



Transcript

Series two, episode three: Equity and inclusion

Hriday Thakur:

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Natasha Lokhun:

When we talk about equity and inclusion in higher education, in the context of online learning, most people will think of the digital divide.

Professor Sasmita Samanta:

For the students, those who were not coming to the universities, for them the online education is very much accessible.

Natasha Lokhun:

Digital technology also has a role to play, in providing access to higher education for people who might not otherwise be able to attend university.

Professor Charles Pascal:

The pandemic has revealed unfortunate inequities in all forms, whether it's online learning, whether it's issues of race, or mental health and wellbeing, we are not all in this together.

Natasha Lokhun:

But there are other inequalities at play in society. How can we use digital technology in universities to address these, and ensure that we are widening not closing the gap?

Natasha Lokhun:

In this episode, we'll focus on the challenges that universities face in dealing with the digital divide, and broader inequalities. What measures can we take to improve the situation for everyone? I'm Natasha Lokhun, welcome to The Internationalist podcast, from the Association of Commonwealth Universities.

My guests are Professor Sasmita Samanta, Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology, in India, and Professor Charles Pascal, Professor of Human Development and Applied Psychology, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, at the University of Toronto, in Canada. But first we'll hear from Hriday Thakur, who is studying Biotech at Amity University, Uttar Pradesh in India. We asked Hriday, to tell us about his experience of online learning.

Hriday Thakur:

For me, studying online has been I believe personally a good experience, because I believe that I was already very technologically friendly, so to switch to an online mode wasn't very difficult for me. So, the first thing that goes with online that I personally liked very much and that I believe most of the people were in favor of, was that we don't have to travel anymore. So it was very, very time saving on the part of teachers, the students. The second thing being that it makes us

more flexible, it's something that really compliments the studying that happens with the teacher as well.

There are a little bit more challenges that come with it. What happens is that particularly if I talk about India, we were a country that was in a social economic divide when pandemic hit us, so if we talk about that, most of the people, they were not really having the electronic devices or the technology, to have online classes on the laptops or phones. So, that became a very big problem, because they were not able to attend the classes anymore.

Natasha Lokhun:

So although Hriday's experience has been positive, he recognizes that some students have been less fortunate, because they haven't had access to data and devices. My first guest Professor Sasmita Samanta, is from the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology, also known as KIIT. I asked her to tell me, about how KIIT has managed during the great online pivot.

Professor Sasmita Samanta:

Pandemic outbreak in India in the month of March, we started the online classes from 17th of March itself. For five years we were using different online platforms, we're conducting the quizzes, for submission of assignment. And sometimes the students, those who are not able to appear at the examination because of some of the health issues, like some of the students will find that they meet with an accident, and during your end semester examination, they are not able to present in the campus. For them also, we explore some mechanism as so they can appear in the examination online.

Natasha Lokhun:

I guess just thinking about the long experience that KIIT has in online teaching and learning, and also the more recent changes that it's made because of the pandemic. Do you think that online teaching can help create opportunities, for people who might not otherwise have been able to attend university?

Professor Sasmita Samanta:

Yes. The greatest advantage of online learning, what I have experienced, it is flexible for the teachers and the students. The teachers can teach from anywhere, and the students can learn from anywhere, and at any point of time.

Second benefit of online teaching, is the optimum utilization of the human resources. Today we find in the economic scenario, getting good faculties, good human resources in each and every domain is very difficult, it's very difficult for the institution, it's very difficult for the universities. So, if in any institution or universities, the good teachers are there in a particular domain, then their knowledge can be utilized by the students optimally.

The third advantage of online learning is that it promotes inclusiveness, because for the students, those who are not coming to the universities, those who are out of the purview of the accessibility to the universities, for them the online education is very much accessible.

We find also with KIIT University, we are having another one Tribal institution, in the name of Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, where around 30,000 indigenous children study. And those children are from the remote areas, they're from the dense forest. So while they went back to their place, we found that because of the online teaching, when they didn't have the access to the university, while we uploaded all the materials in the WhatsApp, in the internet, in the university portal, they could access it, they could learn, and they could appear at the examination.

Because we find in India also, the dropout rate of the students, after the high school dropout rate. is around 50%. It's because those who go to the school, after completing the high school, they become eligible to participate in different small economic activities of the family, and to earn for the family. So that, family does not allow them to pursue their education, but we find that sometimes those children take the advantage of distance mode of education, or online mode of education. There are lots of example in front of us, that the students they work and they learn, they do both the work together.

And maybe after three years, four years, we find that they have completed the graduation. But my personal opinion is that still now we don't have the proper technology with us, proper tools with us, as such it can't take the place of offline education.

Natasha Lokhun:

There's a lot of talk about the digital divide, and we see it between countries, within countries, between different groups of people, how do you think that technology can help reduce the digital divide in the future?

Professor Sasmita Samanta:

From KIIT University which is a tech university, the university provides a laptop to each and every student, and each and every faculty, as such everybody will have the access to the technology. Even with the laptop, few students they didn't have the access to the online classes, because they didn't have the access to the internet in their residence itself. So, if we see in a country like India, and many more countries are there, even the advanced countries are there, there'll be certain places where the internet will not be available around the clock 24 hours.

Second is that, the quality of internet. If in India nowadays we find internet is available in most of the places, but while coming to the online classes, getting engaged, doing practicals online, it needs the quality internet. So, the infrastructural requirement is huge for implementation of online education, all through the country or maybe for all the students.

So digital divide while we talk, I can say that because of the lack of infrastructure, that sort of divide is there. The government of India has come with lots of programs, recently they have launched one program with PM Wani. There they're saying that they are providing the data services to the people at free of cost, even in the village level. And different companies, the corporates are coming with their own WiFi facilities, data services to make it accessible to the people. But I think it will take five years, six years, 10 years, nobody knows, but it will take its own time.

Natasha Lokhun:

From what you're saying, the success of technology in higher education is not solely the responsibility of universities. There are other stakeholders that need to get involved, and need to support that, including the government as well?

Professor Sasmita Samanta:

As I said that, the online education system is not only dependent on the university, yes. Because the universities can always build up the materials, online materials for the students, which can be available in the internet. But that building of that technological infrastructure, it's always the national subject, it's always the state subject.

Natasha Lokhun:

So for Professor Samanta, providing equal access to higher education for all, is not just a matter for universities, external stakeholders have a vital role to play.

We're all in this together, is a rallying cry, we've heard time and time again over the last year. But my next guest Professor Charles Pascal, Professor of Human Development and Applied Psychology at the University of Toronto, believes that this is not the case.

Professor Charles Pascal:

No, absolutely not. There's two phrases that popped up at the beginning, one is, "We're all in this together." And we are not. The pandemic has revealed remarkable chasms, remarkable unfortunate inequities in all forms, whether it's online learning, whether it's issues of race or mental health and wellbeing, we are not all in this together. And the other phrase that drives me crazy is, "We look forward to returning to normal." Things weren't normal and effective before the

pandemic, and there needs to be a major rethink as a result of what we've learned from the pandemic.

Natasha Lokhun:

Do you have thoughts about what the new normal should be for higher education?

Professor Charles Pascal:

If we're talking about online e-learning which will likely be part of going forward, there needs to be a major investment in how to ensure that there's an equitable approach, that deals with the fact that there is a digital divide, and we can talk about the many forms of that digital divide. Do I think that post-secondary education should be about problem solving rather than discipline-based? Absolutely. We need to think more carefully about the quality of a curriculum, and how we can ensure that the complex social economic problems of the day drive how learners learn. We also need learners at all ages, from preschool, through universities and colleges, we need them to be able to evaluate fact from fiction, because we're living in an age where social media bifurcates right versus wrong. And doesn't provide an opportunity for nuanced discussions that are evidence-based, in what I call the gray zone, in the middle. So there's a lot of things that need a major rethink.

Natasha Lokhun:

You mentioned that there are many forms of the digital divide. Can you tell us about what the digital divide looks like in Canada specifically?

Professor Charles Pascal:

Well look, the digital divide usually is decoded as those who have resources, and those that don't. It's related to issues of income and poverty, and we know from the pandemic that those who don't have internet at home, those who don't have proper devices are at a major disadvantage. But the digital divide also relates to the fact that students vary widely with respect to how capable or interested they are in early learning. And there's many factors at play, and these aren't income driven, they have to do with individual differences. I have two granddaughters who've been doing most of their work in the last year online, one of them thrives on it, the other one desperately needs to be in a circle with friends, to enjoy the socialization, et cetera. So the digital divide comes in terms of learners.

The digital divide also applies to professors, many of whom don't have a clue about how to effectively use online learning. Too many of my colleague professors at the University of Toronto, they think that taking the content of their lectures and putting it through the technological black box, and out comes great learning, it's simply not the case. We have to reinvent how we use the basics of high-quality interactions regarding students getting information, applying the information, getting feedback, working with peers. There's lots of ways of teaching and building the capacity of teachers at all levels of education, including university professors, but that's going to take a major investment.

Natasha Lokhun:

And I wanted to ask your thoughts on how, reflecting on those individual circumstances, how digital inequality might intersect with other inequalities that are preexisting, or it might exacerbate those?

Professor Charles Pascal:

Yes. There's no doubt that, one of the silver linings for me is that the pandemic has pulled back the curtain on racism and all of its forms. And racism intersects with poverty, it intersects with an inequitable effect of the pandemic on issues of race, and we know that it's had a much more deleterious effect when it comes to racism.

When it comes to mental health and wellbeing, there were all sorts of pre-existing challenges for many students, including university students, many of whom drop out after a few months in their first semester of their first year, because of undetected issues of stress and anxiety.

These things were all there before, the pandemic has pulled back the curtain, and so all of these things need to be understood. And Natasha your question is absolutely critical, you can't just take a slice of the problem in terms of digital learning and just add all the things we know about how to do that more effectively, without looking at these intersectional issues, regarding issues of racism, issues of gender inequality, and issues of mental health and wellbeing.

Natasha Lokhun:

Can I ask you also a little bit about First Nations people? That's another layer of inequality in countries where indigenous populations are marginalized.

Professor Charles Pascal:

Absolutely, there's no question about that. And when I talk about racism as an ugly truth in our backyard, we like to point the finger to the South regarding the remarkably devastating racial divide in the United States, we are nowhere near thankful the situation there, but we have our own issues here. And when it comes to issues of race, I should separate out and include and underscore the importance of dealing with indigenous peoples, and the inequities that they so certainly suffer. And there's no doubt about that we need special understanding, and special outreach, and special support, led by indigenous leaders that we need to figure that out. And this calls attention, to the one thing that I think needs to be part of the capacity build for teachers at all levels, including post-secondary, and that is anti-oppression training.

I don't think that there should be a professor in the Commonwealth in ten years, that hasn't undergone serious, deep learning from within anti-oppression. And I'm not just talking about a couple seminars with a few folks on a panel, I'm talking about deep learning led by facilitators who can help us lead from within, in terms of dealing with unconscious bias. And the same thing goes regarding issues of mental health and wellbeing, we need to be serious about improving the pedagogy of university professors, according to the things we've discussed. But part of that has to be with respect to the kind of core values and behaviors, that made sure that equity and diversity are understood in the very souls of each of us, who have the responsibility to support the change makers in the future.

Natasha Lokhun:

And is there a role do you think for technology in driving that approach and helping improve the situation?

Professor Charles Pascal:

Absolutely, if it's used appropriately. But you know in 1985, a Harvard professor, and she's still around producing great material. Shoshana Zuboff at Harvard, wrote a book called *In The Age Of The Smart Machine*, 1985. She warned that, if you just think of technology as a black box, where you jam in the content and out comes something different, you are basically going to waste a huge amount of time, and it won't work.

Natasha Lokhun:

We've heard this actually a little bit already, that it cannot be technology for its own sake. I think that reflects a little bit, not just on the role of technology in higher education, I suppose, but how higher education can support societies engagement with technology. And I wondered if you wanted to expand a little bit on that, or if you had any thoughts about how, again I suppose, how that can really help support equity and inclusion.

Professor Charles Pascal:

We need a future where all the graduates of our universities around the Commonwealth are critical thinkers, active problem-solvers, dealing with the complexity of the social and economic issues we

face today, whether it's climate change, or social and economic inequity, we need problem-solvers. And we need problem-solvers to basically know where to get the best information and evidence available.

Too many governments around the world have leaders that have turned their backyards into evidence-free zones, where evidence and facts don't seem to matter. And in this day and age of easy access through Google and other platforms, we need to teach from the earliest years, and I'm talking about preschool. We need to teach learners the ability to evaluate information, to test it out, and to ensure that they evaluate the sources of information. This has to start before formal schooling, and it has to be reinforced throughout, so that when our learners get to universities, and we have professors who understand that this is not just about regurgitating a discipline by discipline information. But a transdisciplinary approach, where students learn how to deal with a complex social economic problem, by taking the best of what each discipline might have to offer to solve it, rather than having this course on geometry, and this course on history, and this course on language where we bifurcate, I call this hardening of the categories, where discipline after discipline.

And we need to go into a transdisciplinary world, and organize curriculum at all levels, including universities. That's a major transformation. And so there's lots to be done to ensure that critical thinking, and problem-solving, and good citizenship, behavior that's informed by moral purpose. Moral purpose is part of what our students leave when they go out into the world after a college and university experience. If we don't start with that end game, where the future needs to be healthier, safer, more just, and prosperous for the many, rather than the elite few. That's my mantra. If we don't begin with a clear vision of the nature of what education is about, we'll continue just going down every single pathway, we'll muddle through, universities will try to get their grants from their governments. We need a major transformation, and the pandemic has clearly called attention that we have not done anywhere near enough, to ensure that better future for the many.

Natasha Lokhun:

The pandemic has revealed inequalities in many forms, in education, and in wider society. This is about more than the digital divide, and my guests believe that we have an opportunity to rethink how the education system can improve equity and inclusion.

I'd like to thank Hriday Thakur, student at Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Professor Sasmita Samanta Pro-Vice Chancellor at the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology, and Professor Charles Pascal, Professor of Human Development and Applied Psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

The Association of Commonwealth Universities is committed to highlighting the issues that influence learning and teaching in our world. In the next edition we'll be asking, is blended learning the new normal, can it create new opportunities for higher education? So please do subscribe to the series, wherever you get your podcasts, and like, comment, and share the program.

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