

Indian Universities Need Immediate Vaccination

C. Raj Kumar April 14, 2021

In some universities that have commenced physical classes, there has been a spike in cases

As universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) across India prepare to bring students and faculty back on campus, COVID-19 cases are suddenly surging across the nation. More people are being infected and at a faster rate than before. Vaccination roll-out strategies targeting selected groups must be rapidly expanded along with public health efforts to bring normalcy.

In a recent letter to the Prime Minister, the Indian Medical Association has suggested that vaccination be allowed for all people above the age of 18 years. India has one of the highest proportion of young people with co-morbidities, including cancer, diabetes and tuberculosis, in the world. With a large part of COVID-19 deaths in India occurring due to co-morbidities, there is a compelling case for young people in universities and HEIs to be given priority in vaccination.

Critical Disparity

The case for mass vaccination involving students, faculty and staff in HEIs is not without precedent. Cornell University in the U.S. intends to have a requirement of vaccination for students returning to certain campuses, which not only has a direct positive impact on restoring academic continuity, but also curtails high-risk asymptomatic transmission. On-campus learning transcends conventional didactic approaches by offering experiential learning and co/extra-curricular activities that are impossible to replicate virtually. Some of these will have to be redesigned to follow COVID-19 protocols.

In 2020, while some HEIs initiated digital reforms to ensure academic continuity, many institutions faced impending challenges broadly around two key constraints. Privileged public and private HEIs were able to build the governance and infrastructural capacity

for digital transformation to ensure academic continuity, supported by the Ministry of Education through several initiatives. SWAYAM deserves a special mention here. However, low Internet penetration and limited power and technology infrastructure impacted universities and students, particularly in rural India.

Multiple institutions have replicated the physical experience of campuses in the virtual world through pedagogical innovations and using technology to drive social engagement. However, all universities in India may not have the resources required to do so in the online space. In order to meet these challenges, close gaps and give a reasonable holistic academic experience, our public health efforts and vaccination strategies may have to reflect this very critical disparity.

Two Concerns

At this stage, one may consider the possibility of resuming university campuses with upgraded infrastructure and COVID-19 protocols, but one must keep in mind two concerns of high-risk exposure and logistical complexities. First, universities host a large number of students, faculty and staff members representing diverse demographic groups. Since the essence of most campuses is to promote social interactions, their ‘normal’ functioning can increase the risk of infection. While the magnitude of risk varies, this is true for campuses with day scholars and fully residential campuses. With such high exposure and cumulatively rising risk of transmissibility, a vaccination strategy that involves them can help curtail the spread and revitalise their learning experience.

Second, reopening campuses will entail complex logistical implementation to ensure health and safety on campus. However, only a handful of institutions have been fortunate to make infrastructure enhancements in the past year. Also, while norms of social distancing and masks can be deployed, sustaining the rigour of adhering to all protocols will be strenuous for some. Compared to corporate organisations where it is easier to deploy such norms and protocols, we must be mindful of the challenges of doing the same for and in universities.

The recent spike in COVID-19 cases upon commencement of physical classes among certain renowned Indian universities reinforces the importance of vaccination prior to reopening. More than 37 million students enrolled in higher education, along with the university faculty and staff, is a number that is feasible for a special vaccination drive to be planned and executed. Since at least three months are needed for two doses and to ensure an effective immune response, the implementation of such a programme for all HEIs must begin by May for timely commencement of on-campus learning this year.

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