Publication: Mint	Date: 07.03.2022
Edition: Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai, New Delhi	Page No: 14
Headline: Phygital education could prove transformative for the country	
Authors: Dr. Swati Piramal and Aditya Natraj	

Phygital education could prove transformative for the country

A blend of digital and physical methods can double India's gross enrolment ratio in higher education

SWATI PIRAMAL & ADITYA NATARAJ are, respectively, vice-chairperson of Piramal Group and chief executive officer of Piramal Foundation.

The government's vision of a digital university to reach all students across the country, with its promise of personalized teaching at the doorstep, should be considered a landmark step in Indian education.

While serving on the Harvard Board of Overseers that launched Havardx (which offers free online courses from Harvard University) and Edx (a massive open online course provider by Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology), I was encouraged to see that the enrolment of Indian students for Edx was second only to that of US students. However, sadly only 16% of students completed these 'digital only' courses.

There are many challenges that need to be overcome. Piramal Foundation's own experience of working with about 2 million students and 700,000 educators during the pandemic has helped us see the lacunae in a digital-only approach.

Students struggle in their transition to online learning, feel demotivated in the absence of a mentor or peer group, and also struggle with tests and assignments. Teachers, on the other hand, struggle with producing online content and find it difficult to keep children engaged.

What does work is a 'phygital' model that combines online course instruction with weekly or fortnightly in-person educational sessions. As observed, phygital education makes it easier for students to transition to learning online, stay motivated to complete their courses and also complete their tests and assignments. Phygital education also helps teachers keep students engaged, read behaviour patterns among them that may be of relevance, and tailor their delivery accordingly.

A phygital approach alone is not enough, though. We need many more components in order for it to be truly inclusive and game-changing, as it can prove to be.

Here are our key recommendations.

Employ a learning management system that is multi-lingual and accessible: Language barriers are a key challenge to online learning in our country, with such vast diversity of languages and dialects. Videos and frequently asked questions (FAQs) are primarily in English, and students struggle with access, navigation, understanding and synthesizing content. The website interface, applications, support and content for digital learning need to be made available in prominent regional languages. These need to be inclusive in other ways as well, keeping in mind the needs of people with disabilities, so that all learners embark on their learning journey with confidence.

Enable the adoption, retention and completion of courses: Students are overwhelmed with creating online accounts and filling and uploading complex documents, and all this adds to their confusion about using applications. Fixing this requires building their digital literacy through simple, concise learning modules on how to operate a device and engage with a digital platform. Providing on-call support with minimum wait time via call centres, chatbots, etc, will help them overcome teething issues.

Create engaging, immersive learning experiences: Shared teaching-learning experiences that have dipped because of the use of a virtual interface can be rebuilt by promoting a spirit of competition through periodic contests and events which rate performance and boost student motivation levels. A weekly in-person interaction between teachers and students will further enhance the experience for both.

Link peer learners to create strong learning communities: One of the big challenges in digital education is the absence of a peer network. Students cope with the difficulty of studying alone, coupled with the boredom of online education, which can lead to discontinuity and drop-outs. Creating peer learning communities and linking groups of 3-5 students who are located in the same geographical vicinity will bring back joy, while fostering healthy competition and cross-learning.

Improve the quality of instruction on digital platforms: Teachers face unique challenges with infrastructure required to teach online, an inability to adapt to the virtual-lecture mode, especially in the face of poor attendance and lack of real-time student feedback. Educators need to be supported in creating hygiene-checked content and regularly assessed to raise their competence levels. Additionally, curriculum frameworks need to be developed that encourage the creation of competency-based micro modular courses.

Phygital education has the potential to transform education in India. It is the future because it contextualizes and reimagines education. However, we need to put in place an enabling environment that makes students and teachers feel comfortable and confident navigating this space in their own language. Blended education opens up immense opportunities for capacity building among frontline workers. It holds high empowerment potential because it can enable adults, especially women, resume education. Phygital education can serve as an engine of economic growth and a transformative force that empowers every Indian.

Phygital education could prove transformative for the country

The government's vision of a digital university to reach all students across the country, with its promise of personalized teaching at the doorstep, should be considered a landmark step in Indian education.

While serving on the Harvard Board of Overseers that launched Havardx (which offers free online courses from Harvard University) and Edx (a massive open online course provider by Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology), I was encouraged to see that the enrolment of Indian students for Edx was

second only to that of US students. However, sadly only 16% of students completed these 'digital only' courses.

There are many challenges that need to be overcome. Piramal Foundation's own experience of working with about 2 million students and 700,000 educators during the pandemic has helped us see the lacunae in a digital-only approach.

Students struggle in their transition to online learning, feel demotivated in the absence of a mentor or peer group, and also struggle with tests and assignments. Teachers, on the other hand, struggle with producing online content and find it difficult to keep children engaged.

What does work is a 'phygital' model that combines online course instruction with weekly or fortnightly in-person educational sessions. As observed, phygital education makes it easier for students to transition to learning online, stay motivated to complete their courses and also complete their tests and assignments. Phygital education also helps teachers keep students engaged, read behaviour patterns among them that may be of relevance, and tailor their delivery accordingly.

A phygital approach alone is not enough, though. We need many more components in order for it to be truly inclusive and game-changing, as it can prove to be.

Here are our key recommendations.

Employ a learning management system that is multi-lingual and accessible: Language barriers are a key challenge to online learning in our country, with such vast diversity of languages and dialects. Videos and frequently asked questions (FAQs) are primarily in English, and students struggle with access, navigation, understanding and synthesizing content. The website interface, applications, support and content for digital learning need to be made available in prominent regional languages. These need to be inclusive in other ways as well, keeping in mind the needs of people with disabilities, so that all learners embark on their learning journey with confidence.

Enable the adoption, retention and completion of courses: Students are overwhelmed with creating online accounts and filling and uploading complex documents, and all this adds to their confusion about using applications. Fixing this requires building their digital literacy through simple, concise learning modules on how to operate a device and engage with a digital platform. Providing on-call support with minimum wait time via call centres, chatbots, etc, will help them overcome teething issues.

Create engaging, immersive learning experiences: Shared teaching-learning experiences that have dipped because of the use of a virtual interface can be rebuilt by promoting a spirit of competition through periodic contests and events which rate performance and boost student motivation levels. A weekly in - person interaction between teachers and students will further enhance the experience for both.

Link peer learners to create strong learning communities: One of the big challenges in digital education is the absence of a peer network. Students cope with the difficulty of studying alone, coupled with the boredom of online education, which can lead to discontinuity and drop-outs. Creating peer learning communities and linking groups of 3-5 students who are located in the same geographical vicinity will bring back joy, while fostering healthy competition and cross-learning.

Improve the quality of instruction on digital platforms: Teachers face unique challenges with infrastructure required to teach online, an inability to adapt to the virtual-lecture mode, especially in the face of poor attendance and lack of real-time student feedback. Educators need to be supported in creating hygiene-checked content and regularly assessed to raise their competence levels. Additionally, curriculum frameworks need to be developed that encourage the creation of competency-based micro modular courses.

Phygital education has the potential to transform education in India. It is the future because it contextualizes and reimagines education. However, we need to put in place an enabling environment that makes students and teachers feel comfortable and confident navigating this space in their own language. Blended education opens up immense opportunities for capacity building among frontline workers. It holds high empowerment potential because it can enable adults, especially women, resume education. Phygital education can serve as an engine of economic growth and a transformative force that empowers every Indian.