Coronavirus outbreak: Here's how B-Schools are changing class modules

Management institutes are having to tweak the way classes are conducted since the COVID-19 lockdown has moved lectures online.

It's COVID-19 times, and e-delivery is the new way of life.

The way XLRI-Xavier School of Management, SP Jain School of Global Management, IIM Calcutta and other business schools are adapting to the changing times is a study in itself.

Every year, XLRI-Xavier School of Management starts its academic session in June. This year, COVID-19 delayed it.

The classes for the first batch of 590 students in the business school at Jamshedpur (470 candidates) campus and the Delhi-NCR (120 candidates) new campus will start in August 'virtually'. An XLRI spokesperson said that the online classes for second-year students will start from July 10.

SP Jain School of Global Management has hit upon what it calls online ELO (Engaged Learning Online). This has many advanced features not possible in physical classrooms, says president Nitish Jain.

IIM Calcutta has its 'beyond-the-blackboard' methods.

Online advantages

Pragyan Rath of The Business Ethics and Communication group, IIM Calcutta, says that one great advantage of the digital mode is that teachers are more alert and available for discussions even after classes through mails, calls, and other mediums.

Nitish Jain of SP Jain School of Global Management reassures: As face-to-face workshops and interactive daily lectures move to ELO, "only the delivery mode changes, not the curriculum."

Jyotsna Bhatnagar, professor and dean-graduate programmes, Management Development Institute (MDI), Gurgaon, explains how even teachers are changing with the changing times.

The institute, she said, will train the faculty and staff with detailed SOPs, and supporting technological devices like pen tablet and studio options. Google Class, Microsoft Teams-based class, and Zoom are the new-age classrooms. Bhatnagar said that the institute will use AI-based exam proctoring for examinations very soon.

How to manage technology disruptions and keep students engaged?

At MDI Gurgaon, wireless hotspots are created to avoid sudden electricity outage. Dongles are also provided to manage internet- connectivity issues, and online attendance is monitored.

"To maintain the rigour of classes, pre-class readings are provided in advance to the cohorts. Smaller and crisper cases are provided," said Bhatnagar.

At Great Lakes Institute of Management, both in Chennai and Gurgaon, the faculty's focus is different: how to make online sessions more engaging. "Online quizzes, polls, and breakout group sessions are some techniques. To ensure that students are well-connected and get individual guidance where required, a faculty mentor has been assigned to each student," the institute spokesperson said.

How were students prepared?

At Great Lakes, there was an online initiative called Term Zero. This was offered prior to the commencement of the academic programme to help students utilise time for building perspectives and key skills. Term Zero consisted of sessions by Madhav Rajan, Dean, University of Chicago-Booth School of Business; Dr Ashwath Damodaran of NYU Stern, V G Narayanan and Srikant Datar from Harvard Business School among others.

There were also sessions by business leaders like Suresh Narayanan, CMD, Nestle India; Ganesan Ramachandran, Managing Director, Accenture Strategy; and, Ananth Krishnan, Chief Technology Officer, TCS.

Anju Seth, professor and director, Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Calcutta, said that the institute has temporarily switched to the digital mode for MBAEx (MBA for Executives) and VLMP (postgraduate programme for visionary leadership in manufacturing) programmes.

"Our faculty members are using 'beyond-the-blackboard' methods to ensure that students do not miss out on active learning activities such as participation in class discussions," added Seth.

What happens to team projects?

The essence of business school education is that students are able to interact with fellow students with various levels of work experience and social backgrounds. These interactions culminate into group projects where a team of students get together and solve live projects or simulated situations.

After the pandemic, team projects have hit the digital mode. Similar to the summer internship process, live projects are also moving online. At MDI Gurgaon, project evaluation is done online via oral tests and peer-to-peer learning is also happening online.

What about schools with multiple campuses?

Business schools with multiple campuses offer greater flexibility to students.

For instance, SP Jain School of Global Management says its students can study online in any one of the campuses in Mumbai, Dubai or Singapore. Here, students can pick and choose and do a part of the programme online now and apart on campus later.

SP Jain has re-trained its faculty to make the best use of hi-tech classrooms. Its ELO offers students a virtual and real-time classroom experience, wherever they are. One can connect with peers and faculty from different countries, collaborate on assignments, discuss and debate, participate in polls, quizzes, and breakout sessions.

Jain added that team projects are strengthened as it is very easy to collaborate in online breakout rooms. "In fact, because of our collaborations with western universities, there are now global teams," he added.

Early movers

Some business schools like IIM Sambalpur enjoy an advantage. The institute had implemented digital learning, pre-COVID-19 itself.

Director Mahadeo Jaiswal told Moneycontrol that the institute had, in 2019, launched 'flipped classrooms' -- partly physical and partly digital. As opposed to a traditional setting, they reverse the learning environment.

For this method, the institute uses online platforms such as Moodle Learning Management Systems (MLMS) and Zoom VC.

However, owing to COVID-19, the first-term of MBA first year and fourth-term of MBA second year this time will be conducted online. All examinations will also go online, either by using proctoring systems for descriptive exams or by using MLMS for quiz and multiple-choice exams.

Apart from this, it will also enhance industry interactions through live projects in the classroom.

The 120 XLRI-Xavier School of Management students, though, will miss one thing: the mandatory rural visit programme. Under the programme, students have to visit nearby villages for a couple of days to experience rural life. The programme, a part of the curriculum, has been cancelled this year.

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