's important to figure out the many issues and problems that could make it hard to use. These problems need to be fixed so that Blended Learning can give students from all parts of society equal access to higher education, because a democracy that doesn't give everyone the same chance to get an education cannot work.

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