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IIMs Add Final Touches to 2020 List

ALMOST THERE B-schools feel virtual interviews just as effective as face-to-face ones in evaluating candidates

Sreeradha D Basu, Prachi Verma Dadhwal & Anjali Venugopalan

Kolkata | New Delhi: Mission Admission has entered its final stage at Indian Institutes of Management, as the prestigious business schools on Friday began announcing the names of candidates shortlisted for their flagship postgraduate programme in management.

Amid the uncertainty around the Covid-19 pandemic, most IIMs have decided to push back their academic sessions to August, instead of June when those typically begin.

Digital was the medium of choice at several institutes to finalise the candidates. While IIM-Ahmedabad, IIM-Bangalore and IIM-Raipur had managed to complete their admission process before the lockdown, others like Lucknow, Calcutta, Kozhikode, Indore, Sambalpur and Jammu had to partly resort to the virtual route to zero in on the candidates.

Virtual interviews were just as effective as face-to-face ones in evaluating candidates, according to those IIMs. Some said it improved productivity and might even become a norm in times to come.

"Virtual medium of student selection may be extremely feasible given that we have well-established technology providers in India. If the digital environment, such as bandwidth, audio-visual set-up, etc., can be standardised, a virtual medium may be preferable, given that a large number of IIM aspirants often have to bear significant travel, boarding and time costs during the IIM interview cycle every year," Shubhasis Dey, the CAT 2019 convener and the admissions chair at IIM-Kozhikode, told ET.

Virtual Route

- **Several IIMs** take digital route as lockdown hits admissions process
- **Lucknow, Calcutta, Kozhikode, Indore, Sambalpur, Jammu IIMs** held online interviews
- **Most IIMs** have pushed back the new academic session to August
- **It will** take further calls as situation evolves
- **IIM Lucknow,** Calcutta & Indore did not include WAT score in weightage to ensure fairness

How was it done: Typically, after the Common Admission Test results, IIMs shortlist candidates based on a variety of factors besides the CAT scores. These could include previous academic records, work experience, diversity of background, etc. IIM aspirants then make it to the final shortlist based on performance in the written ability test (WAT) and personal interviews conducted by individual institutes.

For the batch of 2020-22, however, some institutes like IIM-Calcutta and those in Indore and Lucknow decided to do away with factoring in scores of the WAT. IIM-Sambalpur, which had more than 400 students taking the online test from home, roped in a third-party online proctoring system. "This allowed each student to be monitored and invigilated through an artificial intelligence-based tool so that they did not receive any external help," IIM-Sambalpur director Mahadeo Jaiswal said.

IIM-Indore director Himanshu Rai said the institute had decided to not consider the weightage of the WAT component this year. "This is to maintain the fairness and consistency of the admissions process for all candidates who appeared for interviews either in-person or through the online platform," he said.

At IIM-Calcutta, online interviews were conducted through a third-party videoconferencing software that the candidates could access from home, said admissions chair Sumanta Basu. For IIM-Lucknow, about 40% of the interviews were being conducted online.

Even for IIM-Bangalore, where the PGP shortlist is done, the virtual medium will be used for student selection for the PhD, PGPPM and PGPBA programmes, said director G Raghuram.

IIM-Jammu conducted some interviews through the Zoom video app and evaluated students on extempore sessions instead of WAT. Institute director BS Sahay said the virtual medium should be considered in the future as well as it saved both time and resources.

"You can capture someone's attitude online as well. We have to live with the times and evolve with it. This is good for everybody," said Sahay.

Food, beverage industry to develop digital platforms together: NRAI

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI) on Friday said the food and beverage industry is coming together to develop and identify alternative digital platforms that will level the playing field between restaurants and food delivery platforms.

The association said it has tied up with one of the largest player in this sphere and drawn out the blueprint to launch in a few months. It added that the move was taken as aggregators have become digital landlords and were destroying small restaurants.

"While they came in to solve a genuine problem, their one-sided policies are destroying the business, especially small restaurants. The industry is working together to create an alternate technology solution to reorient and sustain their businesses in the post-COVID-19 world. The focus is on easy reconciliation, transparent pricing, cheaper delivery and protection of customer data", the association said.

NRAI president Anurag Katriarsaid the effortsare aimed at creating more viable alternative and not rivals to other aggregators or their current programmes.

AMU academic session from Aug.

1,300 students of the varsity leave for home by special train

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
GHAZIABAD

Aligarh Muslim University has decided to begin the academic session 2020-21 for existing and newly admitted students from August 1 and September 1 respectively. The admission and departmental tests for various courses are rescheduled in the months of July/early August so as to ensure that admissions for the session 2020-21 are completed by August 31.

It was decided at a meeting of deans of the various faculties and other university officials under the chairmanship of Vice-Chancellor Tariq Mansoor.

Students following social distancing at the Aligarh railway station. • MANOJ ALIGARH

Online teaching

Online teaching, conduct of university examinations and academic calendar for the session 2019-20, and 2020-21 were also discussed.

According to an official release, the V-C emphasised the need to safeguard the academic career of students in view of the extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to strengthen the online teaching, it was decided that e-content/e-lab experiments will be prepared by the teachers concerned and uploaded on the website. The use of ICT and online teaching tools will be encouraged and the teachers should strive to complete about 25% of the syllabus through online teaching and 75% syllabus through face-to-face teaching. And each student will be assigned a faculty adviser who will maintain regular contact with the student.

According to Mujib Ullah Zuberi (Controller of Examinations), online teaching for the session 2019-20 will continue up to May 31, and the period from June 1 to June 15 would be utilised for finalisation of dissertation/project work/e-labs/completion of syllabus/ internal assessment /assignment/reports, etc.

The period of lockdown may be treated as 'deemed to be attended' by all the students and their attendance computed accordingly.

Earlier, around 1300 students from different parts of Bihar left for their homes by a special train arranged by the university administration.

States get 93% of pulses stock, distribute 27%

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New Delhi: UP, Delhi, Manipur and Puducherry have not yet started distribution of free 1 kg pulses to each identified poor family even as they have got the stock under the scheme launched during the Covid-19-induced lockdown, consumer affairs ministry data showed.

Only three states and UTs — Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep and Goa — have distributed pulses for all three months while Andhra Pradesh, Chandigarh and Dadra and Nagar Haveli have distributed for two months. All others have either distributed pulses for one month or are yet to get one full month's allocation.

So far, the Centre has made allocation of pulses for one month (0.98 lakh tonnes) and states have got 93% of it (0.92 lakh tonnes), but the distribution so far has been little over 27%. Till Thursday, only 54,000 tonnes were distributed to identified families.

"Distribution of pulses is state governments' responsibility. It has not been easy for us to get raw pulses milled and transported to states/UTs in these difficult times. States should also put extra effort to ensure distribution," food and consumer affairs minister Ram Vilas Paswan told reporters.

IIT-JEE top rankers offer free doubt-solving sessions

Start-up launches 30-day online initiative to help aspirants

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
GUWAHATI

A group of Indian Institute of Technology-Joint Entrance Examination (IIT-JEE) top rankers has offered free doubt-solving sessions for students aspiring to crack JEE and National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) for medical courses.

Examination dates

Union Human Resource Development Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' had on May 5 announced July 18-23 as the dates for JEE Main and July 26 for NEET exams.

The announcement made Edvizo, a Guwahati-based start-up launch a 30-day online initiative to help JEE and NEET aspirants clear their doubts.

"Studying from home has obtained top importance more than ever before due to the ongoing crisis that made educational institutions close abruptly. Post-lockdown, many platforms are providing free online courses but few are there to solve their doubts on time," said Pallav Baruah, one of 42 members of start-up formed in 2017.

Clearing uncertainties

Clearing the uncertainties related to their approach to the examinations is the responsibility of 18 top-rankers in the group. The top-rankers include IITians, doctors and senior subject experts.

Edvizo has been connecting with the aspirants through the Zoom app every day from 6 am to 9 pm. The aspirants are provided solutions through one-to-one live video.

Mr Baruah said their education-tech start-up is a one-stop digital platform for students and parents to guide them to proper coaching.

They have been focussing on "real-time query resolution", which a Google-KPMG report in 2017 said topped the list of problems for India's ed-tech firms.

"We have registered more than 50,000 students from across India and tied up with more than 2,500 coaching institutes in five cities of the country for taking the idea forward. Our objective is not to make the students feel demotivated because of the lockdown," Mr Baruah said.

Career guidance

The team has now planned to provide career guidance classes every weekend for seven hours from 9 am.

E-LEARNING

A question of access

Post lockdown too, there are a plethora of ways in which online education can be made accessible to students across social strata

AKHIL SHAHANI

The nationwide lockdown in response to COVID-19 has forced more than 300 million Indian students to stay at home. Although many of India's schools and colleges have started online classes for their students, many youngsters have been left behind.

Connectivity

Virtual classrooms work on the assumption that every student has fast Internet access, a laptop, or smartphone, or reliable electricity connection. Current estimates show that, out of India's 1.2 billion population, only 600 million are connected to the Internet, mostly through smartphones. This creates a huge barrier for students (especially in rural areas) to access online education during this lockdown, as they fall further behind their connected peers, as classes proceed online. Even those with Internet connections may not be able to access the 4G speed needed to view online streaming video lectures.

For those with basic Internet connectivity, teachers could record lectures and upload them on YouTube and email links to their students, who can then download the videos for viewing offline. This does not require a fast broadband connection. Additionally, Doordarshan has been streaming educational content through its channels Gyan Darshan and Vyas. Schools/colleges could match their semester schedule based on when the respective programmes are beamed on these channels, or also conduct audio lectures through a telephone-based conference call facility.

However, if the government wants to truly enable online education for all, it should consider supplying free basic smartphones and data plans for under-resourced people in rural areas. It could even offer tax breaks for companies and individuals who donate for these much-needed devices and data. The government should also widely publicise the free educational content it has on its portal Swayam, as many Indians may not be aware of it.

Vernacular content

Another barrier to the penetration of online education is that the vast majority of learning material (videos, animations and documents) are in English, which only a small percentage of the population can fully understand. Most Indians consume vernacular entertainment videos online, rather than English content. EdTech companies should start creating content in major vernacular languages. They would also be able to access a vast untapped market of potential paying customers, as many languages such as Hindu, Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, and Tamil have millions of speakers.

Change in teaching methods

A majority of teachers are used to lecturing for 45 minutes, using a blackboard and textbooks. Due to the lower attention spans that students have online, teachers will have to change their methods for online classes, and try to play videos, animation, and presentations by sharing their laptop screens to engage students.

Long-term measures

Once educational institutions re-open, post the lockdown, they should not go back to the same classroom-based "chalk-and-talk" teaching model and should instead consider incorporating technology to enhance their pedagogy. One possibility is adopting a "flipped classroom" approach, where students study subject theories through material online/at home, ahead of classroom sessions. At the classroom, the teacher introduces interactive exercises, discussions, and simulations that facilitate student learning of the material studied in advance. This will ensure better understanding of the subject matter in an interactive manner.

The writer is Managing Director, The Shahani Group

..teachers will have to change their methods for online classes, and try to play videos, animation, and presentations to engage students.

ETCETERA

ieltsmaterial.com acquired

EdTech startup GetMyUni, recently acquired online IELTS test preparation platform ieltsmaterial.com. Post the acquisition, IELTS material operations have been merged with the startup.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the startup has enabled universities to connect with students using webinars and is also working closely with universities to enable them to take their courses online and prepare the start their academic session, irrespective of campus openings. For details, visit https://www.getmyuni.com/

Online coaching by Oliveboard

Learning and assessment platform Oliveboard is providing a range of free mock tests and study material for students. It has online courses for Bank, SSC, Railway, MBA and insurance exams, and provides complete syllabus, day-wise study plan, live classes and live practice sessions on its app and website.

The platform has introduced #GharPeCoaching, a free course for all banking exams, which will be accessible to students in Hindi and English. It has also launched a daily live test series to help aspirants prepare for their upcoming exams. For details, visit https://www.oliveboard.in/

Cost-effective face shield

Panchagunula Jayaprakash, Assistant Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, SRM University, Andhra Pradesh, has designed a face shield embedded with 3D printing technology. It has been made available at a nominal cost of ₹20. This face mask alleviates the limitations of the regular masks currently used by doctors, policemen, and journalists. "It has a 100 micron thick transparent plastic sheet attached to the front, which prevents contaminated air, dust, and liquids from coming in contact with people," said Jayaprakash.

Online entrance exams for JGS

Admissions to all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of Jindal Global University (JGU) across all its schools will be conducted online, under the aegis of the Jindal Scholastic Aptitude Test (JSAT) administered by Pearson VUE. The exceptions to this are the five-year law programme of the Jindal Global Law School (JGLS), and the five-year architecture programme at the Jindal School of Art & Architecture (JSAA).

Candidates from India and around the world can now take the JSAT exam at their convenience, from home starting May 11.

Like centre-based testing, AI-enabled testing solution requires candidates to complete a virtual self-check-in process, which includes enhanced identification, authentication and, after successful validation, candidates will be approved to take the test. They will be monitored live through their device's webcam with the assistance of AI tools.

VALUE ADD

Digital, the way forward

The ongoing coronavirus-led lockdown has given rise to a plethora of possibilities in online higher education, post the pandemic

R.W. ALEXANDER JESUDASAN

With the growing fear of COVID-19, many facets of life and livelihoods have come to a standstill. Educational systems are not exempt. COVID-19 has hit Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in India at a time when they were going full-swing to complete the last quarter of the semester and conduct the end-semester exams. Rescheduling these unfinished tasks must be done as soon as possible, as an inordinate delay would affect the future of outgoing students.

Recently, the media has highlighted that the occurrence of similar episodes in the future cannot be overlooked. Thus, this requires both the teacher and taught in all segments of educational systems, in particular HEIs, to be prepared to adopt an online system.

Preparation

Children and the youth: With the advent of computer-based learning across the globe and in particular among toddlers who are exposed to such gadgets, it should be easy to implement some of the learning modules in school education. Coming to those in colleges, and how effective IT-based education could be fostered among the youth, this is the right way ahead as colleges and universities are locked down. The modules suggested ought to be carefully thought of and implemented in a phased manner to give desired outcomes.

Capacity building, a necessity: Higher education in India and the world over has seen a paradigm shift with regard to its pedagogy and application. While computer-based education has been introduced in most colleges, it needs to be fine-tuned in certain essential areas to ultimately make it effective. Mere availability of equipment, gadgets and broadband connectivity will not bring the desired results. The most important aspect is to provide adequate training to professors and students on the use of online education and to familiarise them with the apps and nuances of the available material. Strong Internet connectivity, either through cables or Wi-Fi, is fundamental. In future, colleges should embark on a system wherein one-third of the syllabus content will be handled online. This approach should be made mandatory so that there will be a smooth transition from offline to online teaching models. Teachers, at the moment, do not have sufficient exposure and training to handle online classes, and the approach to this endeavour should be serious as its impact will have far-reaching consequences.

Pilot study is a prerequisite: At least in most autonomous colleges across the country, experts should conduct regular pilot studies to assess the efficiency of digital learning so that there are no major hiccups during implementation. Based on such studies, online procedures can be tweaked appropriately by the teachers and students. Feedback can also be obtained from those concerned to refine the platform. Institution-industry connect could be established with well-known agencies, who have commercialised online education templates, besides seeking support from government organisations who have specialised in these areas.

Online assessment, a viable alternative: Since multiple online assessment modules are available to gauge individual performances in several areas (for example, psychometric tests), it should not be difficult to create a robust platform to help understand the learning outcomes. Exam systems in universities and autonomous colleges already have a methodology in place to generate outputs pertaining to consolidation of marks and related terrains. All that they have to be involved in is to frame questions and probes available through online systems, evaluation templates, awarding of marks, and computation of data generated. Integrating this recommendation may not be cumbersome as exam offices in colleges are already computerised.

MOOCs such as Coursera, Educity, and others can be referred to or consulted while developing online modules. Indisputably, online higher education systems are going to reign in the future, as it is easier, faster, cheaper, reproducible and with less personnel engagement.

The writer is Principal and Secretary, Madras Christian College (Autonomous), Chennai.

Food vendors to get hygiene training

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Over 500 food vendors will be trained in the first phase of the safe practices training next week. HT ARCHIVE

NEW DELHI: Eating street food will not be the same when the lockdown is lifted. To prepare Delhi's street food vendors for the new normal, the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) has decided to train them in the measures they need to take while selling food.

The training will focus on keeping a separate table next to the cart from where customers can collect food, keeping a water dispenser, wearing protective gear, using disinfectants to keep the cart clean, opting for online payment, home deliveries in nearby areas among other things.

The training will be based on guidelines prepared by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) for food businesses during the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic.

Sangeeta Singh, head of the street food programme at NASVI, said street vendors will have to get used to the "new normal to earn their livelihood". While there were close to 1.45 lakh authorised street vendors as per government records based on surveys done in 2007 and 2011, their exact number now is not known as no survey has taken place in the recent past. According to NASVI, there are over three lakh vendors (approximately) in Delhi.

The training guidelines for vendors state that high-touch points (surfaces that are touched the most number of times) have to be cleaned twice daily using disinfectants such as sodium hypochlorite.

"Vendors will now have to use these disinfectants to keep their carts clean. They will also have to wear proper protective gear, provide customers with water dispensers and make arrangement to regularly sanitise their hands. We will teach them about hand hygiene, social distancing, etc., which are essential today," Singh said.

Shyam Sunder (65), a street food vendor at Harkesh Nagar in Okhla, is unsure whether he can immediately go back to selling fritters near the Metro station after May 17. "I will have to buy a lot of things, such as disinfectants, to keep the cart clean. But I don't know if people would prefer to eat on the roadside. The government should help us restart," Sunder said.

Subhash (who goes by his first name), another street food vendor near Pragati Maidan, is also uncertain about his livelihood. "We don't know when the lockdown will be lifted and we will be allowed to put up our stalls. There is a lot of uncertainty. My brother had started selling vegetables during the lockdown to feed the family, but we discontinued it later due the rise in cases in the Azadpur Mandi," Subhash said.

The training is likely to start from next week and over 500 street food vendors will be trained in the first phase, Sangeeta Singh said.

She said vendors, especially those selling street food, will be the worst affected, as people will be reluctant to eat on the road fearing Covid-19.

"Earlier, we would try to teach them about the importance of hygiene while cooking. But now the vendors are eager to know what they can do to revive their business. They have suffered a lot in the last one-and-a-half months," she said.

Arbind Singh, executive director of NASVI, said that the Delhi government and municipal agencies should now create dedicated vending zones as mandated in the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, and also prepare a plan for street vendors once the lockdown is lifted. "The creation of dedicated vending zones will help ensure social distancing. We will request the government to prepare a plan for street vendors, including food vendors. As and when the lockdown is lifted, street vending will need the government's support in reviving their businesses," he said.

A senior Delhi government official said, "There can't be a common rule for all the areas in Delhi now due to Covid-19. The plans will be area-specific. We will ask the district magistrates to ensure that social distancing is maintained whenever vendors are allowed to operate. We will prepare a detailed plan once we get some guidelines from the Centre in this regard."

The digital divide

Rural households with Internet: **14.9%**

Rural households with computer: **4.4%**

Urban households with computer: **23.4%**

Urban households with Internet: **42%**

(Numbers from Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India report, based on the 2017-18 National Sample Survey)

Education during an emergency

PRAVEEN SUDEVAN

Having observed National Technology Day this week, we look at the stark digital divide among Indian students during the COVID-19 crisis — but there is still hope

Sruthi Sri Laxmi, a Class XII student in Coimbatore, last attended school on March 16, before it closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. She has been learning via WhatsApp ever since. The notes and assignments would be posted in her class group. She calls her teachers to clarify doubts. But she disfavours this set-up. "I prefer to be in a classroom," she says, "Now, I have to do everything on WhatsApp – submitting assignments, talking to friends, asking doubts... It is boring."

Sruthi is among the 1.26 billion children worldwide (estimated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)) affected by school closures due to the pandemic. This is 72% of the world's student population. India comprises over 320 million of these learners. It is still uncertain when they can return to their schools or colleges.

Education, as a result, has largely moved online. The World Economic Forumreports a surge in the use of language apps, virtual tutoring, video conferencing tools, and online learning software in the last three months. India, too, is witnessing an e-learning boom. Classes on Zoom, WhatsApp and Skype are becoming the norm for students, parents and teachers. Yet, this abrupt transition to online hardly compensates for the absence of the classroom experience.

Operational nightmare

Neha Sharma's nine-year-old daughter, who attends a private school in Bengaluru, has four classes on Zoom from Monday to Friday – two core subjects (English, Science, etc) and two activities (dance and Taekwondo). Though Neha, who is an online tutor herself, and her daughter have adapted to e-learning, she says several parents she knows are not happy with this new set-up. "They complain of increased screen time for children, which is now inevitable," says Neha. "There are a few parents who aren't comfortable with technology themselves – they crib about it. So, their children, too, might look at it negatively. At times, classes get disturbed due to Internet issues."

In nuclear families, especially, parents might have to miss work to take care of their children. Some of them could be healthcare professionals, who are desperately needed to mitigate the pandemic. There is pressure on teachers, too. Valli Subbiah, the principal of KCHigh School in Chennai, says, "Every teacher has a unique teaching style. Over a period, they would have built a rapport with the children. This is done through observing their body language in class, their interaction with classmates – how it is different in small groups and large groups. Now, they justsee them on computer screens and there could be a lot of disturbances."

Students and teachers also have to quickly adjust to new routines. "You can't have the same nine-to-five schedule," says Valli, "We had to reinvent our model within a few weeks. And, thanks to the support of the students, parents and the school management, we could do it successfully." Classes were divided into groups of not more than seven children. Teachers regularly apprised the parents, individually, of their child's progress. The school even managed to conduct exams online. "Students were asked to take an honesty pledge. We felt it was a good way of making them responsible. Plus, even if they had a book with them, the questions required their own thinking to find the solution."

Making the most A student in Tamil Nadu engages ine-learning during the COVID-19 lockdown • R RAGU

Conducting large-scale, high-stakes examinations, however, will be more complicated. Most board and entrance examinations have been either postponed or suspended, causing disruptions in the academic calendar. The students who are slated to appear for next year's board exams, for instance, have already lost instructional time.

A call to arms

Meanwhile, millions from Government schools and colleges, especially in rural areas, will not even have access to education due to the lockdown. According to the Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India report, based on the 2017-18 National Sample Survey, less than 15% of rural Indian households have Internet (as opposed to 42% urban Indian households). A mere 13% of people surveyed (aged above five) in rural areas – just 8.5% of females – could use the Internet. The poorest households cannot afford a smartphone or a computer.

Governments, NGOs and other public-private organisations are trying to alleviate this serious deficiency.

Avanti, a social-educational enterprise set up in 2010, has launched a free learning app for Hindi medium Government school students in Classes IX to XII. The Sankalp app, which has been installed from the Google Play Store by 1,000-plus users, has recorded video content, solved examples and quizzes in the National Council of Educational Research and Training topics of Mathematics and Science. Avanti also conducts free live classes for IX to XII students on YouTube, TikTok, Facebook and other social media platforms. Akshay Saxena, Avanti's co-founder, says his organisation has partnered with the State Governments of Haryana, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh to make its free content accessible to over one million students. "Students from private schools and those from urban areas can access high-quality digital learning. But we aren't able to help those from the economically weaker parts in rural areas. There is no plan for them. The Government needs to subsidise phone data and phones for people in rural areas. There needs to be an aggressive push to do this as quickly as possible."

ThinkZone, an startup from Odisha, is using Interactive Voice Response (IVR), Short Message Service (SMS) and radio to help households with no Internet access. It has partnered with a local radio channel to broadcast activity-based learning modules for students aged three to 10. The activities are available in Odia, Hindi and English. "The response has been good. We found that people from the neighbouring states are consuming our content as well. In April, we reached over 5,000 families," says ThinkZone's founder Binayak Acharya.

The implications of school closures in the country are not just about education ; they are manifold. An unprecedented social disaster can be avoided if more entities – Government and private – pitch into short-term and long-term futures of the children in this digital divide.

Online learning

Google Classroom is a free web service that schools can use to create and distribute lessons and grade assignments.

TED-Ed's Earth School, in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme, offers lessons about the planet. Check out the quizzes and challenges as well.

Discovery Education offers free educational resources about viruses and outbreaks for different grade levels.

Khan Academy has free lessons and tests in math, sciences and humanities for various grades.

Education Nation Nordic countries have opened up their learning solutions for the world for free, supporting teachers and learners during the school closures.

• IMAGING: M ARIVARASU

Mandis linked to e-platform see 65% rise in count post-lockdown

On Monday, 177 more joined the platform, taking the total to 962 nationwide

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

COVID-19 has given a boost to e-NAM, the national digital platform for agricultural trade, with the number of connected mandis, or wholesale markets, up 65% since the lockdown, according to Agriculture Ministry data.

On Monday, 177 more mandis joined the platform, taking the total to 962 nationwide, giving farmers and traders another option at a time when transport disruptions and social distancing requirements have made physical mandi trade more difficult.

The National Agricultural Market (e-NAM) is a pan-India electronic trading portal which networks the almost 7,000 existing mandis run by Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMC) to create a unified national market for agricultural commodities, with a promise to promote real-time price discovery based on actual supply and demand.

It was launched in April 2016 but progress was slow, especially as many States did not amend their APMC Acts; most farmers were not part of the cooperatives that would help aggregate the bulk quantity of produce needed to interest online buyers and most mandis did not possess the infrastructure to make the most of the platform.

The user base comprises 1.66 crore farmers, 1.3 lakh traders and 71,911 commission agents registered on the platform. • PTI

By January 2019, when the first inter-State trade took place, there were only 585 mandis connected to the platform, although the Agriculture Ministry promised to integrate 415 more mandis by March 2020. At the end of March 2020, however, the number of markets connected to e-NAM still remained stagnant at 585, even as the nation went into lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic and hundreds of mandis shut their physical gates.

The Centre recognised the potential of e-NAM in overcoming some of the hurdles of the lockdown, and introduced some important new features in April: a trading module allowing Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) to trade produce directly from their collection centres without bringing it to mandis, a warehouse-based trading module and a logistics module offering users trackable transport facilities through aggregators with access to 11 lakh trucks.

On May 1, Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar integrated 200 new mandis with the platform.

On May 11, another 177 mandis were integrated. As of May 9, 150 commodities with produce collectively worth more than ₹1 lakh crore had been traded on the e-NAM platform, according to an official statement, although 236 mandis have actually participated in inter-mandi trade across 12 States.

The user base remains at a nascent stage, with 1.66 crore farmers, 1.3 lakh traders and 71,911 commission agents registered on the platform. There are more than 13 crore farmers in India. However, an encouraging sign is the more than 1,000 FPOs which are registered on the platform, providing access to their members.

'Taking online exams will prove difficult'

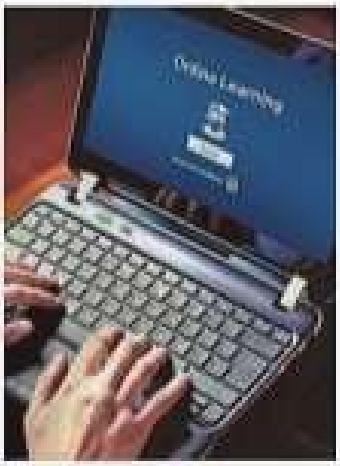
Nearly 72.2% of surveyed DU students said they had Internet connectivity issues

STAFF REPORTER
NEW DELHI

Over 74% of Delhi University students, who took part in a survey by the All India Students' Association (AISA), said they would have trouble taking online examinations, the group said on Tuesday.

In a survey of 1,500 students from the university, the AISA asked questions regarding online examinations as well as other issues. The survey gains significance in light of a recent notification from the university's Dean of Examinations inviting suggestions and comments on holding examinations in the present academic year.

With regard to availability of smartphones or computers, up to 62.6% of the students surveyed said that



they did, however, nearly 72.2% of these students said that they had connectivity issues as a consequence of which they could not attend online classes. Apart from this, 11.6% said they couldn't attend classes due to financial incapability and 7.6% said they were facing difficulties due to household chores.

Study material

Among those surveyed, 44.4% said that the college or department was undertaking online classes while 37.7% said that only some classes were being taken. Most students, however, said that only a few teachers were providing study material with nearly 23.4% saying that they weren't provided study material in the language of the examination.

Only 22.4% of all surveyed reported that they were able to attend all online classes. Apart from this, 68.2% students also said that they were facing difficulties paying rent.

In separate surveys carried out by SFI, Ramjas College, over 60% of the students did not have access to continuous high-speed Internet and at LSR college, 40% students did not get continuous supply of electricity, the group said in a statement.

Arguing against the online classes to complete the syllabus and conduct examinations, the SFI said, "It is highly worrying to know that a 15-member working group on examinations formed to study all matters related to examinations, review the preparedness to conduct the examinations of 2019-20 session and take appropriate steps in this regard do not have student representation which raises the concern of the students' plights being neglected."