

Pedagogy meets purpose: Rethinking higher education in the age of AI

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Prof. Dabiru Sridhar Patnaik is Professor & Registrar, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat. Views expressed are personal.

The growing presence of generative artificial intelligence within the wider academic ecosystem has acquired momentum at a time when Indian higher education is already undergoing policy restructuring with National Education Policy's emphasis on multidisciplinary education, flexibility, and student-centred learning. That restructuring is now moving into its regulatory phase with the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill which is one of the most consequential structural reforms to the system in decades. This is a defining and transformative moment for Indian higher education, marked by the convergence of reformative policy and regulatory architecture and the rapid development and expanding use of artificial intelligence. These developments should not be viewed as separate or unrelated as they are central to the realisation of Viksit Bharat 2047. Higher education reforms and the rise of artificial intelligence are reshaping, at the same moment, the conditions under which knowledge is accessed, taught, understood and constructed. The future of Indian higher education must hold them together. They call for deeper and more thoughtful socio-pedagogical reflection on how the universities should respond both philosophically and administratively so that structural reforms and technological change may together enrich the purpose of education.



There is a clear need to move from the mere transmission of information to the construction of knowledge within the classroom that should function on the principles of stewardship and stakeholderism, rather than on hierarchy or an asymmetrical model of knowledge transmission. We need a genuine learner-centric engagement by encouraging inquiry-based and multidisciplinary learning with active student participation. The emergence of generative artificial intelligence has further accelerated this transition. The task of pedagogy is no longer simply to teach content, but to cultivate the conditions under which students can shape themselves, question assumptions thereby engaging actively rather than passively with the systems, automated or otherwise, through which knowledge is now mediated. Higher educational institutions should enable students not merely to develop competence but the capacity to think critically within and beyond the systems that now process knowledge.

With digital transformation and artificial intelligence, traditional modes of assessment are clearly under strain. When artificial intelligence systems are capable of generating and even interpreting texts, the methods of assessment must be revisited to evaluate students' understanding of concepts and subject areas rather than the mere reproduction of information in response to linear questions. The learning outcomes of each subject should therefore determine the mode of assessment adopted. Universities will increasingly have to design forms of evaluation that reveal understanding, analysis, judgment, originality, and the ability to substantiate an argument, rather than simply reproduce information. This calls for a careful pedagogical reorientation so that students develop the ability to distinguish between superficial and genuine understanding. Faculty reorientation will therefore be essential to this pedagogical shift.

Digital and technological transformation must be approached with careful attention to the scale and complexity of higher education in India, which accommodates approximately 43 million students across central, state, deemed-to-be, and private universities, as well as affiliated colleges, according to the All-India Survey for Higher Education 2021-22. The Economic Survey 2025-26 situates this within a larger challenge. While the number of higher education institutions and the Gross Enrolment Ratio for the 18-23 age group have grown steadily over the past decade, achieving the government's target of 50 per cent GER by 2035 will require a significant expansion of the existing educational network and infrastructure. Digital transformation realises its potential only when it reaches every institution

effectively. Equity in higher education today must therefore be understood not only in terms of access to institutions, but access to the infrastructural and learning conditions that make meaningful participation in a knowledge society possible.

Many of the questions raised by the increasing use of artificial intelligence are fundamentally humanistic in nature. What, for instance, happens to comprehension and interpretation when the assimilation of information becomes automated? How should reasoning, analysis, and ethical reflection respond to knowledge mediated through large language models? These questions go to the heart of what universities are meant to cultivate in the contemporary era. The real test of higher education lies not merely in its ability to adapt to technology, but in its capacity to integrate it in a manner that deepens conceptual and contextual understanding while fostering a nuanced intellectual perspective across disciplines.

Artificial intelligence is reshaping the very grammar of education. For it to be truly transformative, however, we must develop a conceptual apparatus that integrates technology with pedagogy, ethics, and the humanities – one that reminds us that education is not only about efficiency, but also about values, empathy, and wisdom. A constructivist approach, therefore, becomes essential – students must remain active co-creators of knowledge, with artificial intelligence functioning as a facilitator rather than a substitute. India's higher education ecosystem is vast, diverse, and resilient. Institutions should reflect this resilience by embracing innovation while safeguarding academic integrity. Yet resilience in education is not about resisting change; it is about absorbing disruption and transforming it into opportunity, while remaining aligned with a larger institutional purpose. Higher educational institutions in India must therefore move forward with a renewed understanding of what education is for to contribute meaningfully to the common good. If artificial intelligence is integrated within this broader philosophical framework, it can become a powerful instrument of inclusion, creativity, and intellectual renewal.

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