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Topic: Policies, Practices and Possibilities of Digitization in the Governance of Universities in India

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Findings

The major global changes over the last decade have led to significant challenges for universities around the world. The use of technology in education has introduced disruptive developments that alter university governance. On one side, there is a growing realisation that effective governance is critical to ensuring that universities achieve their core missions. On the other side, university governance has become more complex and multi-layered.

The study employed a mixed-method approach. Primary data was collected from 236 universities using stratified random sampling. The sampling plan covered close to thirty percent of universities across the central, state, deemed, and private university types. Document analysis was conducted on fourteen national policy documents and forty-seven institutional policy documents related to digitization. On quantitative data of capabilities, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed. To understand the policy themes from the qualitative data, code-hierarchy modelling was done using MAXQDA.

Findings show that digitization in most universities is limited to the implementation of digital technologies without any governance change. Even while different aspects of digitization are being taken care of by universities to some extent, its linkages lack a comprehensive approach. Policy documents show that most institutions treat digitization as an operational manual devoid of a futuristic policy approach, leading to fragmentation. Most institutions rarely distinguish between digitization policy and IT policy which adds to the fragmentation approach of using digital tools in silos.

Foundational capabilities are composed of an online grievance system, facilities for digital transactions, remote access to the digital library, direct benefit Transfer, transactions via PFMS, customised ERP, GeM for public procurement, online evaluation and Central IT infrastructure.

Operational capabilities are composed of digitization of the admission process, attendance management, time-table creation, fee management, examination, issue of transfer and other certificates, digitization of academic transcripts, student profiles, faculty profiles, scholarships and fellowships, digitization in the reporting to regulatory bodies, alumni and fund-raising procedures, budgeting procedures, digitization of accounting and financial documentations, and question bank.

Differentiating capabilities are composed of data on digital connectivity and accessibility of students, online system for departmental resource sharing, e-Governance initiatives, sufficient annual budget, adequate number of trained regular staff, IT-driven daily operations, online functioning of statutory bodies, acceptance of digital initiatives among internal stakeholders, dedicated team for digital infrastructure, innovative academic leadership, and facilities for the

online course production.

The major digitization hindrances identified from the qualitative data are lack of expertise, administrative burden, technology distrust and adoption issues, lack of resources, data quality and technological barriers, faculty-related barriers, and challenges in scaling-up.

The study suggests a fourth dimension, *relational capabilities*, and proposes a new framework for digitization in universities. The framework conceives of competency paths linking these four capabilities. Competency refers to the demonstrated ability to execute specific tasks as a measure of performance often assessed against predefined standards. Capability is a broader concept that refers to the potential to perform a range of functions and includes underlying knowledge, resources, and abilities of the university. Linking competency paths with four capabilities provides three spaces, viz, academic, administrative and emerging technology spaces.

By leveraging these capabilities, universities can enhance their coordination efforts, identify areas of overlap and redundancy, and optimise the use of digital resources. The relational framework can assist universities in determining the responses that are appropriate during the emergence of disruptive technologies.

The study suggests that universities must transition from the idea of digital readiness or e-governance to *transformative digitization*. The former attempts to measure the degree to which an institution may benefit from the usage of ICT. Transformative digitization, on the other hand, is an evolutionary process in which ICT becomes an integral part of daily operations and a university-wide phenomenon. Using the framework suggested, with a *digital master plan*, universities can understand what institutional configurations of digitization will work best for each of them aligned to their missions. Policymakers can use this study to make decisions on schemes and initiatives related to digitization. Educational leaders can use this study to create institutional-level policies to bring new perspectives on digitization in their institutional settings.

Differences in governance cultures and nuances of online teaching are not included in this study, as it merits a separate work. For further studies, development of a *digital readiness index* for universities, *digital maturity profiling* of higher education institutions, impact of generative AI on higher education governance, cost-benefit analysis of digital capabilities and its impact on financial choices of universities are proposed.

The researcher hopes that the current work will stimulate a new set of targeted conversations, conceptual explanations, and practical initiatives surrounding transformative digitization in university governance as a window of possibility and as a series of emerging capabilities.