PANEL DISCUSSION

Challenges and future direction of online and blended education: a note on the round table discussion

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As a part of the first ever conference linked with this journal *Decision* on "Dealing with Online and Blended Education in Modern Challenging Times", in March 2022, almost after 2 years of the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic, an enlightening discussion took place among the distinguished professionals, practioners, and policy makers from different organisations across the world. The experts included Rajnish Kumar, Director of Digital Education of Ministry of Education; Tom Crick, Professor of Digital Education and Policy and Deputy Pro Vice Chancellor at Swansea University at UK; Wilima Wadhwa, Director of ASER (Annual Status of Education report) Center; and Björn Haßler, Technical Director at EdTech Hub. The panel discussion was anchored by Prof Aditi Bhutoria from the Public Policy and Management Group of Indian Institute of Management Calcutta and Strategic Advisor, EdTech Hub.

The discussion revolved around nuances of online education and future direction for policy and research in the field of technology-enabled education systems. The panelists shared details of their experiences across fields like education, computer science, public policy, and economics. While Dr. Björn Haßler talked about the challenges of inclusiveness of digital education and role of the EdTech Hub in promoting it globally, Dr. Wadhwa focussed on massive learning loses among school-going children in India driven by the pandemic. Prof. Crick then brought about the issue of ensuring quality teaching in this digital educational hemisphere while being cognisant of the stress and changing mindset of the teachers. Dr. Rajnish Kumar threw light on the National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR), which aims to energise the modern-day Indian education ecosystem.

Dr Björn Haßler discussed about the potential of the technology as an antidote to the problem of the global learning crisis, more so after the covid-ridden world. The key points he made about the role of EdTech Hub were to reach out to the poorest sections of population at an affordable cost, facilitate learning gain, and to supplement printed textbooks with digital version. He also indicated the need of today, i.e., collaboration beyond national boundaries and efficient utilisation of funds specially meant for such digital advancement.

Prof Crick described the massive impact that covid-19 has had on the educational landscape of the UK. He indicated that giving people laptops or devices and connectivity was not able to solve the intrinsic problem of identity and inequality. Teachers were not able to adjust to the rapid shift towards remote teaching and assessment. There were fear and uncertainty where people essentially had to do their jobs with impact on their health and well-being. This led to

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a skewed distribution of quality of teaching because people with strong technology background or in some specific earning streams perhaps felt more confident and capable of handling the shift, while others did not feel the same way. He also emphasised the role of digital education especially in the context of living in the digital, data-driven, competitive world in the society.

Dr. Wadha briefed about the situation of primary education in India and shared the details of learning losses based on field surveys during Covid-19. Based on field surveys during the pandemic across three states of India and some phone-based surveys as reported in ASER, few interesting issues related to school enrolment, access to learning resources and learning losses came up which warrant targeted policies. The increase in enrolment in public schools in India due to migration, loss of job opportunities, and provision of mid-day meals occurred along with non-accessibility of learning resources using digital platform. This was mainly due to the lack of internet facility and ownership of smart phones in rural India. Prof Wadha also described the feature of massive learning losses in terms of reading ability and arithmetic computational ability among the school kids, due to school closure during this pandemic. Hence, the above discussions though hinted towards the digitalisation mode of teaching; at the same time, experts were concerned about the challenges of moving towards online or blended mode of delivery due to paucity of digital access to every section of the students' population.

Interestingly enough, in the midst of such debate, came in the National Education Policy of India (2020) in which one of the crucial ingredients was digital education. Dr. Kumar updated about the contexts in which this digital architecture (NDEAR) was proposed to adopt a holistic approach to cater to the needs of such big, diverse, and complex education system of India. This was meant to enhance the education system to facilitate equitable and vibrant knowledge society. Use of technology for teaching and learning, removing language barriers, creating a digital infrastructure, a digital database to create a unifying common platform form the crux of such policy. Dr Kumar portrayed the envisaged outcomes of NDEAR such as the access to

on-demand learning materials, videos, graphics and animations, virtual laboratories and different forms of assessment tools, access to personalised adaptive learning (PAL) by the students, access by the teachers to online support for lesson plans, online reference materials. Teachers would also get access to online modules for improving professional standards. Schools/school management will get access to school management practices, learning management systems, and parents also get access to the child's holistic progress reports, school performance, teacher performance. From a policy perspective, educational administrators use data analytics to bridge infrastructure gap, teacher availability gap, address dropouts and make informed policy choices.

Finally, a question that continuously kept coming up was on the future of technology use for teaching and learning across the globe with all the aforementioned diversities. The discussions also indicated the importance of digital literacy along with accessibility to close the digital divide. There was consensus that technology can act as an enabler rather than a discriminating tool in education, especially when policies are contextualised. The panellists indicated the importance of open access, open source for research outputs in these dimensions for collaborative effort from different stakeholders to attain most efficient outcome in this digital world. The consensus was to move towards tech-enabled learning mechanism which could propel an open flexible learning process in several directions. Concerns on equity and a digital divide reinforced due to pandemic were recurrently raised. Hence, the need of the hour is not just an educational intervention—future research and policy prescriptions should be in the direction of developing a national-level infrastructure with affordability and accessibility.

Declarations

Conflict of interest   There is no conflict of interest.