

Task Force Looking at Feasibility of Online Exams for Higher Education

The Covid-19 crisis has meant a postponement of many competitive exams and a time of uncertainty for students across the board. **Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank'**, Union minister for human resource development, is helping efforts to minimise disruption while prioritising the safety of teachers and students. In an interview with **Prerna Katiyar** over phone and email, he discussed the measures being taken and weighed to help students, the strengths and weaknesses in India's research efforts and our poor showing in global university rankings, among others. Edited excerpts:



Due to the outbreak of Covid-19, many competitive exams such as JEE (joint entrance exam) and medical entrance had to be postponed. What is the ministry's plan for these exams? Is there a case to move these exams online?

“Examinations are also delayed. We are consulting various stakeholders like boards of examinations, IITs and other agencies before announcing new dates. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented public health emergency affecting the functioning of every sector, and, causing, sadly, the closure of schools and higher education institutes. Examinations are also delayed. We are consulting various stakeholders like boards of examinations, Indian Institutes of Technology and various other agencies involved in the logistical operations of JEE and NEET (National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test), as well as user organisation of results of JEE and NEET before announcing new dates. For us, the safety of students and teachers are the prime concern and all decisions will be taken

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keeping this in mind. I have received many representations for change of examination centres, as students will not be able to travel after lockdown, so I have directed the National Testing Agency to allow students to change examination centres in their application form. Also, JEE (Mains) exam will be held in the last week of May. Many exams by bodies such as the National Council for Hotel Management, Indian Council for Agriculture Research and Jawaharlal Nehru University (entrance) have been postponed. I request students to keep checking the MHRD and National Testing Agency websites for authentic information. To assess the possibility of conduction of online exams for higher education, the ministry has constituted a task force under the University Grants Commission. We will issue guidelines based on the report. The decision will be taken in the best interests of the students.

How many universities/rooms of higher education institutions have been converted into isolation wards for Covid-19?

In our endeavour to extend support to various states in their fight against Covid-19, we have asked the local administration to use our hostels and institutes. So far, 136 facilities are used as quarantine centres. These include 77 Kendriya Vidyalayas and 33 Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas; 5 IITs, 3 IIITs, 6 Central University hostels; and hostels or guest house facilities of 12 NITs.

The lockdown has caused major interruption in students' learning. What is the ministry's plan to make up for lost trimester and teaching hours?

The NCERT and the UGC have started work to keep the academic calendar of 2019-20 secure. A task force has been

constituted for the same. The guidelines will be issued depending upon the report submitted by the UGC. The interest and health of the students will be given prime importance.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has brought the spotlight back on the need for more research in fields like epidemiology. Researchers at the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine in London have built epidemiological models of the spread of the virus that have influenced public policies in the UK. Similarly, researchers from Peking University, China, first produced evidence last month that there were two strains of the novel coronavirus. There has been no such breakthrough in India. In what ways can research be promoted and more and more students be inspired to pursue it?

Our higher education institutes are doing impeccable research to combat Covid-19. For example, IITs are carrying out around 250 research projects in areas of personal protective equipment, testing kits, sanitisation, medical equipment/robots, surveillance, pharmacological and non-pharmacological treatment, and data analytics as well as use of artificial intelligence to model epidemic patterns and disease dynamics. Seeing the progress, I have asked IITs to draw up

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clear short-term and medium-term technology solution p

lans to combat Covid-19 and all such medical emergencies in the future. The proposals are under review and will be taken up with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the expert Covid-19 Response Task Force chaired by the principal scientific advisor to the government to enable a quick scale-up.

Separately, to promote research and development in higher education institutes, we have launched the Scheme for Transformational and Advanced Research in the Sciences (STARS), Impactful Policy Research in Social Science (IMPRESS), Impacting Research Innovation and Technology (IMPRINT), Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration (SPARC) and Scheme for Trans-disciplinary Research for India's Developing Economy (STRIDE).

India has struggled to raise the number of universities

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in the top 500 global list over the past decade. In contrast, China has more than doubled its share in the top 500 over the same period. What are we doing to improve this?

We have launched various schemes to inculcate a culture of research in higher education institutes and thus to establish world-class centres of education. We, at HRD, believe in the principle of convergence and collaboration to derive solutions for tomorrow. Therefore, through SPARC, we aim to improve the research ecosystem. We are facilitating academic and research collaborations between category-wise, top 100 Indian institutions (according to the National Institutional Ranking Framework) and the best institutions in the world (top 500 overall and top 200 subject-wise institutions listed in QS World University Rankings) from 28 select nations to solve problems of national and international relevance jointly. Systemic efforts are being undertaken to develop a comprehensive approach to transform the quality and quantity of research in India, critically in higher education institutes. To equip higher education institutes with coordinated and interrelated re

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search, the National Research Foundation has been formed. NRF has an overarching goal of strengthening the ecosystem of

research with a focus on identified thrust areas relevant to our national priorities and towards basic science without duplication of effort and expenditure. It will competitively fund research in all disciplines across the academic landscape: science, technology, social sciences, and arts and humanities. Twenty universities — 10 each from the public and private sector— are

being selected as institutions of eminence (IoEs). I have directed the 10 public IoEs to work hard to improve their global

rankings and emerge as centres of excellence at the global level. Institutions will now be inviting Nobel laureates, academicians, professors, foreign faculty, among others, to visit Indian educational institutions. Also, the entire architecture

for giving access to research journals will be reviewed, and open access may be provided to institutions. IIT-Bombay, IIT Madras, IIT-Kharagpur and IIT-Delhi were declared as IoEs.

Once the epidemic is contained, will the ministry give more push to e-learning modules over classroom learning? Will the ministry consider reskilling Indian faculty in online teaching?

To support teachers and accelerate the process of learning, our ministry provides a plethora of educational applications and platforms at both school and higher education level. They make available engaging content

for students, teachers and parents to facilitate the process of learning at the time of social distancing and nationwide lockdown.

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Definitely, we will be putting in more efforts to strengthen the future of e-learning in India to make it more immersive and hopefully more constructive to the teacher and student community than it is today. The higher education institutes will be made more competitive to foster constant innovation and become more resilient. The country is witnessing a greater acceptance of online education as a large number of students and working professionals are joining e-learning platforms to enhance their skills. For higher education institutes, our ICT (information and communication technology) initiatives include SWAYAM, Swayam Prabha, National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER), e-PG Pathshala, Shodhganga, E-ShodhSindhu, e-Yantra, FOSSE project, virtual labs, SAMARTH, VIDWAN and Shodh Sudhi. Traffic on SWAYAM has tripled. It hosts all the courses taught in classrooms from Class IX till postgraduation, to be accessed by anyone, anywhere, at any time. Simultaneously, the upskilling of teachers is also being conducted through the e-learning resource under the Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Teaching