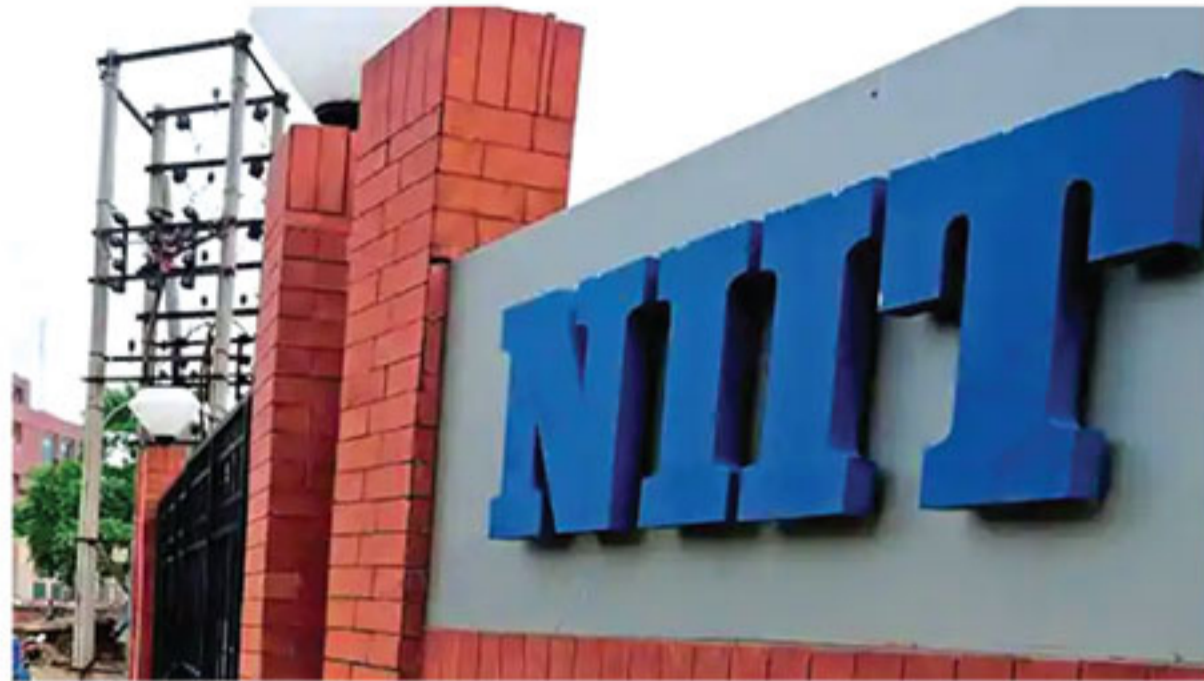


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How NIIT University pivoted to digital, minimized COVID-19 disruption

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Many brick and mortar universities are laggards when it comes to adopting technology. But black swan events such as Covid-19 outbreak would now accelerate the shift online. (Pradeep Gaur/Mint)

NEW DELHI : Sanya Kapoor, a third-year engineering student at NIIT University, was preparing for a presentation on March 13 when she received an e-mail from the university's dean of student affairs. Academic and co-curricular activities were being suspended.

The sprawling university campus at Neemrana, Rajasthan, is surrounded by the Aravali hills. It is a residential school with 1000 B.Tech, M.Tech, M.Sc and MBA students. There are 48 teachers. Students were asked to leave for their home towns. Sanya came back home, in Noida. "When we were asked to go home, there were not many COVID-19 cases in India. We were puzzled and it was an unexpected break," she said. "Three days into the break and we realised that the university was starting online classes. That was great because we would be on track once we get back on the campus," she added.

Around 13 March, India had reported about 83 confirmed cases — the count spiked to 415 by 23 March. The brick-and-mortar NIIT University acted fast and pivoted to a digital mode, minimising the disruption caused by the outbreak. The university is not only holding lectures through video conferencing, it is also tinkering with virtual labs where experiments can be demonstrated through video conferencing. Going ahead, if the outbreak prolongs, even examinations could be held remotely. The academic sessions end in May.

"The teachers and students took a couple of days to familiarise themselves with the video conferencing software," said Sanya. For online classes, the university uses software platforms such as Adobe Connect and Zoom. "Now, classes are running just as it did on the campus. We get daily timetables. We can un-mute and interact during the lectures or through chat," she added.

Professor V.S. Rao, President of the university said that almost 70% of the students are currently accessing the classes live. And now, the faculty, thus far lecturing from the university campus, is being enabled to teach from home. "We are allowing teachers to work from home. We have to ensure that the faculty has Internet connections in their home towns. We will reimburse the bills. We are shipping laptops and desktops to their houses too," Rao said.

Ensuring business continuity at the university has yet another dimension — admissions. The university follows its own processes that involves prospective students interacting with the faculty.

"The interactions with prospective students and the faculty is meant to understand compatibility; we want the faculty to judge the potential of the student," said Rao. In earlier years, prospective candidates reported at NIIT University's regional offices in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Hyderabad. They took some tests before interacting with the faculty through Skype. This year, many candidates wouldn't be able to reach these centres because of lockdowns. "We are allowing them to take the tests and interact with the faculty from their homes," Rao explained.

Many brick and mortar universities are laggards when it comes to adopting technology. But black swan events such as the COVID-19 outbreak would now accelerate things, industry watchers said. Education is headed for what is being called a 'blended model'.

Ratnesh Jha, Chairman of industry body FICCI's Publishing Committee and the India CEO of Burlington English, a publisher of educational material and digital content, explained that traditional universities rated the social angle to be very important in the development of a student — the people one studies and collaborate with. "Residential universities added value by bringing many of these aspects of social collaboration. What was not happening was the leveraging value of technology," Jha said.

A wide range of technology, which includes data science and facial recognition, can now map outcomes and track a student's progression far better than humans ever can. Education technology start-ups such as the Bengaluru-based Vedantu have built online businesses leveraging such technology.

"Now, there will be a blend of online and offline education. People realise that existing standalone teaching is a problem in the kind of situations we have today," Jha added.