

### *Ishaan edit*

Just four months ago, there were as many as 4.8 million Indians using Coursera, the online learning platform, to access learning from top global universities—the most popular courses were from Stanford University, University of Michigan, and Princeton University. That is nearly 13% of all Indians pursuing formal higher education in the country, as per the latest All India Survey of Higher Education report. Against such a large demand for online education, it is hard to fathom why Indian policymakers have been so cagey about letting it flourish. In 2015, the government banned online degree courses to stop fly-by-night operators—there are many in the brick-and-mortar space, but there is no ban, only listing by the UGC as “fake universities”. To be sure, it allowed distance learning from recognised institutes or universities, but only through extension campuses/brick-and-mortar learning centres. So, an IGNOU could offer a distance learning programme through its centres, but a Delhi University couldn’t do this online. It reversed the ban in 2018, with certain conditions, but none of the 35 universities that applied for a licence to do this got one. Against such a backdrop, the government has done well to liberalise further its online education policy; finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced in her Budget speech last week that the top-100 institutes/universities, based on the National Institute Ranking Framework, would be allowed to offer online courses.

One of the reasons the older policy failed was the requirement of setting up centres in cities where the university was not present—it failed to understand the disruptive impact of online learning, and yoked distance learning to brick-and-mortar. So, for a student sitting in Shillong, IIT-Guwahati courses would only be available if IIT-Guwahati opened a centre in Shillong. Add to that the need to hire staff to run the centre, and the concept of distance learning through online is turned on its head. Though this changes with the latest announcement, the government should be looking at the draft New Education Policy (NEP)—which it is still to adopt, two years after its publication—for direction and going beyond the NIRF-ranking criterion. The draft NEP talks of encouraging all Type 1 (that focus equally on research and teaching) and Type 2 (that primarily have a teaching focus, but carry out significant research) to offer top-quality open and distance learning programmes and courses, especially through online learning. That will truly help Indian online education take off.

The other Budget announcement, allowing external commercial borrowing (ECB) and FDI in the higher education space, is a significant step forward, but must be accompanied with the right spirit on part of education regulation. The government, first and foremost, should be willing to let go of its command-and-control approach and, instead, allow higher education institutes, especially the top-rung ones, full financial autonomy. The ECB proposal, particularly, could become a den for bureaucratic delays and red-tapism if the government were to create a body

to decide on allocations.