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DIGITAL INITIATIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

Debarati Das

M.Phil Scholar, Department of Education, University of Gour Banga, Malda, West Bengal, Email: debaratid71@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The higher education (HE) of our nation is the third largest and oldest in the world. With the advent of the 21st century, revolutionary changes are taking place in the HE of India. We live in an era where technology shapes education globally. Digitalization stands as a transformative force in higher education, reshaping content delivery and learning experiences. Digital content, smart classrooms and online learning are becoming essential for the education system. The Indian government has invested heavily in HE level to digitalize the content and delivery of education. This paper examines various digital initiatives aimed at enhancing education quality in India like SWAYAM, e-PGPathshala, NDL, GIAN, NAD, NPTEL, Swayam Prabha, Virtual Labs and Shodhganga etc. Additionally, it explores the impact of these initiatives on higher education in India. Through this analysis, the paper highlights both the opportunities and challenges presented by India's digital education (DE) initiatives.

Keywords: Higher Education, Digital Content, Digital Initiatives, Digitalization, India.

INTRODUCTION

India is the world's leader in the field of communication and information technology as well as in other advanced fields, including space. It has achieved remarkable advancements in science and engineering and is emerging on global platforms as a formidable economy (Gawande, 2020). The advancements in knowledge and technology have instigated substantial progress in the transformation of Indian society via the interchange of information (ibid). Today, digital technologies—particularly advancements in artificial intelligence—are reshaping industries worldwide, including education. The 'Prime Minister of India', Narendra Modi, declared the country 'Digital India' on 1st July, 2015. The launch of the 'Digital India' initiative marked a significant milestone in the country's digital revolution. It consists of three main elements i.e., "secure and reliable digital infrastructure growth, digital government services delivery and universal digital literacy" (Gawande, 2020). It is a flagship project of the Indian Govt. with a view to changing India into a digital community and wisdom based economy (Jadhav, 2018). This programme aimed to connect dwellings in village areas with strong internet networks and improve digital literacy. Empowering citizens and integrating India's economy into the global knowledge network has been a key focus of this initiative. The recent pandemic situation has made us feel the need for alternative approaches of quality education where traditional education is ineffective. However, the efficacy of 'digital education' is based on the standard of the content, its accessibility, and the internet speed (Singh, 2023). The 'National Education Policy 2020' (NEP 2020) recognizes the necessity of leveraging technological benefits while acknowledging its potential risks and advantages. This policy mentioned ongoing online platforms and existing ICT-based educational initiatives to effectively tackle present and future challenges in providing quality learning for everyone. This



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policy also states that a diverse array of educational software will be created and accessible for learners and educators at every level. This kind of software will be provided in all primary Indian languages and will be usable to a diverse array of users, including pupils in distant regions and differently-able learners. All States, along with "NCERT, CIET, CBSE, NIOS", and another organizations, shall persist to develop educational e-content in various regional languages, which will be released to the DIKSHA portal. This portal also is used for educators' improvement via e-content (Government of India, 2020, p. 57).

India is a large state with a huge population and diversified cultures. India has the third biggest universities across the globe after China & the United States in aspects of size, variety, and numbers of institutions. India is expected to become a significant academic hub in the coming days. The 'Right to Education Act 2005' has instigated a paradigm shift in the nation's educational system by offering free and compulsory schooling for all children aged 6 to 14, as shown by increasing rates of enrollment in schools in recent years (Gawande, 2020). India has become a multicultural, pluralistic nation with the world's 2nd largest demographic and the 3rd biggest HE system of education globally (Jayaram, 2007; UGC, 2003; Mondal & Islam, 2021). The HE system has achieved phenomenal developmentsince India's independence. Before independence, India possessed merely 28 universities & 578 colleges and an enrollment of 0.1 million students (Karan & Mondal, 2024). In accordance with the 'All India Survey on Higher Education' (AISHE) 2021-22 report, there are presently a number of universities, colleges, and standalone institutions in India, i.e., 1,168, 45,473, and 12,002, respectively. 17 universities are completely intended for girls. Since independence, India's higher education sector has expanded exponentially, with universities growing 41 times and colleges increasing over 78 times in seven decades (AISHE report 2021-22). The ratio of Indians' involvement in the field of HE has been on the rise. In accordance with the 2021-22 AISHE report, the 'Gross Enrolment Ratio' (GER) for HE of India is 28.4, which is determined for individuals aged 18 to 23. The GER at the all-India level of women in HE indicates a consistent rise. The rise in GER, particularly among women (28.5% compared to 28.3% for men), highlights the progress toward greater gender inclusion in higher education (AISHE report, 2021-22)). The total enrollment in HE is approx. at 4.33 crore, comprising 2.26 and 2.07 crore males and females accordingly. With the growth of Indian Higher Education Institutes (IHEs) since independence, India has been genuinely progressing toward the massification of HE.

Higher education significantly contributes to individual and social well-being and to the development of India as outlined in its Constitution - a democratic, equitable, socially aware, cultural, and humanistic society that upholds "liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice for all" (Government of India, 2020, p. 33). HE substantially enhances sustainable living and the financial growth of a country. As India transitions into a "knowledge economy and society", a rising number of younger Indians are expected to pursue HE. In light of 21st century demands, quality HE ought to aim to cultivate competent, reflective, holistic, and innovative persons. In this context, NEP 2020 mentioned:

It must enable an individual to study one or more specialized areas of interest at a deep level, and also develop character, ethical and Constitutional values, intellectual curiosity, scientific temper, creativity, spirit of service, and 21st century capabilities across a range of disciplines including sciences, social sciences, arts, humanities, languages, as well as professional, technical, and vocational subjects. A quality higher education must enable personal accomplishment and enlightenment, constructive public engagement, and



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productive contribution to the society. It must prepare students for more meaningful and satisfying lives and work roles and enable economic independence (Government of India, 2020, p. 33).

Higher education should serve as the foundation for knowledge generation and innovation, ultimately enhancing the national economy. Consequently, the objective of quality higher education transcends merely generating increased employment prospects for students. Therefore, it provides a pathway to livelier, socially involved, cooperative communities, as well as a happier, more unified, culturally aware, productive, innovative, progressive, and successful society. Higher education must not only foster individual growth but also serve as the foundation for national innovation and global competitiveness in the digital era.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following objectives of the current investigation emerged in the mind of the researcher:

- 1) To examine the various kinds of digital initiatives in 'higher education'.
- 2) To analyze the opportunities and challenges in implementing India's digital education initiatives.
- 3) To explore the impact of digital initiatives on the higher education.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This study draws upon both primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The primary sources are AISHE 2021-22 reportand digital initiatives in higher education of the Govt. of India, MHRD. For this study, both the review-based analysis method and the document analysis method were used, and its approach was qualitative in nature.

GOVERNMENT DIGITAL INITIATIVES IN HE

Considering the rise of digital technologies and the growing significance of utilizing technology for teaching-learning across all tiers of education, the Govt. of India has executed different strategies to improve and ensure excellence in HE. Digital initiatives have been introduced under the 'National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (NMEICT)' programme of the MHRD, Govt. of India. On 9th July, 2017, the 'National Convention on Digital Initiatives' was held at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi. A 17-point strategy was established at the meeting, which is slated to be launched by December 2017. Various types of digital initiatives or programmes in higher education are discussed in the following sections, which are fully managed by the Govt. of India.

i. SWAYAM ('Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds')

This project was built by the Govt. of India, "IIT Madras, Google Inc., and NPTEL" (Sing & Sing, 2022). It is a programme that aims to attain three basic elements of education policy i.e., "access, equity, and quality". This programme aims to provide better teaching and learning resources to everyone, including the maximum underprivileged learners. It aims to bridge the digital divide among learners who were previously untouched by the digital era and unable to join the mainstream of the information economy. This portal offers free, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) in many fields. It offers top-quality multimedia audio & video content, and text-based learning material can be downloaded or printed. The course is designed to be highly interactive with online discussion forums and self-assessment tests. Foreign universities can also offer their courses in this portal, and exams can be conducted through SWAYAM procedure



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and guidelines (Gawande, 2020). Sivakumaren and Thangavel (2019) revealed that enrollment in these courses is increasing constantly.

ii. e-PGPathshala

This project is being implemented by the UGC to develop e-content in 70 subjects at the post-graduate stage. Content and its excellence are the main elements of the education system. This initiative, called e-PGPathshala, has developed top-quality, curricula-driven interactive web content in several disciplines in the "social sciences, arts, fine arts, and humanities", physical and mathematic sciences, lingual, and languages (Deivam, 2016). In this regard, Maharaj (2018) and Sonkar & Srivastava (2017) published a report that stressed the role of e-PG Pathshala in the progression of online learning and its facilitation of broader educational access globally.

iii. NDL (National Digital Library)

NDL is a comprehensive digital repository housing metadata and educational materials (Jha, 2020). It offers a single-window search option that allows users to access both currently available digital content in India and other digital sources under one roof. The digital content is accessible in both English and many Indian languages and can be downloaded and read offline.

iv. GIAN (Global Initiative of Academic Network)

GIAN is a govt. sanctioned project that aims to harness the talents of researchers and entrepreneurs globally to motivate their participation in Indian higher education institutions to enhance the nation's existing educational resources², research, and innovation projects, accelerate quality rectify, and improve India's scientific and technical capability for international quality.

v. Shodhganga

It is the name coined to represent the "Digital Archive of Electronic Theses and Dissertations" of India created by the "INFLIBNET" Center⁴. It provides a mandatory platform for researchers to archive their Ph.D. theses. Also, Shodgangotri is a part of this initiative where synopsis and research project proposal can be uploaded. The purpose of this programme was to disclose the trends and directions of study in Indian universities and to avoid duplication of investigation. Research theses by Ph.D researchers all over India are obtainable in an open reservoir and can be easily used by anyone, anywhere, anytime.

vi. NAD (National Academic Depository)

The NAD was conceived as a programme to provide a '24x7 online store' for all educational awards, including "certificates, diplomas, degrees", etc., deposited by academic departments, boards, and evaluation bodies. NAD not only providessimple and free access to all academic awards but also verifies and guarantees their genuineness and secure storage. It is also an effective tool against fake paper certificates

vii. Swayam Prabha

Swayam Prabha is 32 direct to home (DTH) channels dedicated to telecast quality educational programmes 24x7 using GSAT-15 satellite content which is broadcast across the country (Jha, 2020). The content of the training program is provided by NPTEL, IITs, UGC, IGNOU, NCERT and NIOS.

viii. Virtual labs

The concept the virtual laboratory was born from an initiative to provide remote learning and examination through an online interface that is available everywhere in many science and



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engineering subjects. This project is a paradigm shift in ICT-driven education. It is constructed to give students the feel of a real lab. Unlike traditional laboratory settings, students can execute the same examination multiple times and independently. This helps to encourage learners' curiosity because they can take the tests at any time and individually.

ix. NPTEL ('National Program on Technology Enhanced Learning')

In 2003, Govt. of India has started this project by seven "Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and Indian Institute of Science (IIS), Bangalore³". The purpose of this project was to offers excellence of education to anyone interested in studying from the IITs. The primary objective of this programme was to make web & video courses in all of the major engineering and physical science fields for the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, as well as post-graduate management courses (Singh et al., 2020 & Sanghvi et al., 2021). It is the biggest online repository across the globe for engineering, the fundamental sciences, and a few humanities and management disciplines, as well as the first successful MOOC-type platform for webcasting lectures. Any person can access these courses without any remuneration or eligibility requirement at anytime. The lectures are delivered by eminent professors from IIT and IIS.

x. e-Yantra

It is a programme entrusted to IIT Bombay to enable fruitful education in embedded systems and robotics in engineering colleges in India. The training for teachers and students is provided in workshops where participants are taught fundamental of embedded systems and programming. Besides, it helps colleges establish robotics labs/clubs to integrate regular training into their curricula. As a result In India, above 275 colleges has benefited.

xi. Plagiarism Detection Software

MHRD plans to provide plagiarism diagnosis software to all universities and institutes to facilitate plagiarism detection in academic and research works including articles in journals and conference proceedings, book chapters, theses, research reports, project papers, electronic content for MOOC and educational platform etc. (Shrivastava & Shrivastava, 2022). Plagiarism checking software such as iThenticate, Turnitin, Urkund, Duplichecker etc. will check the plagiarized content and identify the address from where the sentence was copied. This software improves quality research and it also improves the ability to rewrite researchers. xii. ARPIT (Annual Refresher Programme in Teaching)

In 2018, India government started a significant and exclusive initiative for the online professional improvement of 15,000 university teachers on the MOOC platform SWAYAM. To implement ARPIT, 75 discipline-certain 'National Resource Hubs' have been established to prepare online teaching materials that focus on the newestimprovements in the field in dealing with revised curricula based on pedagogical developments and methodologies (Jha, 2020). The duration of the entire course is 40 hours. After successful completion of the course, all faculties receive a certificate. Let's see the opportunities and challenges to the implementation of DE initiatives are the following.

Opportunities and Challenges to implementation DE Initiatives

1) **Flexibility of learning:** Enhanced access to a wide array of educational tools, enabling learners from different cultures and backgrounds to access various contents (**Bebbington, 2021**). Furthermore, pupils who are employed or have other obligations have the opportunity to pursue their studies (Jindal & Chahal, 2018).



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- 2) **Self-pace learning:** Personalized learning allows pupils to advance at their own pace in accordance with their individual learning patterns, hence augmenting the efficacy of instruction (**Bebbington**, 2021).
- 3) **Interaction among students and educators**: Positive motivation of interaction and cooperation among students and educators via digital platforms fosters a more flexible atmosphere for learning.
- 4) **Monitoring and assessment:** The potential for actual time monitoring and evaluation of pupil achievement enables faster and more successful measures in the educational process (**Bebbington**, 2021).
- 5) **Improved competence and self-assurance:** A broad range of standard online courses through digital platforms is offered by prominent and skilled instructors. Availability to them is now universal, unlike face-to-face classroom teaching.

Despite many opportunities, implementation of DE initiatives faces the following challenges:

- 1) Lack of availability of resources and internet connection: Inadequate internet access in rural and certain urban areas constitutes an important roadblock to 'digital education' in India (Jindal & Chahal, 2018; Bhatia, 2024; Budhia & Behera, 2023). In India, a significant portion of the population remains without internet connection, and especially numerous persons in rural regions lack basic knowledge of digital technology. Innovative concepts are essential for enhancing the resilience and dynamism of DE.
- 2) Lack of sufficient training: Inadequate training for teachers to successfully use diverse digital tools, potentially undermining instructional quality (Bebbington, 2021).
- 3) Resistance to change: Resistance from teachers and educational organizations may impede the adoption of new approaches and technologies. Particularly, several academic institutions in rural regions possess faculties that express a lack of interest in implementing digital technology in the classroom (Bebbington, 2021).
- 4) Diversity language and content: It is a primary obstacle hindering the advancement of e-learning in India. With a large number of regional languages spoken in different states across the country, educational institutions face challenges in providing digital content in all languages (Jindal & Chahal, 2018; Budhia & Behera, 2023).

Also, Bebbington (2021) mentioned that DE faces challenges, i.e., issues about the safety and confidentiality of user data on digital platforms, and Singh (2023) noted 'digital justice,' 'cyber security,' and the necessity of training educators to utilize digital tools proficiently. The widespread accessibility of electronic devices and informational resources has significantly challenged teaching process. Again, in the technology era, students have access to 'virtual classrooms and laboratories' led by renowned educators globally, resulting in a progressive decline in their interest in face-to face classes (Singh, 2023).

IMPACTS OF DIGITAL INITIATIVES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Various studies have proved that the effects of digital initiatives have been established in higher education. Despite relatively low adoption rates among institutions (15%), the transformative potential of digital initiatives remains significant (Shrivastava & Shrivastava, 2022). The implementation of 'Digital India' initiatives in education has had a greater impact on social, economic, financial and educational activities. Digital platforms like NAD, SWAYAM Virtual Labs, and NDL have significantly expanded digital literacy among students, young



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professionals, and job seekers. These initiatives can help students improve their knowledge and skills and prepare for future careers. In this regard, Bano & Vasantha (2020) mentioned that digital initiatives play a crucial role in addressing the divide in employability skills, enhancing the standard of education, and fostering both digital literacy and socio-economic advancement. McGrath et al. (2017); Suri & Sharma (2025) assert that MOOCs signify an enormous technological improvement in e-learning over the past decade, which are considered radical transformations for the higher education landscape. Again, Zheng & Yang (2017) stated that these initiatives have allowed learners to elevate the educational process beyond the traditional limitations of time and location, hence expanding opportunities for knowledge gain. Suri & Sharma (2025) pointed out that pupils' active participation highlights the expansion in higher education. Therefore, these initiatives enhance learning outcomes for both students and lifelong learners, equipping them with essential skills for the evolving digital landscape. Furthermore, these efforts will result in a vast repository of knowledge, tools, and opportunities that will not only provide quality education and accessibility but, beyond accessibility, digital platforms foster a culture of innovation, encouraging students to explore their full potential through interactive and adaptive learning tools.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As a developing nation, India's higher education system plays a crucial role in fostering human growth and national development. India's HE system has undergone phenomenal development after independence. In the 21st century, the Govt. of India has taken a huge step to develop telecommunications technology. 'Digital learning', has gained increasing popularity in recent times. It performs an essential role in providing education. Especially, the 'COVID-19' pandemic reinforced the necessity of digital initiatives, highlighting their role in ensuring education continuity amid disruptions. In this lens, day by day the government launches new projects like e-PGPathshala, NDL, NPTEL, Swayam Prabha, Virtual Labs, ARPIT, e-Yantra etc. The basic purpose of this project is to achieve quality education in rural and urban areas, including for students in remote areas. To maximize the impact of digital education, robust broadband infrastructure and structured training programs for educators should be prioritized. Students are getting used to e-content every day, and its acceptance is increasing. Digital programmes have helped impart education faster, easier, more efficiently, and cheaper. Teachers should be properly trained in technology skills. Students should be made aware of the free availability of digital content through special campaigns and advertising events. In this perspective, Government of India has emphasized that in the new NEP-2020, digitalization of education is one of the first government's priorities. In a nutshell, it can be stated that digitalization has facilitated rapid, fruitful, and cost-effective progress; nonetheless, the challenges to its future implementation remain somewhat ambiguous and unpredictable. The 'success or failure' of the higher education system relies on effective solutions to such challenges. The effective formation of a knowledge-driven society would present substantial prospects for India, but its failure to succeed could lead the country into both economic and political crises.

NOTES

¹https://swayam.gov.in



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²https://gian.iitkgp.ac.in

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³https://nptel.ac.in

⁴https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in



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