

Sarthak edit

A direct policy push to online education—by allowing universities/higher-education institutes (HEIs) to offer certificate/diploma/ degree courses in the fully online mode—has made headlines in India for some years now. In 2018, the plan to allow top-100 universities/HEIs (based on National Institute Ranking Framework and NAAC scores) was first announced. This was repeated in the finance minister’s Budget FY21 speech in Parliament. And when Covid-19 hit, and it was clear that classes as usual couldn’t continue—making online education not just desirable but also necessary—the government, in its Atmanirbhar Bharat announcements in May 2020, said that the top 100 universities would be allowed to offer online courses without requiring the UGC’s approval. The website of the Distance Education Bureau (DEB) of the UGC listing just seven universities/HEIs that are allowed to offer online education is, therefore, quite telling of regulatory sclerosis.

To be sure, the list on the DEB website is an old one, and it could be that some other universities/HEIs have, since the May 2020 announcement, started or, at the very least, announced online degree/diploma/certificate programmes. However, the number is still likely to be below what Atmanirbhar Bharat envisaged. While infrastructure, personnel and other resource challenges are significant hurdles—lack of adequate online material and teaching tools, teachers/instructors trained to deliver lectures online, or even machines key to propping digital infrastructure—Manish Sabharwal of [Teamlease Services](#) points out in The Indian Express that there are several regulatory hurdles. Indeed, as FE has highlighted before, it is difficult to understand why the government is so averse to liberalising online education for all universities/HEIs; after all, it does deem them fit to administer courses in brick & mortar classrooms.

To that end, the clauses 3(A), (B), and 5 of the UGC (Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes) Regulations, 2020 need to go, says Sabharwal. Clause 3(B), that pertains to eligibility criteria for universities/HEIs to qualify for running online programmes, gives a glimpse of the antediluvian regulatory thinking holding back higher education in the country. It provides that HEIs/universities that qualify for running online courses can start a “maximum of three undergraduate and 10 postgraduate programmes” and will need the UGC’s permission for starting more courses. Other than that, the HEIs will be required to submit “desired information” and “an affidavit to the UGC”—such vaguely worded provisions, as

has been the case in the past with regulation across sectors, are a conduit for government control. The gains of allowing all universities, through an automatic approval route, to design, develop and conduct their own online programmes are not hard to. Also, while the annexure to the Regulations talk of ensuring programmes are “relevant to national economy”—that is, these are responsive to job-market demands—the provision restricting the courses to only those offered by the HEI in the offline mode mean universities are hamstrung.

With such a blinkered vision on online education, meeting the 50% higher education GER target that the new National Education Policy talks about will be quite difficult. And, Covid-19 has shown how late India is to the game already. The need, therefore, is to quickly remove the regulatory hurdles to online education; infra and resource hurdles are far easier to take care of.