

Why Have Degrees Around Necks?



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The ministry of human resource development has just released the draft of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) Bill, 2018, that will repeal the earlier UGC (University Grants Commission) Act, 1956. Essentially, unlike UGC, which is both regulator and grant provider, HECI will only be the regulator of academic quality.

But isn't India missing a grand opportunity to thoroughly disrupt the higher education system? For starters, why do we need a degree as we know it today? What if we could have credentials without a university degree?

Take the music industry. When music started to be sold digitally by the song and not by the album, the ensuing unbundling obliterated the industry's revenues. Imagine something similar happening in higher education, with credentials offered at the level of a skill or knowledge, rather than a degree.

In 2000, Fathom, an ill-fated online educational platform at Columbia University, US, tried to become the first mover on digital education. But with people reluctant to pay for online learning, Fathom folded in 2003. Today, we have massive open online courses (MOOCs), with millions of eager learners flocking to the likes of Udacity, Coursera and edX.

The college degree — an unambiguous credential from an accredited institution — may well be the last barrier to entry, standing between traditional education models and a major disruption. For many companies globally, degrees are a handy shortcut. Want to reduce the résumés sitting in your inbox? Make a BA, BSc a requirement. In one fell swoop, the list of candidates gets shorter.

But in India, this doesn't work much. Even PhD-holders will apply for entry-level positions requiring just a basic degree. So, an additional qualifier, such as a 'minimum cut-off mark', is used. This makes life easier for HR, but cuts off opportunities for others. The obsession of getting a degree with high scores becomes even more reinforced. Companies also end up paying more for candidates. For instance, the quality of an average engineering graduate has fallen so low today that organisations taking them need to spend



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substantial resources on training to bring them up to a level where they can add value.

Other forms of skill certification than degrees are becoming an alternative. Some companies are already seeking out 'new collar' workers. EY and IBM are early experimenters. The 'Skill India' mission may have been a profiteering racket for some, but it certainly has prompted many companies to launch internship and apprenticeship programmes.

Alternative forms of credentialing, in which some kind of respected accreditation body certifies skills and knowledge at the level of the skill or knowledge, rather than the degree, will gain momentum. Today the economics of higher education exists because

there are few alternatives. Students see no choice but to attend college to access meaningful employment. They are forced to take a whole bunch of courses regardless of their interest. Professors are rewarded for their seniority, not for being inspiring curators of the learning process.

An ecosystem fails when it fails to create results for its constituents. The university system, however, is bulwarked by its control over that paramount credential business. Alternative credentials are starting at the 'low end' of the education market, with boot camps, online courses and short 'training' sessions. But the impact on established institutions will be greater over time.

One is not suggesting that a carefully curated curriculum, taught by passionate teachers, is bad. What one is reiterating is that students must be able to integrate what they learn with what is in practice. The dilemma, however, is when the degree becomes an end in itself.

It may be too early to disrupt the university model as we know it. But it's certainly the right time for those making decisions in higher education to keep a close watch on developments in alternative credentialing.

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