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Reimagining Higher Education: Student Preferences Between Online Comfort And Offline Engagement

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Abstract: The perspectives of postgraduate students regarding learning techniques at a few chosen colleges in Kolkata are examined in this study. It investigates experiences with both online and offline education using a mixed-methods approach. Important facets of accessibility, communication, and participation are highlighted by data gathered from surveys and interviews. The results provide insightful information on how students prefer to learn and give guidance for developing future teaching methods in light of changing higher education settings.

Index Terms: Postgraduate Students, Online and Offline Learning, Learning Mode Preferences, Higher Education in Kolkata, Mixed-Methods Research

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic's worldwide effects and technological advancements have significantly accelerated the evolution of higher education delivery in recent years. The decision between online and offline learning has become crucial in the midst of this shift for students, teachers, and legislators. The direction and efficacy of instructional modes are crucially determined by college students, who are the main stakeholders in the educational system. In addition to their flexibility and educational requirements, their preferences also speak to more general systemic problems like infrastructure, pedagogical quality, and digital access. Online learning provides cost-effectiveness, flexibility, and accessibility, but in-person, interactive learning is frequently praised for peer collaboration, direct teacher support, and an engaging environment (Muthuprasad et al., 2021).

The argument between online and offline learning has gotten more heated in the context of Indian higher education, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas like Kolkata. Student preferences are greatly influenced by a number of factors, including the digital divide, faculty preparedness, device availability, and internet connectivity. Therefore, creating inclusive, flexible, and successful teaching strategies requires an understanding of student choices. Recognising and accommodating student preferences will be essential to building a sustainable and just higher education system as the education sector investigates long-term reforms after the pandemic. In order to add significant insights to current discussions on academic delivery in India, this study ultimately aims to explore college students' preferred learning modes—online, offline, or blended—as well as the underlying factors that influence their decisions.

This study particularly aims to explore postgraduate students' perceptions and preferences regarding the future of education in order to understand the evolving educational preferences and future learning expectations of college students in Kolkata. 205 postgraduate students from six higher education institutions in Kolkata are the subjects of this study, which investigates their future perspectives. It uses surveys and interviews to find out if students think that higher education will be more traditional in the future, more hybrid, or move towards a more dynamic, learner-centric paradigm. Findings are anticipated to guide curriculum development, guaranteeing that postsecondary education satisfies student goals and the requirements of an academic future that is increasingly digitally integrated.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A thorough investigation into students' preferences for offline, online, and blended learning in higher education was spurred by the abrupt switch to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies conducted in India, especially in West Bengal, shed light on how regional variables influence these preferences.

According to a survey conducted by Muthuprasad et al. (2021) among 307 agricultural students in India, about 70% of them were open to taking classes online because of their flexibility and convenience. The authors did, however, stress that online formats were less appropriate for practical subjects and suggested blended learning as a better substitute. Das and Dey (2021) studied undergraduate students in West Bengal and found that while online learning performed well in terms of convenience and understandability, rural students were more stressed by technology, which had a big effect on how they felt about digital learning.

In a more comprehensive survey of 1,963 students in Kerala, Shameera and Khan (2023) found that 72.8% of them preferred traditional classroom instruction, 23.2% preferred blended learning, and only 4% preferred fully online modes. Their preferences were largely determined by factors such as psychological stress, teacher support, technical proficiency, and device availability. Similarly, 61% of students preferred offline learning, 31% preferred blended learning, and only 8% chose online education, according to Ella et al. (2022). Cost savings and access to recorded content were cited as benefits of online learning, while mental exhaustion, diminished focus, and an increased workload were cited as drawbacks.

A multi-method study in the field of medical education revealed that classroom instruction continued to be superior in terms of stress management, faculty interaction, and concept clarity. Over 60% of students reported feeling more stressed when learning online, frequently as a result of technical issues and a lack of experiential learning opportunities (Indian Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology, 2021).

At the national level, Hasan (2020) discovered that only 15.1% of students desired education that was exclusively offline, while 62.2% of students preferred blended learning and 22.7% preferred fully online modes. Poor internet connectivity (77.6%), a lack of ICT training (38.8%), and unstable electricity (16.4%) were the main obstacles to online learning.

However, due to improved comprehension, increased interpersonal interaction, and reduced stress levels, offline learning remains the most popular choice among students throughout India, but especially in West Bengal. Due to its adaptability and hybrid support systems, blended learning is becoming a competitive second choice. Due to increased cognitive load, emotional exhaustion, and infrastructure constraints, fully online learning is the least preferred mode. These preferences are heavily influenced by demographic factors like discipline, digital literacy, and urban/rural origin.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a mixed-methods research methodology, which combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies to give a comprehensive knowledge of postgraduate students' perspectives on the future of education. The quantitative component includes a structured survey to collect measurable information on students' learning choices, engagement, and satisfaction. The qualitative component involves semi-structured interviews designed to elicit in-depth personal experiences and perspectives. A detailed literature study also contributes to the research by putting the findings within larger academic discourses. This comprehensive strategy enables data triangulation, which increases the validity and depth of study findings.

Population and Sample

This study's target demographic comprises all postgraduate students enrolled in Kolkata's institutions and universities. From this demographic, 205 students were drawn from six higher education institutions in the city. A non-probability purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure that participants from all academic backgrounds and disciplines were represented. These institutions were chosen based on their accessibility and the number of master's students ready to participate. The sample size was judged enough for reflecting the larger PG student population, and it offered quantitative and qualitative data for the study's mixed-methods methodology.

III. FINDINGS

The study of 205 postgraduate students provides a varied perspective on online and offline learning. A huge 71.2% choose online classes for the convenience of being able to study from home, while 40.5% value the self-paced flexibility. However, just 15.6% found them interactive. In contrast, 76.6% favoured offline classes for improved interactions with classmates and instructors, while 50.2% said that taking notes in class benefited learning. Students preferred offline means for attention (81.5%), engagement (80%), interaction (82.9%), and doubt-clearing (81.5%). Furthermore, 93.7% agreed that direct student-teacher engagement is critical, and 69.8% rated face-to-face communication with instructors as highly important. This clearly demonstrates a significant preference for offline education in terms of efficacy, engagement, and learning depth, notwithstanding the logistical advantages of online education.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings show that, while online learning is convenient and flexible, it falls short in terms of contact and engagement. Most students (only 15.6%) do not consider online classrooms as engaging, and 93.7% believe that student-teacher connection is vital. The literature backs up these concerns; research such as Bao (2020) and Dhawan (2020) show how online modalities frequently lack the immediacy and responsiveness of in-person learning. Offline teaching was deemed more effective for sustaining attention, clarifying doubts, and increasing peer contact. Even if the pandemic normalised digital learning, the inclination for in-person engagement remained strong, consistent with Ali's (2020) observation that digital education cannot entirely recreate the collaborative setting of traditional classrooms.

V. CONCLUSION

According to the survey, most postgraduate students do not choose online learning as a stand-alone mode, despite the fact that it has significant benefits including comfort and self-paced learning. For improved focus, engagement, contact, and conversation with peers and professors, offline learning is strongly recommended. One of the most important components of successful learning is the requirement for direct student-teacher contact. These observations highlight the need for a more hybrid or blended learning strategy that combines the efficiency of in-person instruction with the flexibility of online learning.

VI. SUGGESTION

Educational establishments have to embrace hybrid models that strike a balance between adaptability and engagement. While online technologies can improve accessibility, offline components must be maintained to encourage participation and dispel doubts. Curriculum designers should emphasise peer and student-teacher contact in all media, and faculty should be educated to make online sessions more engaging.

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