

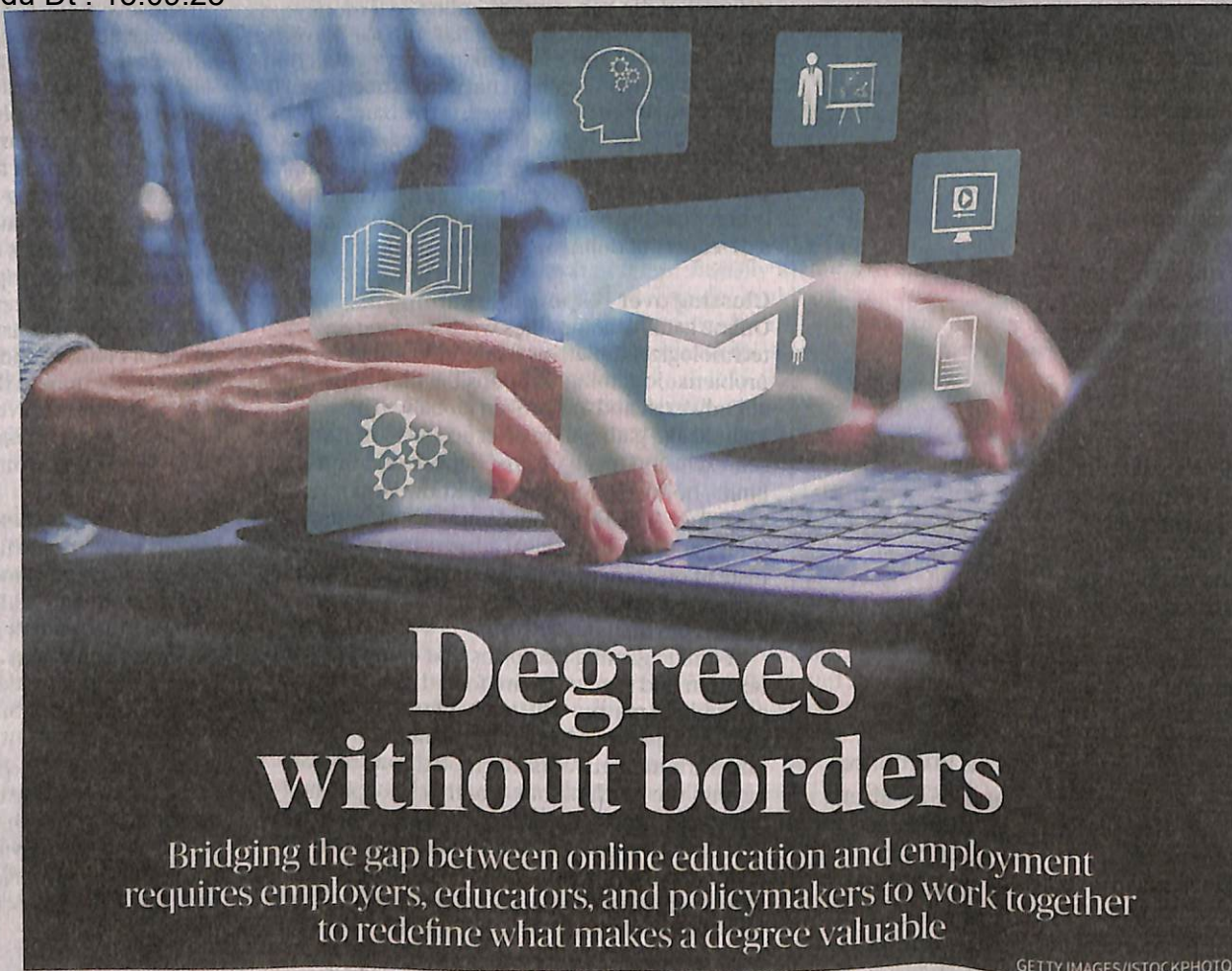
Vasanth Gopal

The COVID-19 pandemic may have fast-tracked India's digital learning revolution, but the job market hasn't quite caught up. Despite the University Grants Commission (UGC) formally recognising online degrees from accredited institutions, employers remain hesitant. A 2023 report by Aspiring Minds found that just 18% of recruiters consider online degrees equivalent to traditional ones; a sobering statistic in a country where online enrolments have nearly tripled from 1.4 million in 2020 to 4.1 million in 2023.

Fault line

This disconnect between education and employment reveals a deeper fault line in India's evolving learning ecosystem. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions a future where hybrid and online learning are integral to higher education. But, for many job-seekers, that vision remains aspirational.

Employer scepticism is rooted in perception and policy. A 2024 Shine.com survey found that 72% of job postings still explicitly require "regular degrees", even for roles that could be performed by online graduates. The wage gap is equally telling. Online degree-holders earn 15-20% less than their offline peers in similar roles, according to the Indian Labour Market Report (2023). Sectoral differences



Degrees without borders

Bridging the gap between online education and employment requires employers, educators, and policymakers to work together to redefine what makes a degree valuable

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further complicate the picture. While IT and IT-enabled services (ITES) firms are relatively open – 34% reportedly hire online graduates – traditional sectors such as banking and government remain resistant, with acceptance rates below 5%.

Concerns about academic integrity and skill development continue to fuel employer distrust. A 2023 study by Delhi Tech University found that 41% of online students admit-

ted to malpractice during exams.

Compounding this is the limited use of AI-based proctoring. Only 60% of UGC-recognised online programmes currently employ such tools, leaving room for fraud and undermining credibility.

Intangible benefits

Beyond technical skills, employers also value the intangible benefits of in-person education – communication, collaboration,

and critical thinking – often nurtured in physical classrooms. Hybrid models, while promising, still struggle to replicate these experiences effectively. Cultural perceptions add another layer of resistance. A CSDS-Lokniti survey (2023) revealed that 68% of Indian parents distrust online degrees, reinforcing the belief that offline education is inherently more rigorous and prestigious.

The NEP's push for hybrid learning faces practi-

cal challenges. While 45% of universities now offer online programmes, only 12% of Fortune 500 companies in India have updated their hiring policies to accommodate them. Infrastructure gaps persist; just 30% of rural colleges have access to reliable digital tools, according to AICTE (2024). Faculty resistance is another barrier: over half the professors surveyed by the Education Ministry in 2023 opposed hybrid teaching, citing

increased workloads and lack of training.

Yet, there are glimmers of hope. IIT-Madras's online BS programme, for instance, boasts a 92% placement rate, thanks to strong industry partnerships with firms like Tata Consultancy Services. Amity University's hybrid MBA programme uses blockchain technology to secure certificates, addressing concerns around forgery and authenticity. These examples show that when quality, transparency, and employer engagement align, online education can deliver results.

Bridging the gap between online education and employment will require more than regulatory tweaks. It demands a cultural shift, one where employers, educators, and policymakers work together to redefine what makes a degree valuable. Co-designed curricula, robust assessments, and transparent credentialing can help build trust.

The UGC is already moving in this direction, mandating stricter proctoring and standardised evaluations. But for the NEP's vision to truly take root, employers must evolve alongside the education system. In a digital age, learning can no longer be confined to classrooms. What matters most is not where a student studied, but what they can do.

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