

The Role of Higher Education Institutes Offering Online Degrees in Democratizing Higher Education in India: Aligning with NEP-2020

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Abstract

The study examines the significant role of HEIs offering online degrees in achieving UGC's goals to democratize higher education through technology. It explores how online platforms enhance access, reduce entry barriers, and promote equitable education. The emergence of these institutions is highlighted as a response to COVID-19, accelerating digital learning adoption. The research assesses the positive impact of online education on learner motivation and self-reliance, addressing traditional education's limitations. It reviews policy recommendations and UGC guidelines for establishing and regulating HEIs offering online degrees in India. Key components include admission criteria, learning management systems, curriculum, virtual classrooms, teaching methodologies, assessment, student support, and program outcomes. Ethical considerations and strategies to address potential discrepancies in online education are also discussed. The study concludes by analyzing the prospects and limitations of HEIs offering online degrees in India, emphasizing their potential to improve accessibility, flexibility, and the integration of emerging technologies in education, aligning with NEP-2020 goals.

Keywords: Higher Education, Online Degrees, Online Learning, NEP2020, Online Education

Introduction

With the rise and emergence of technology, the education system adapted itself in a way to facilitate the trinity- Learner, Instructor & Administration. The rise in technology is a sign of modernization for any nation. In the context of India, it always strives to serve society with the use of Information Technology such as Audio-visual Learning, Blended Learning, Hybrid mode of education and so on. The main purpose has always been to adapt the change according to the time and situation. It is the nature of our education system which believes in dynamism. The Education system, especially Higher education has witnessed various transitions and encourages learners by providing flexibility in learning, especially to those who can't study in a regular mode.

In the NPE 1986, the provision of providing remote learning was enshrined. With that IGNOU was established to deliver higher education to people who have some kind of limitations of not attending the regular degree. The idea of online education originated in India in 2004–2005 when government agencies including MHRD, and IGNOU attempted to initiate two-way video communication. However, because of inadequate technology improvements, the initiatives did not provide the desired outcomes. The development of smart classrooms and satellite-based education also began the Indian EdTech journey at the same time, however, the idea did not catch on with many people. Over time, as technology advanced, India experienced significant expansion in the online education sector (Bhartiya, 2021).

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Later on, MHRD took charge of starting the Online courses in the form of MOOCs in the year 2017. It served lots of working and employed people who wanted to continue their education. It was the sort of revolution which was embraced by all. The first time it was seen that Higher education is moving forward towards betterment as well as serving the people with the democratic approach by allowing them to learn on their own and self-paced. Also, it was observed that HEIs Offering online degrees were also started and accredited by UGC to provide Undergraduate & Postgraduate degrees in both distance and online modes. It was embraced by the in-service people, it helped them in the promotion, job increment, and knowledge enhancement. However, the University Grant Commission's guideline of 2017, restricted some universities to providing online degrees only with compliance of UGC's guidelines. Later in 2019, the global pandemic hit the globe and shut the universities, the universities that were offering regular programmes had to shift to online mode. It was a challenge for the nation to adopt online learning and teaching because there were lots of limitations; learners were not familiar with this as well and the teachers were also not trained to teach in this mode. During the Pandemic period, India presented its New Education Policy commonly known as NEP- 2020. It mentioned online education and its significance for the future of the country. Over a while, UGC had also brought the notification in the year 2022 that Online degrees are at par with regular degrees, except the professional courses such as nursing, medicine, law, etc.

India is poised to witness revolutionary shifts in the higher education sector with the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. HEIs Offering online degrees appears as a forces behind the democratisation of higher education as the country adopts a progressive agenda to transform teaching methods and advance inclusion. This paper explores the critical role that online learning platforms play in meeting the goals outlined in NEP-2020.

It clarifies how these platforms facilitate access, lower obstacles to entry, and the development of a more just educational environment. This investigation attempts to illuminate the potential of HEIs Offering online degrees to transform the educational paradigm and guarantee that everyone may benefit from high-quality higher education, regardless of location, by examining the distinctive qualities and opportunities they provide.

Need of the Study

During COVID-19, the entire education system collapsed and transitioned to the online mode, which lasted till 2021. During this period, many learners observed that they felt that their achievement and learning were inclined towards the positive side. (Masalimova, et al., 2022). A new age of inclusion, flexibility, and innovation in higher education in India will be ushered in with the National Education Policy (NEP) that was introduced in 2020. The NEP lays a strong focus on using technology to democratise access to higher education since it envisions a flexible and dynamic educational system that meets the different demands of students. Under these circumstances, research on the critical function of HEIs offering online degrees becomes necessary. The rapid speed of digitization has fuelled the emergence of online institutions, revolutionising established paradigms of education. HEIs Offering online degrees has become more and more popular as a practical option as more people see the need for a more accessible and flexible learning environment, particularly in a large

and varied nation like India. By examining the rise of HEIs Offering that are online degrees and how they fit in with NEP-2020 requirements, this research aims to shed light on how these establishments respond to the urgent need to democratise higher education.

Online education and learning through it show a significant impact on the motivation of learners to learn as compared to traditional learning (Lin, Chen, & Liu, 2017). It is to say that these online degrees make the learner self-reliant and motivated to pursue their course according to their pace, it minimises the academic burden on them. The study looks into how online colleges may help with the accessibility, affordability, and scalability problems that the traditional higher education system is experiencing. Through the removal of geographical constraints, the provision of affordable choices, and the facilitation of a variety of learning methods, online institutions are essential to achieving the goals outlined in the NEP-2020. This research attempts to provide significant insights into the current conversation about changing the face of higher education in India by providing a thorough examination of their origin and the innate requirements they satisfy.

The Concept of HEIs Offering online degrees is novel, these universities provide degree courses in online mode, and everything from teaching, and learning management, to assessment, takes place on screen. It is widely in function in the UK & US, but here in India, it is still growing. The mentality of common people in India is to prefer a degree from a regular university over a degree obtained from an HEI offering Online Degrees. It is necessary to study such HEIs which cater to catering education along with the placement. Since UGC has also allowed many universities to run online degrees (except practical professional courses). It has also mentioned that Online degrees are at par with regular ones. To create awareness about HEIs Offering online degrees, it is vital to mainstream through the study. Also, Examining the critical role that online institutions have played in democratising higher education in India in line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is essential when it comes to changing the educational landscape of the country. The pressing need to understand and resolve the complex issues present in the current higher education system justifies this study. First of all, the NEP- 2020 offers a thorough plan for educational reform with a focus on flexibility, inclusion, and technology integration. Since online colleges represent a powerful response to these demands, it is critical for policy implementation that their compatibility with the goals of the policy is thoroughly examined.

Second, the research is crucial to solving the enduring problems of diversity and accessibility in higher education. The enormous and varied population of India frequently encounters financial and geographic obstacles to receiving high-quality education. It is essential to comprehend how online colleges might act as enablers to get beyond these barriers to promote a more broad and fair learning environment.

The study also explores how online learning might be revolutionary in meeting different requirements and learning styles. HEIs can serve a wider range of students by offering flexibility and adaptation, which helps to realise the NEP-2020's goal of creating a varied and inclusive educational environment. Furthermore, the necessity of analysing India's adoption of these approaches is highlighted by the continuous improvements in online education around the world. Local initiatives can be informed by comparative analyses of global best practices, which also guarantee that online education complies with international standards and national objectives. It is

important to recognise the financial effects of online learning. Since many people find traditional higher education to be financially prohibitive, the research looks into how online colleges might provide affordable options without sacrificing academic quality, which advances the larger objective of democratizing education.

What does NEP 2020 say about Online Education?

NEP-2020 laid emphasis on Online Education. It talks about the conducting of pilot studies by eminent bodies such as NIOS, IGNOU, IIT, NIT, CIET, etc. to know the need for online education. Digital infrastructure, Online teaching platforms, content creation, virtual labs, teacher training for online education, and assessment, are the major areas which have been identified and enshrined in the NEP.

In totality, the policy has a clear roadmap to bring online education to facilitate the learners. There is an intense focus on bringing novel technology such as Artificial intelligence into education so that better dissemination of knowledge would be ensured. The policy stated that Online education and technology-driven education are essential, especially considering the Pandemic which shook the traditional education system, at that time online mode of education was useful. It was seen that in online education there is the proper reach and accessibility of education to the learners. Also, learners adopted the mode as they were conditioned and found the online mode more democratic and learner oriented. It also stated that some e-content platforms by the government must be leveraged to create digital inclusivity, such as DIKSHA, SWAYAMPRAKASH, SWAYAM, etc. For teaching some subjects, there will be the provision of a blended-learning method along with the online mode. To make the teachers affluent using the technology, the policy mentioned training teachers to be high-quality content creators to make learner-centric pedagogy. For that, these teachers would go through rigorous training. In the following Table.1, there are the recommendations of NEP-2020 for Online Education in a nutshell.

Table 1: Recommendations of NEP-2020 for Online and Digital Education

S.N.	Recommendations	Desired Objectives
1.	Pilot Studies for Online Education	To enhance the research efforts and investigate the potential for expanded online educational opportunities.
2.	Digital Infrastructure	To enable the system to expedite nationwide online and digital education using technology-driven solutions
	Online Teaching, Platform and Tools, Content, Creation, Digital Repository & Dissemination	To bolster the gathering and accessibility of electronic content to enhance the educational experience of learners in terms of material richness

Addressing the Digital Divide	To reinforce the current mass media infrastructure for widespread utilization in broadcasting educational programs (24/7) in various languages to accommodate the diverse requirements of students
Virtual Labs:	Training and Incentives for Teachers To enhance teachers' training in learner-centric pedagogy and equip them with competence in creating E- content and utilizing online teaching and learning interfaces
Online Assessment and Examination	To reinforce and implement assessment, frameworks, providing stability and grants for the adoption of innovative assessment methods utilizing educational technologies
Blended Models of Learning	To recognize and advocate various alternative models for traditional face-to-face teaching and learning
Laying Down the Standards	To establish suitable bodies and standards for content, technology, and pedagogy to facilitate online/digital teaching and learning

Hence, The Policy has laid a vital emphasis on promoting Digital and Online Education by improving current education, doing it in collaboration with other educational or regulatory bodies, and making education more and more accessible and learner-centric using the online mode. However, The Policy has nowhere mentioned HEIs Offering online degrees and their establishment, but the alignment of online education in policy can be observed in contrast to the dissemination of knowledge. Certainly, the University Grant Commission has put stress on establishing HEIs Offering online degrees which consist of digital infrastructure such as a Learning Management System, Online Assessment, Online proctored examinations, and e-content.

UGC Guidelines about HEIs offering online degrees: With the rise in the need for education and learning especially for those who cannot access it through formal mode, the trend of HEIs Offering online degrees has been rising in compliance with the regulation propounded by the University Grant Commission. UGC separately made a sub-body called UGC-DEB (Distance Education Bureau) in 2013 to grant, vigil, and approve the Universities and the courses running in it. It covers both Distance Education as well as Online Education. Before UGC-DEB, it was DEC (Distance Education Council) by IGNOU who used to be responsible for providing approvals to the Universities to run courses in Distance mode. The UGC-DEB is comprehensively responsible for giving approvals (year- wise) to the Universities to run courses in two modes- Open & Distance Education Mode and Online Education. Universities get the yearly approvals for running the courses in both aforesaid modes only if they are fulfilling the requirements enshrined by UGC-DEB

in their regulations. Students are clearly instructed by UGC before taking admission they are required to check whether the institution is recognized or not. The ABC (academic bank of credit) account is required during the enrolment in order to make the admission process transparent. Many Universities are also accredited by other regulatory bodies along with UGC-DEB such as AICTE. The UGC-DEB presented some regulations, conditions, and rules for the universities to run the Online Programmes. There are three regulations which have been come up for Online Education by UGC-DEB-

1. UGC Online Courses and Programmes, Regulations (2018).
2. UGC Online Courses and Programmes, Regulations (Amendment, 2018).
3. UGC Online Courses and Programmes, Regulations (Amendment, 2020).

As per the regulations aforesaid, The guidelines outline the eligibility criteria and procedures for higher educational institutions to offer online courses or programs. Institutions must meet accreditation and ranking standards, have existing programs in the discipline, and possess the capability for online course development and production. They must apply to the Commission, adhere to quality standards, and ensure learner authentication and support services. The curriculum, assessment, and delivery mechanisms must comply with specified guidelines. Additionally, institutions must establish quality assurance measures, administrative structures, and technical teams. Non-compliance may result in withdrawal of approval or punitive measures. The Commission periodically reviews institutions' performance and may issue directions or renew approvals. Appeals against Commission decisions are allowed within a specified timeframe. Additionally, institutions may establish separate centres or cells for the coordination and maintenance of online courses. Academic staffing requirements include program coordinators, course coordinators, course mentors, examiners, and technical teams for content development, delivery, and management. It was amended in 2018, professional courses such as Law, Medical, Nursing, Hotel Management, Physiotherapy, and other professional courses are not to be offered in this online mode. However, Management courses can be offered only when they have approval from concerned regular bodies such as AICTE. (India, 2018) Also, in the year 2022, the Amendment was made in 2020 regulations that Online Degrees would be equivalent to traditional or regular degrees. It means Online degrees stand as valid as Regular degrees. The learners would not face any difficulty while seeking any job as their degree would stand as legit by UGC itself. (UGC, 2022). In summary, the rules establish a thorough structure that ensures compliance with accreditation requirements, quality standards, and student assistance when higher education institutions offer online courses or programmes. The rules endeavour to uphold academic integrity and guarantee the efficacy of online education delivery by instituting stringent eligibility requirements, approval procedures, and quality assurance protocols. Institutions must show that they can create online courses, uphold standards of quality, and offer sufficient learner support services. These recommendations provide a road map for institutions to manage the challenges of online course delivery while maintaining academic quality, given the expanding significance of online education. The Commission works to maintain ongoing improvement and regulatory compliance through regular review and renewal procedures.

HEIs Offering Online Degrees in India and Their Purpose

Considering the various needs of learners and diversity, UGC decided to democratise education through an online mode of education. It has been observed that online education helps the learner to learn at a desirable pace and environment. It allows the liberty to learn anytime and anywhere. Apart, various universities have been accredited to offer online courses by the UGC- DEB, every year UGC-DEB lists the approved institution and discloses it in the public domain, it also informs the learners to see the list before enrolling into any online degree programme. Various Central, State, Deemed, and Private Universities offer the online courses.

1. Purpose of HEIs Offering Online Degrees

HEIs offering online degrees are effectively prevalent when it comes to accessibility, flexibility, interactivity, dynamism etc in learning. It has been observed that many people who are working or employed, prefer to get a degree to continue their education to get better job opportunities.

Apart from, there are various purposes and advantages of HEIs Offering Online Degrees, especially in the context of India:

Accessibility- Access to education is made possible by online institutions for those who would not be able to attend traditional brick-and-mortar schools because of a variety of limitations, including personal circumstances, employment responsibilities, or geographic location. By making courses and programmes available to anybody with an internet connection, they remove obstacles to education.

Flexibility- The schedule flexibility that online institutions provide is one of their key benefits. Students may usually access lectures, course materials, and assignments at their convenience and pace, which makes it possible for them to juggle their academic obligations with those of their jobs, families, and other commitments.

Affordability- Compared to typical campus-based programmes, online education can be more affordable since it saves money on textbooks, campus amenities, and sometimes even transportation costs. To help students continue their education.

Skill Development- HEIs Offering online degrees may provide professional certifications, skill-specific training programs, and short-term courses in addition to degree programs. These programs are designed for those who want to change occupations, pick up new skills, or enter new markets. A credible HEIs Offering Online Degrees's certification program can improve one's employability and professional prospects.

Personalised Learning- Technology is frequently used by universities online to offer individualized learning opportunities. Students' learning styles, interests, and progress may be catered to by customizing course materials and activities using data analytics and adaptive learning algorithms. Learning results may be improved and student engagement can be increased with this customized strategy.

Integration of Emerging Technology- HEIs Offering online degrees frequently integrate emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), and blockchain into their educational offerings. These technologies can enhance learning experiences, facilitate hands-on practice in virtual environments, automate administrative tasks, and provide secure credentialing solutions.

Global Reach and Collaboration- HEIs Offering online degrees have the potential to reach a global audience of students. They may collaborate with institutions, organizations, and experts from

around the world to offer diverse perspectives, expertise, and resources. This global reach fosters cross-cultural exchange and enriches the learning experience for students.

Social Impact and Inclusivity- HEIs Offering online degrees could reach underserved populations, such as rural towns, economically disadvantaged people, differently-abled learners, and marginalized groups, and democratize access to education and foster social inclusion. More inclusion and social effects are achieved through programs that assist vernacular language learning, grant scholarships, and bridge the digital gap.

Quality Content Creation and Open Educational Resources- HEIs Offering online degrees invest in the creation of high-quality educational content, including multimedia resources, interactive simulations, and digital libraries. They may also embrace the principles of open education by sharing educational resources freely through OER platforms, promoting accessibility, affordability, and collaboration in learning.

Components of HEIs Offering online degrees

1. Learning Management System- Online institutions depend heavily on Learning Management Systems (LMS) to support communication, analytics, assessment, and course delivery. They make course contents accessible, promote teacher-student cooperation, and offer individualized learning opportunities. Diverse learner requirements are supported by LMS elements that improve engagement, including customisation, feedback, and assessment. They enhance learning outcomes and guide instructional practices with the use of analytics. LMS places a high priority on integration and accessibility to guarantee fair resource distribution and smooth interoperability. In general, LMSs are crucial resources for providing online institutions with high-quality instruction.

Curriculum & Content- In HEIs Offering online degrees, curriculum and content are thoughtfully crafted to deliver effective education through digital platforms. Curriculum development involves defining learning objectives and outcomes, while course design focuses on selecting instructional strategies and materials to engage learners. Content creation and curation encompass a variety of resources such as videos, articles, and quizzes, often integrating multimedia elements for enhanced learning experiences. Accessibility features ensure inclusivity, while quality assurance processes maintain standards. Technology integration through learning management systems supports seamless delivery and interaction. Overall, curriculum and content are pivotal in providing engaging and impactful education in HEIs Offering online degrees.

Virtual Classrooms- HEIs Offering online degrees cannot function without virtual classrooms, which offer dynamic, engaging venues for instruction in a digital setting. Instructors engage students in live lectures, debates, and presentations with interactive whiteboards, chat functions, and real-time video conferencing. This promotes active involvement and cooperation among students. Screen-sharing tools provide the easy incorporation of multimedia content, including presentations and films, which improves the educational process. Group activities and cooperative projects are facilitated via breakout rooms, and real-time assessment of student comprehension and involvement is made possible by polling and quiz features. Furthermore, recording features are frequently included in virtual classrooms, enabling students to examine lessons whenever it's

convenient for them. Virtual classrooms enable seamless operation and accessibility for all participants with immediately available technical assistance.

Teaching Methodology- Teaching in HEIs Offering online degrees focuses on engaging students through various methods like pre-recorded lectures, live virtual sessions, and interactive activities. Instructors use technology to deliver content effectively and encourage student interaction through discussion forums and chat. Assessments are designed to measure understanding, and feedback is provided to support learning. Overall, teaching methodology prioritizes flexibility, interactivity, and support for students in the digital learning environment.

Assessment and Examination- Proctored exams and ongoing assignments are frequently used in online institutions' assessment and examination processes to evaluate students' learning. Continuous assignments, such as projects and quizzes, are provided often during the course to enable teachers to gauge how well their students understand the subject matter. These tasks are frequently turned in online, and grades are sent out right away. Proctored exams are another tool used to assess students' knowledge and abilities in a controlled environment. Exam integrity is maintained by a variety of techniques, including webcam proctoring remotely and in-person proctoring at testing facilities. Online colleges make sure that student performance is fairly and thoroughly evaluated while upholding academic standards in the digital learning environment by integrating proctored examinations with ongoing assessments.

Student Grievance Cell/ Support- Online institutions have established a Student Grievance Cell or Support system to handle grievances and offer help to students as needed. Students can use this support system to get help with any personal, academic, or administrative problems they may run into while they are enrolled in classes. Students can use online forms, phone calls, emails, or other ways to contact the Grievance Cell. The Grievance Cell will handle their issues discreetly and sensitively. In order to guarantee a good and fruitful learning experience for every member of the HEIs Offering Online Degrees community, the Grievance Cell strives to rapidly address difficulties while providing advice, advocacy, and support.

Outcomes of the Program- What students accomplish after finishing their studies is what online programs at HEIs Offering online degrees call results. These results include acquiring information and talents unique to their subject of study, such as grasping key ideas and developing useful skills. Students also gain soft skills that are useful in the workplace, such as problem-solving, teamwork, and communication. Students prove that they grasp the material and are competent in it through tests, projects, and evaluations. In the end, online programs aim to set students up for professional success, give them the tools they need to make significant contributions to society and foster a love for learning and development that will last a lifetime.

Ethical Considerations in Online Education and Strategies to Mitigate Discrepancies

Ethical considerations in online education within universities encompass maintaining integrity throughout the learning process and examinations. To mitigate discrepancies, universities establish clear policies on academic integrity, communicating expectations and consequences to students. Educational initiatives, including workshops and tutorials, are implemented to promote ethical behaviour and responsible conduct in online learning environments. Technology-assisted monitoring tools, such as plagiarism detection software and online proctoring solutions, help

prevent academic dishonesty. Diverse assessment methods, including assignments and exams, cater to different learning styles and reduce opportunities for cheating. Proctored examinations, whether conducted remotely or in person, enhance assessment security. Faculty receive training and support to address ethical concerns effectively, while regular audits and reviews of assessment processes identify areas for improvement. Overall, universities prioritize maintaining ethical standards to ensure a fair and equitable educational experience for all students in online settings.

Future and Limitations of HEIs Offering online degrees in India:

HEIs offering online degrees in India have a bright future ahead of them, with plans to increase accessibility to education, encourage flexibility, and use technology to improve student outcomes. A wide range of students, including those who live in remote places or have obligations to their families and careers, may be able to enrol in online institutions. They provide schedule and delivery flexibility so that students may learn whenever it's most convenient for them. Furthermore, cutting-edge technology like artificial intelligence and virtual reality may be used by online colleges to provide engaging and dynamic learning environments. But there are restrictions to take into account, such as issues with digital literacy, internet availability, and the dearth of real-world expertise in some sectors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, HEIs Offering online degrees in India are revolutionizing higher education, in line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, and compliance of UGC. The new education policy is democratising the education system in which education is holistically learner-oriented so that it is also applicable to higher education. UGC, the body that sees the functioning of HEIs, came up with the idea of allowing existing universities to be HEIs Offering online degrees. They offer flexibility, affordability, and personalized learning, bridging gaps in accessibility and catering to diverse needs. Despite challenges like ensuring academic integrity and addressing digital literacy, these institutions are poised to transform education by leveraging technology and innovation in the nation. It is making a significant change in the educational setting of the country, where the traditional universities are sustained along with the new arrivals of HEIs Offering online degrees. These universities are catering to various academic courses through online mode, especially to the people who have some kind of restrictions regarding attending the regular ones, considering all possible ethical practices in Online education. By embracing online education, India is paving the way for a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment, empowering learners nationwide.

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