

Leadership Capacity Building for Sustainable Digital Initiatives in the Higher Education Sector in India: Need, Challenges, and Strategies

Pradeep Kumar Misra
CCS University, Meerut, INDIA
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Abstract: India is one of the largest and most vibrant systems of higher education in the world with 993 Universities, 51649 colleges, 37.4 million students, and 1.41 million teachers. Higher education is supposed to raise educational attainment levels, and provide skills to aspiring youths to contribute immensely to economic growth and development of Indian society. The role of higher education becomes much more important considering that among the total population of India (1.33 billion), 600 million are under the age of 25. But providing quality higher education at affordable rates for every aspirant is a herculean task. Fortunately, digital initiatives have been seen as a viable option to achieve three long-cherished goals in higher education in India i.e. access, equity, and quality. To make this happen, India needs digital leaders in the higher education sector. Extending these arguments, this paper presents a plan for promoting digital leadership in the higher education sector. To place current scenario into context, this paper first provides an overview of current digital initiatives in the higher education sector in India, and afterward deals with three important issues i.e. i) need for developing digital leaders in the higher education sector in India, ii) challenges of developing digital leaders for the higher education sector in India, and iii) strategies for leadership capacity building in the higher education sector in India.

Keywords: Leadership, capacity building, digital initiatives, higher education, India, strategies

Background

India is one of the largest and most vibrant systems of higher education in the world with 993 Universities, 51649 colleges, 37.4 million students, and 1.41 million teachers. Higher education is supposed to raise educational attainment levels, and provide skills to aspiring youths to contribute immensely to economic growth and development of Indian society. The role of higher education becomes much more important considering that among the total population of India (1.33 billion), 600 million are under the age of 25. But providing quality higher education at affordable rates for every aspirant is a herculean task in a country like India having vast socio-cultural and linguistic diversities. Fortunately, digital initiatives have been seen as a viable option to achieve three long-cherished goals in higher education in India i.e. access, equity, and quality.

2. Recent Digital Initiatives by Government of India for Higher Education Sector

Considering the importance of technology-enabled learning in higher education, the Government of India has launched several new programs as well as consolidated the earlier programs in the present decade. Some of the significant digital initiatives that have been initiated in the present decade to benefit higher education in India are:

- **SWAYAM:** SWAYAM, an online learning platform, aims to take the best teaching-learning resources to all, including the most disadvantaged. SWAYAM seeks to bridge the digital divide for students who have hitherto remained untouched by the

digital revolution and have not been able to join the mainstream of the knowledge economy.

- **SWAYAM PRABHA**: The SWAYAM PRABHA is a group of 32 DTH channels devoted to telecasting of high-quality educational programs on a 24X7 basis using the GSAT-15 satellite. Every day, there are content for at least (4) hours and repeated 5 times in a day, allowing the students to choose the time of their convenience.
- **National Digital Library**: National Digital Library (NDL) of India is developed as a virtual repository of learning resources with a single-window search facility. NDL is designed to hold the content of any language and provides interface support for leading Indian languages.
- **National Academic Depository**: National Academic Depository (NAD) is a national database to hold academic awards issued by different Academic Institutions (AI) in India in electronic form.
- **NPTEL**: NPTEL (National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning) is an initiative by seven Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT Bombay, Delhi, Guwahati, Kanpur, Kharagpur, Madras, and Roorkee) and Indian Institute of Science (IISc) for creating and providing course contents in engineering and science.
- **e-ShodhSindhu**: e-ShodhSindhu provides current as well as archival access to more than 15,000 core and peer-reviewed journals and several bibliographic, citation, and factual databases in different disciplines from a large number of publishers and aggregators to its member institutions including technical institutions, universities, and colleges.
- **Shodhganga**: Shodhganga, a reservoir of Indian theses, contains electronic copies of theses submitted by research scholars of different Indian institutions.
- **e-PGPathshala**: e-PG Pathshala provides high quality, curriculum-based, interactive e-content in 70 subjects across all disciplines of social sciences, arts, fine arts and humanities, natural and mathematical sciences, linguistics, and languages. The contents have been developed by the subject experts working in Indian universities and other institutions across the country.
- **Virtual Labs**: Virtual labs, Web-enabled experiments designed for remote operation, support students of different institutions to conduct curriculum-based virtual experiments without visiting the real lab.

In addition to these initiatives, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 challenge, Union Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister of India has recently announced several initiatives to boost the education sector including higher education. Introducing these initiatives, the Minister highlighted that

the education sector has taken this opportunity to plan several interventions, particularly in the area of adopting innovative curriculum and pedagogies, concentrating energies on the gap areas, being more inclusive and integrating technology at every stage, to usher in a new era of focussed investment in the human capital (MHRD, 2020).

The Minister further announced that the Government is expanding e-learning in higher education - by liberalizing open, distance, and online education regulatory framework. It is projected that under this initiative, the top 100 universities will start online courses, and online components in conventional Universities and ODL programs will also be raised from the present 20% to 40%. The government hopes that this measure will provide enhanced

learning opportunities to nearly 370 million students across different colleges and Universities. The importance of these ongoing/upcoming digital initiatives/programs becomes much more evident because Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India is still about 26% and the government would like to bring it to 30% in the coming years.

3. Need for Developing Digital Leaders in the Higher Education Sector in India

The success of any type of digital initiative in the higher education (HE) sector, by and large, depends on three stakeholders i.e. teachers, students, and institutional leadership. Among these, the role of Leadership, ‘a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal’ (Kruse, 2013), is very important for the success of any organization or initiatives. The role of leadership becomes much more important considering that social influence is vital to sustainable use and promotion of any digital initiative, as observed by Ehlers (2018):

To be able to digitally transform an HEI and establish a corresponding organizational culture that is characterized by new, changed, individual and collective values, it is essential to refine and develop the HEI’s core dimensions and processes affected by the digital transformation (p.2).

The HE sector in India needs innovative and inspired leaders to maximize the reach of digital deliveries in an innovative and managed way. It is assumed that these leaders, termed as digital leaders, will be helpful to reap the dividends of technology-enabled teaching and learning initiatives and programs in the HE sector in India. Summarizing this call for promoting digital leadership in the HE sector, Weber and Eichholzer (2017) observe:

The digitalization is impacting the education system as well to be able to deliver the right human resources: What are important subjects to teach within the digital world? What disciplines have to consider digital facts? The education system needs time to change and an organization has to develop new capabilities.

Digital leadership may be termed as a process of social influence to maximizing the collaborative efforts of different stakeholders to digitally transform the institution and promoting culture for the sustainable use of digital technologies to support the teaching and learning process. In the HE sector, digital leadership is supposed to bring transformation in terms of content, pedagogy, and technology to make digital initiatives an integral part of the teaching, learning, and assessment culture of the institution. Digital leadership can help HE institutions in many ways, as noted by Rouse (2015):

Organizations that value digital leadership, often place value on communication, creativity, and a willingness to explore new ways that technology and digital information can be used to successfully address outward-facing [...]projects, internal projects, projects that affect operations and unplanned work.

Digital leadership can be helpful for the HE sector in India in many ways:

3.1 Bringing change in the mindset of stakeholders

This is a proven fact that the success of any program or initiative mainly depends upon its acceptance, appreciation, and use among stakeholders. A change in the mindset of users is necessary to ensure the maximum utilization of digital initiatives and programs in the HE sector. Extending this argument, it can be said that digital leadership will be

helpful to communicate with and convince different stakeholders to ensure sustainable use of ongoing digital initiatives.

3.2 Harnessing the creativity and innovation of students and teachers

Digital technologies present numerous opportunities in the HE sector, and the main stakeholders i.e. teachers and students are expected to use available resources innovatively and creatively. But any effort leading to creation and innovation demands assurance and support at a higher level, and digital leadership can be vital to provide this support. Digital leadership will be a vital link to coordinate, promote, and disseminate the digital teaching and learning practices and experiments of students and teachers at institutional and public platforms.

3.3 Assessing the technical requirements and ensuring the availability

HE institutions often differ in terms of courses, mandate, and philosophy. Accordingly, these institutions require a different set of digital tools and means. Often, decisions to procure required software and hardware in the HE sector are taken by those who do not have enough expertise in this area. It can be expected that digital leadership will be able to overcome such challenges. Besides, digital leadership will also be helpful to suggest need-based and cost-effective tools and programs for the benefit of teachers, students, and employees.

3.4 Developing a culture of cooperative and collaborative use of technologies

The most important aspect of digital tools and techniques is that these provide numerous opportunities to teach and learn cooperatively and collaboratively. But developing this culture is not an easy task in the complex surroundings of HE institutions. We can hope that digital leadership will be able to convince different groups to come together and make a plan to use available digital tools, means, and initiatives to achieve the desired educational goals.

3.5 Promoting ‘community of digital practices’

Digital leadership can also play a very important role in developing the ‘Community of digital practices’ in the HE sector. The purpose of such digital communities will be to share their experiences, expertise, concerns, achievements, and practices regarding the use of digital technologies. These communities will also be helpful to advise, support, train, and evaluate each other regarding the best possible use of available digital tools and techniques.

4. Challenges of Developing Digital Leadership for Higher Education Sector in India

Digital leadership is multifaceted as well as a challenging task. Those chosen as digital leaders will be required to bring changes at an individual as well as at the institutional level. Digitalization is a dynamic process and to keep pace with it or manage it for benefit of the educational process will require several changes, as suggested by an article from Forbes:

“But as with any immigrant in a foreign culture, there are new languages, attitudes and mind-sets that can be learned, helping ease your transition into this new environment” (IESE Business School, 2013).

Some other challenges related to developing digital leadership in the HE sector in India are as follows:

4.1 Digital technologies are still not part of the core scheme of HE sector

Instead of widespread use of technologies in our life, the acceptance and use of technologies in the HE sector in India remain low. A large section of academia still sees digital technologies as adversaries rather than a supporting modality for the teaching and learning process. Therefore, the most significant challenge before digital leadership will be to convince the main stakeholders to accept and start using digital tools and techniques in their routine teaching-learning activities. Digital leadership will also be required to show a way out about the promotion of blended or hybrid learning in face to face mode institutions of higher education.

4.2 Concept of digital leadership is not practiced much in the HE sector

The use of digital initiatives and technologies requires a change in mindset and existing practices. Changing the mindset and practices is a slow process while technologies evolve at a fast pace. Therefore, the other major challenge before digital leadership will be to convince all stakeholders to come forward and start giving their support in principle and practice to promote the use of existing digital initiatives and programs.

4.3 Practitioners are still apprehensive about the use of digital technologies

Bringing the digital revolution in the HE sector cannot be achieved only at policy or institutional level. Like any other revolution, this also needs strong social and human support. Instead of many claims and supportive voices, practitioners are still apprehensive about the use of digital technologies in their classrooms. Therefore, asking people to participate and cooperate in the digital movement in HE will be another prime challenge before digital leadership.

4.4 Securing financial assistance and social support to practice digital leadership:

The success of digital initiatives and programs depends on the main stakeholders of the HE sector like teachers, students, and administrators. Making them ready and bringing on one table for the effective and efficient use of digital technologies will be another challenge before digital leadership. Besides, getting sufficient financial support from the institutional budget or government agencies to procure digital tools and introduce new digital programs will also be a difficult task for digital leadership.

4.5 Convincing present leadership to accept and promote digital leadership

The most obvious challenge before developing digital leadership in the HE sector is to convince existing leadership to accept and promote it. No leadership will feel comfortable about any proposal to nurture a parallel leadership in the form of digital leadership. Therefore, convincing existing leadership that the proposed scheme of digital leadership will not be a rival instead it will be a helping hand to them will require a lot of effort and energy at the level of policymakers.

5. Strategies for Digital Leadership Capacity Building in the Higher Education Sector in India

The concept of digital leadership is not much prevalent in higher education institutions/ organizations in India. On behalf of directives from the University Grants Commission of India, Universities have nominated one of its faculty members as SWAYAM coordinators. As other directives from the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Indian Universities have an AISHE (All India Survey on Higher Education) coordinator. But both these directives are program-specific, and cannot match with the aims and expectations from digital

leadership. Time has come that all higher education institutions /organizations in India may realize the benefits of digital leadership and start practicing it. Following strategies may be helpful for them in this regard:

5.1 Select a digital leader of the institution through open competition

Higher education institutions/organizations may choose a faculty member to be designated as ‘Digital Leader’. Instead of the most popular practice of nomination, where the head of the institution/executive committee nominates a person to bear a particular responsibility, institutions may select a digital leader through open competition. As part of this competition, candidates may be asked to put up plans about digital empowerment of the institution and an e-portfolio showing their digital expertise and experiences. Shortlisted candidates may be asked to give an open presentation before an expert team (consisting of digital technology experts), faculty members, students, and employees. The institutions can make the final selection on the combined strength of the submitted plan, the expertise of the candidate, and the quality of presentation.

5.2 Authorize selected leader to pick-up a team and take appropriate decisions

As discussed earlier, digital leadership is a challenging task. Irrespective of his/her level of expertise, no one can solely bear this responsibility. Therefore, institutions/organizations will be required to authorize the selected digital leader to pick-up a team of his/her choice. The digital leader may also be encouraged to include members from different sectors such as students, faculty, researchers, employees, administrative staff, parents, etc. in his/her team. The institutions/ organizations must also provide the required facilities and authority to the chosen leader to connect and collaborate with different members of the institutions. This support will enable the selected digital leader to make the best use of ongoing digital initiatives and plan new schemes/programs.

5.3 Support selected leader to develop a digital policy of the institution

The most important task of any digital leader is to evolve a digital policy of his/her institution/organization and make everyone to believe and follow it. The digital leaders will be required to include different aspects like promoting different digital initiatives of the government, defining the role and use of digital technologies in teaching, learning, and evaluation, specifying the role of the teachers and the students regarding the use of digital technologies, evolving mechanism for availability and maintenance of digital tools and techniques, using digital technologies for assessment purposes, etc. in this policy. Digital leadership will also be expected to regularly review this policy and try to improve it with the help of the feedback received from stakeholders and users.

5.4 Provide opportunities to digital leaders to get professional training

The most important characteristic of digital technologies is that they keep evolving at a fast pace. To remain digitally competent throughout his/her life, one needs continuous training and practice. Considering the role and importance of digital leaders, it will be useful to help them to get professional training on different aspects of digital technologies. Therefore, higher education institutions will be required to sponsor the selected leaders to visit or contact other institutions that how they are utilizing digital technologies and what can they learn from each other. This kind of support will help them to get updated about emerging digital technologies and programs and use this knowledge for the improvement of his/her digital leadership skills and competencies.

5.5 Sponsor researches on digital leadership

Digital leadership in the HE sector is an emerging field and no policy and practice can be treated as universal. Research can play a very important role in this regard. To make this happen, institutions/organizations will be required to sponsor and support researches on different aspects of digital leadership in higher education. The dissemination and implementation of findings from these researches will be helpful to practice digital leadership more effectively and efficiently in the HE sector.

6. Conclusion

India has launched several digital initiatives and programs to reach the elusive triangle of access, equity, and quality in the HE sector. Experiences, from the corporate sector, suggest that promoting digital leadership can be a viable mechanism to take maximum benefit of these initiatives/programs as well as emerging digital technologies to strengthen the HE sector. Extending this argument, the present paper highlighted that there is an urgent need to promote digital leadership in the HE sector in India. Afterward, the paper discussed that the implementation of digital leadership in the HE sector will not be an easy task as many challenges await it. Finally, the paper suggested some useful strategies for developing digital leadership in the HE sector. The researcher hopes that suggested strategies will be helpful for higher education institutions/organizations across India to accept, promote, and take maximum benefit of digital leadership.

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