



Online study is the shortest, most convenient route to higher education for many Indians

By Vijaya Pushkarna

Have you been dreaming of pursuing higher education from a prestigious institute, but have never had the time or the means to go for a regular course? Perhaps, you did not look at all the options.

For you could as well have the classroom, the best teachers and all the course paraphernalia at your fingertips, virtually. No matter how old you are or what your calling is, you can still be as lively a student as any day-scholar and earn your cherished degree thanks to communication technology-enabled online higher education.

Twenty-three-year-old Bhuvaneswari Joshi's experience shows how exciting and rewarding online education can be. While she was in Class 12, college was her dream. Finally, when she got into a Delhi college, classes bored her. A year later, she decided to complete her BA in Political Science through Delhi University's distance learning programme.

Even as she pursued her education online and through self-study, she ventured into the world of event management. By the time her former classmates began their second-year at college, she joined CRI Events as a trainee. In a year, she was designated creative executive. She could pursue her political science course at leisure. "The degree I have from Delhi University is no different from what students of St Stephen's or Miranda have. I have two years of work experience as a bonus," says Bhuvaneswari, who is now consultant with Brodeur India. There was no way she would have given classroom learning the go by for a call centre or BPO job. "It was for a full-fledged career," she says.

Two years after Sunaina Jairath, who had completed her BSc. in Zoology from Delhi University, enrolled for an LLB programme, she realised it was not what she wanted. Sunaina, who handled campaigns and managed crisis communications, was attracted to the exciting world of public relations. Four years into the job at a public relations agency, she realised that theoretical grounding was equally important. "I did not want to give up my job. I zeroed in on the online course that the Xavier Institute of Communication, Mumbai, was offering. I'm glad I did that," she beams.

The flexibility in timings and the online programme being from a reputed institute mattered most for her. That the diploma was not from a regular course did not deter her because, as she says, "I'm in an industry where hands-on experience counts most." Rukmani Bachal, 23, joined Synapse in Goa as an intern after her Class 12, as she did not quite fancy taking the competitive exams her father wanted her to. The internship led to a job, and one job led to another. She then enrolled for Annamalai University's distance and online dual degree in visual communication and psychology, besides a few other online courses from India and abroad. A couple of months ago, she left for a regular face-to-face classroom at the New York Film Academy.

In the new era of higher education in India, exclusively online is OK. A regular face-to-face learning is not a necessity. Convergence is the buzzword. And many young Indians, and even the not-so-young, are willing to experiment-choosing the best suited, shortest, and the most convenient path to higher education.

Driven and delivered by broadband and dedicated high bandwidth, with or without the use of the internet and the world wide web, online education has become a boon for people like Devika. A Mumbai-based merchandising manager at Fifth Avenue Sourcing, it helped her learn from the best faculty of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, without actually being on the haloed campus.

The trend has delighted those in the field of education. Says Prof. Rajashekharan Pillai, vice-chancellor, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), which has moved from snail mailing printed lessons to satellite television, radio and the internet to teach: "If the five IITs and the Indian Institute of Science use the online format of their classes, the expertise of its best teachers can reach a remote college somewhere. If we create a platform and put it on the internet, anyone can avail of it." Colleges across the country can use these repositories with the help of a pen drive, depending on their convenience. Many are using repositories of places like Harvard and MIT, too, says Prof. Pillai.

The prospect of providing quality higher education to a huge number of students is what propels people like Prof. Pillai to ride the technology-driven path. At a time when the gap between the seat capacity of premier institutions and the number of aspirants to it is widening with every passing year, communication software has proved its utility. Students in remote areas can now take lessons without really budging too far. In a way, they can choose their teacher, virtually.

Says Uday Singh, executive vice-president and head, NIIT Imperia: "A guru who was passionate about a certain subject and had taught it in an unforgettable way is indeed a memory everyone cherishes. But such gurus are in short supply the world over. Technology can make the great teachers available to thousands of students."

It was a return to basics for Ramesh Kharbanda, vice-president in the petroleum division of Reliance Industries Ltd. Ramesh, who has been into sales and marketing, knew the business world was changing. With mergers and acquisitions becoming the order of the day, mastery in risk management was essential. He needed to return to school to prepare himself for the change, more so because of his growing responsibilities.

"I did an extensive survey, evaluated the skills I needed and looked at the various online programmes in India and abroad. Apart from mergers and acquisitions, and risk management, I had to learn about finance. A cross-functional knowledge was necessary," says Ramesh, who enrolled for the Senior Management Programme, conducted by NIIT Imperia in conjunction with IIM Calcutta. The course was for those with 10 years of work experience.

Ramesh feels no different from a regular student. "In a classroom, things get only as interactive as the teacher and students make it. Here it is built into the system," he says, on his experience of synchronous learning in a virtual classroom. Today, Prof. Ashok Banerjee, Prof. B.B. Chakrabarti and Prof. Balram Avittathur from IIM Calcutta respond to a point Ramesh makes, in real time.

The specially-designed remote classroom in which Ramesh sits is linked by dedicated broadband two-way-audio-video to a special studio in IIM Calcutta. Through the headphone, he can hear Prof. Banerjee discuss a case study. He can talk to his teacher at the click of the mouse.

The rest of the students from across the country can see and hear Ramesh and Prof. Banerjee, live. "I cannot see the other students' expressions when they are listening to my intervention, but the teacher and the student can see each other, and all of us can see the student with whom the teacher is interacting one-on-one," says Ramesh. Video cameras ensure that the teachers get feedback from students and sustain their interest in the class.

Ramesh's classmate Bikram Suri, a 35-year-old software engineer, who has worked in India and abroad, took to online learning when he found that he lacked the skills to handle HR and financial matters of his own venture, Venascent Info Tech. He joined an online programme in management, where he could 'attend' Prof. Banerjee's lectures. Similarly, Vasudha Verma, 33, general manager, finance, Dalmia (Bros), is pursuing an online senior management programme with the faculty from IIM Calcutta. "My present job is comfortable, but there is potential for growth. I would need management skills. I would have loved to enrol for a regular MBA, but I have two children. So I joined the online programme over the weekends," says Vasudha, who finished her AICWA and ACS in 1994.

Impressed by Vasudha's determination, her company is considering reimbursing the Rs 2.1 lakh that she is spending on the programme. The online courses are a cut above the regular classroom, says Prof. Pillai, who is chairman of the Distance Education Council. "You can have the benefit of the best of teachers and the latest technology, delivering education in a focussed and interesting manner."

According to him, there are 22 lakh students pursuing higher education through distance and online learning. Expanding rapidly and jumping on the bandwidth wagon are 13 state open universities and 120 distance education institutes of conventional universities, besides IGNOU. Private players, including at least 50 big names like NIIT, Symbiosis, Arena and Maya, are also on the scene.

Students are making a beeline to study online-either to acquire their main degrees, or to grab add-on qualifications. "About 10 per cent of the total higher education is through the online and distance mode. In the next three to four years, this could double as more institutes are offering courses online," says Prof. Pillai. Apart from this, over a lakh students are in pursuit of degrees from reputed foreign universities, without moving out of India. US-based online education firm mLogica works with a university in Pune, which has a partnership with a US-based university. "The courseware is provided by the US university and classes are engaged by professors in the US. Exams are proctored by the university in Pune," says Vazi Okhandiar, vice-president, technology, mLogica.

"At the end of the programme, students are conferred a US degree. It is as good as getting an education in the US, while being in India," she says. Employers, too, are getting their staff to tap the online facility to upgrade their skills. The Indian Retail Association, the Mumbai-based conglomeration of retail units, has tied up with IGNOU to facilitate higher education for its Class 12 passed employees. From day one of joining work, the employees are registered with IGNOU for a diploma in retail management. As they go up the job ladder, they can get BBA or MBA degrees.

As virtual classrooms are gaining popularity, the distinction between online and regular students seems to be fading. IIM Ahmedabad plans to give alumni status to students who have done its online programme from NIIT Imperia. The IIMs at Kolkata and Indore are yet to take a decision on this, says Uday Singh. Also, the Distance Education Council has given the green signal to IITs and IIMs to offer their programmes online. The HRD-supported National Programme for Technology Enabled Learning (NPTEL), a joint venture of the five IITs and the Indian Institute of Science, was inaugurated a few months ago.

The utility of online education in India is immense. While education for children under 14 is a millennium goal to be achieved by 2015, around 30 million children in the age group are not in schools. It will take one million more teachers to provide them education, and all the country's teacher training schools put together cannot churn out so many teachers.

"These children will face more problems when they reach the stage of higher education. Without technology, we cannot educate them all-be it at the lower or higher level," says Prof. Pillai. "Digital literacy modules will teach them how to make use of technology to learn. Even people who are illiterate and old can use this." However, parents by and large still prefer the good old college and its compulsory attendance for their children. Says Rukmani's mother, Jyoti: "My husband was very apprehensive about it. He favoured a normal college education, and all the competitions that come with it. I am not a conventional person, so I supported her through all her decisions."

How do employers weigh a candidate who has an online degree? Till a few years ago, there was a lingering doubt about the ability of a person not exposed to college life. The interactive nature of online education has changed the perception. "Earlier, distance education was considered a system without any quality control, where students received notes, took exams, and got a degree. Some people were also misusing it to make money. All that has changed," says Prof. Pillai. Online education is also about big money. Many with the capital to pump in and bandwidth to spare are game for it. The famed coaching centres of Kota have taken the plunge with online mock tests. According to Vazi, the total market value of online education (e-learning) worldwide is expected to grow to \$21 billion by 2008. In India, the current market value of the online education industry is around \$200 million and within three years, it is expected to touch \$1 billion, she says.

Indian software companies, too, are cashing in on the online education industry. Educomp Solutions, Core Profacts and Technologies and Evermonn Systems are developing software for online tutoring, classroom management and web-based learning. Online education is a growing trend, particularly in the US, where face-to-face education is costly.

The sunrise sector has opened up opportunities for Indian teachers who want to teach without going to schools or students' houses for a one-on-one home tuition. For example, Vazi offers online tuitions in maths, English and computers, and gets queries from those who want to learn Hindi online. Says Vazi, who teaches online for a master's programme in software engineering for a private university in the US: "A few years back, they tried starting a programme in India. But they had to go through a lot of bureaucracy, and dropped the idea. There is a lot of potential for Indian universities to partner with US universities, where they can offer programmes to US students."

The cost of books and classroom training is high in the US and many students cannot afford tuition, she said. "The US universities can provide a cheaper solution through the partnership programme, and Indian and US professors can interact with each other. This will open a job market for teachers and professors in India." At the top end of the spectrum are institutes like NIIT, which invest hugely in technology to keep pace with the emerging trends. On its part, the government is concerned about the quality that the huge bandwidths are offering. An Assessment and Accreditation Board for Distance and Online Educational Programmes may just be on the cards. And virtual classrooms are here to stay.