

GUEST COLUMN

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New CEO will be orchestrator of experiments

By the time India confronted Covid-19 in mid-March, IIM Bangalore had completed all its degree-granting programmes. Only the convocation remained. The immediate decision was to cancel the event and replace it with a small ceremony to recognise the award winners. We did not have enough time to visualise an online event with digital avatars that has now become the default convocation practice at most institutions. We have, however, promised to host a grand physical event for the 2020 graduating class, when conditions permit one!

Our faculty are no strangers to distance teaching-learning using technology. More than a decade ago, IIMB was the pioneer in offering a weekend degree programme for the software industry simultaneously in Bengaluru and Chennai, with two-way video and audio using ISRO satellite technology, much before streaming video became commonplace. IIMB also became the pioneer of massive open online courses

(MOOCs) in business and management in India in 2014. Today, we offer 50 management courses and customise many more.

We adopted a structured approach to manage the Covid-induced online transition. We quickly put together a team of our most tech-savvy and experienced online teachers and the chairs of our key academic programmes to chart out our approach. Feedback from faculty suggested that they would be most comfortable teaching in a classroom setting and that they would like to have as clear a view of the students as possible. So, we rapidly upgraded the infrastructure in 20 classrooms to include a large screen to see the students, a large digital writing board and another monitor to follow the chat.

We trained online learning facilitators—staff to help the faculty move between modes in the classroom. Our core team offered a series of workshops to faculty to help them make the best use of the available technology and the features of the online

platform. Faculty were also encouraged to make modifications in their courses, pedagogy and evaluation to suit the new medium. The feedback I have suggests that these efforts paid off. Both faculty and students admit that the experience has been much better than expected. Yet, challenges remain.

An MBA programme is much more than classroom sessions. Projects, peer learning and camaraderie leading to lifelong friendships are a few of the other key elements. We realised early that we needed to curate a “social learning experience” and organised a number of online forums, games and informal events to facilitate this process. Our students have taken many initiatives to keep their clubs and other activities running virtually. I was amazed by the quality of the student events online; it showed their talent and technical prowess.

Evaluation has been a challenging area. While some faculty have shifted to online assignments and projects, others have tried out different online evaluation and proctoring solutions. Students have access to library and database resources online, so projects based on secondary research have worked well, but field-based projects have been difficult to pursue. Placement is the next major challenge. Initial indicators from recruiters are that there will be good job opportunities at the top schools this year, though India’s overall economic numbers are a cause for concern.

What are the long-term prospects for management education in India? I personally believe that they continue to be good. The government has announced incentives for companies setting up capacity in India in a variety of priority industries. Changes in agricultural policy are expected to create new opportunities for the corporate sector in agriculture and food processing. The experience during Covid-19 suggests that much needs to be done to enhance the quantum and quality



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of health care services in India. The country will need qualified managers to drive all these initiatives.

The skill-set required by the manager of tomorrow will be different. Elements of Industry 4.0 (such as automation, Internet of Things, 3-D printing, data warehousing and analytics) are becoming an integral part of contemporary manufacturing. Contemporary services businesses are dependent on technology and advanced data analytics. The core principles of marketing, finance or operations management are likely to remain the same, but a successful manager will need to integrate a good understanding of technology and data with the traditional functional skills.

Automation is likely to make some existing managerial jobs redundant. But there will be new roles where human intelligence cannot be replaced or where it can augment artificial intelligence for the best results. Today, businesses generate a lot of data and

the digital environment permits experimentation at low cost. Contemporary managers have to be able to design and perform such experiments and use the results in their decisions. Reflecting these changes, the role of the CEO is increasingly that of an orchestrator of experiments.

For those who have rich industrial experience and are looking for the content and the way of thinking that management education provides, MOOCs are a useful approach. Based on asynchronous access to streamed content, MOOCs give a lot of flexibility to the learner. MOOCs offer a way forward to provide specialised content in hitherto under-managed verticals. If required, learning through MOOCs can be supplemented by discussion forums, small group discussions and other modes of focused learning. This will be particularly useful for the owners and managers of MSMEs.

There is an urgent need to make mass undergraduate education in In-

dia more relevant and useful. The typical bachelor's degree in the humanities does not equip graduates with any kind of marketable skill. MOOCs offer the opportunity to correct this. Why not offer a MOOCs-based degree programme in digital entrepreneurship? Essential skills would include communication and presentation, basic spreadsheet modelling, making business plans, online sales and marketing, an understanding of digital technologies and basic coding skills.

The MOOCs technology makes it relatively easy to offer such a programme with different language options, thus making it possible to reach out to learners across the country.

Management education undoubtedly faces challenges in the years ahead, but, in my view, we are well prepared to face them.

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