

Classroom learning to be made mandatory in distance education

Government plans 40% weight to face-to-face classroom, practical component in distance education courses

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The government is bringing in a new blended learning policy in which at least 40% of the programme has to be in a classroom in distance education courses for technical subjects.

The All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), the country's technical education regulator, on Thursday said it has formulated the policy and sent it to the human resources development ministry for approval.

The idea of 100% theory in distance education in technical education will neither lead to quality education nor production of quality manpower for industry.

"We are proposing at least 40% weight to face-to-face classroom and practical component in the distance education courses," AICTE chairman Anil Sahasrabudhe said.

The government stopped recognizing distance B-Tech and M-Tech courses in 2009. It lifted



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the ban in September saying all those who have received any certificate in distance education are eligible for government jobs, provided their courses are recognized by regulators such as the University Grants Commission. This benefited institutions such as the Indira Gandhi National Open University, a central university offering such courses.

The government, however, did not clarify if from now on any institute could offer distance technical education, leaving it to regulators such as UGC and AICTE to devise a policy.

AICTE has so far held back its approval for B.Tech, M.Tech, pharmacy, hotel management and architecture courses in distance mode on grounds that such teaching compromises the quality

of the education.

Sahasrabudhe said soon all these courses can be legally availed of in distance learning, without compromising 40% face-to-face learning.

Authorities said the move will benefit aspirants, especially working executives, and expand the scope of higher education. India's gross enrolment ratio in higher education is at 20%. It will also help take higher education to a larger number of people.

Although it will support the expansion of technical education, especially for the working class, industry says the system may not produce high-quality graduates and will not command a premium in the job market.

"Expansion will bring more people into the fold of technical

education. But will quality of such courses be very good? The answer is may not be. Industry always demands quality workforce and a distance-educated person may not command premium in a marketplace," said Shalini Sharma, head, higher education wing at lobby group Confederation of India Industry.

Raju Davis Parepadan, chairman of Kerala-based Holygrace Academy, which runs engineering and management colleges, said the fresh move is better than the earlier situation. However, given that classroom learning in a majority of technical education institutions is not too good, it was doubtful if giving 40% weight to classroom learning as part of mixed distance courses would improve the quality of education, he added.

"Yes, you will see more people opting for such courses as it will be less expensive and less rigorous than a full-time, face-to-face course. But quality improvement may not be achieved unless the classroom learning improves," said Parepadan said.

Only 17.5% of engineering graduates were deemed employable in a 2011 survey by industry lobby Nasscom. India's information technology industry spends nearly \$1 billion a year to make them job-ready, the report said.