

Transiting to a digital mode: A disruptive innovation in tertiary education

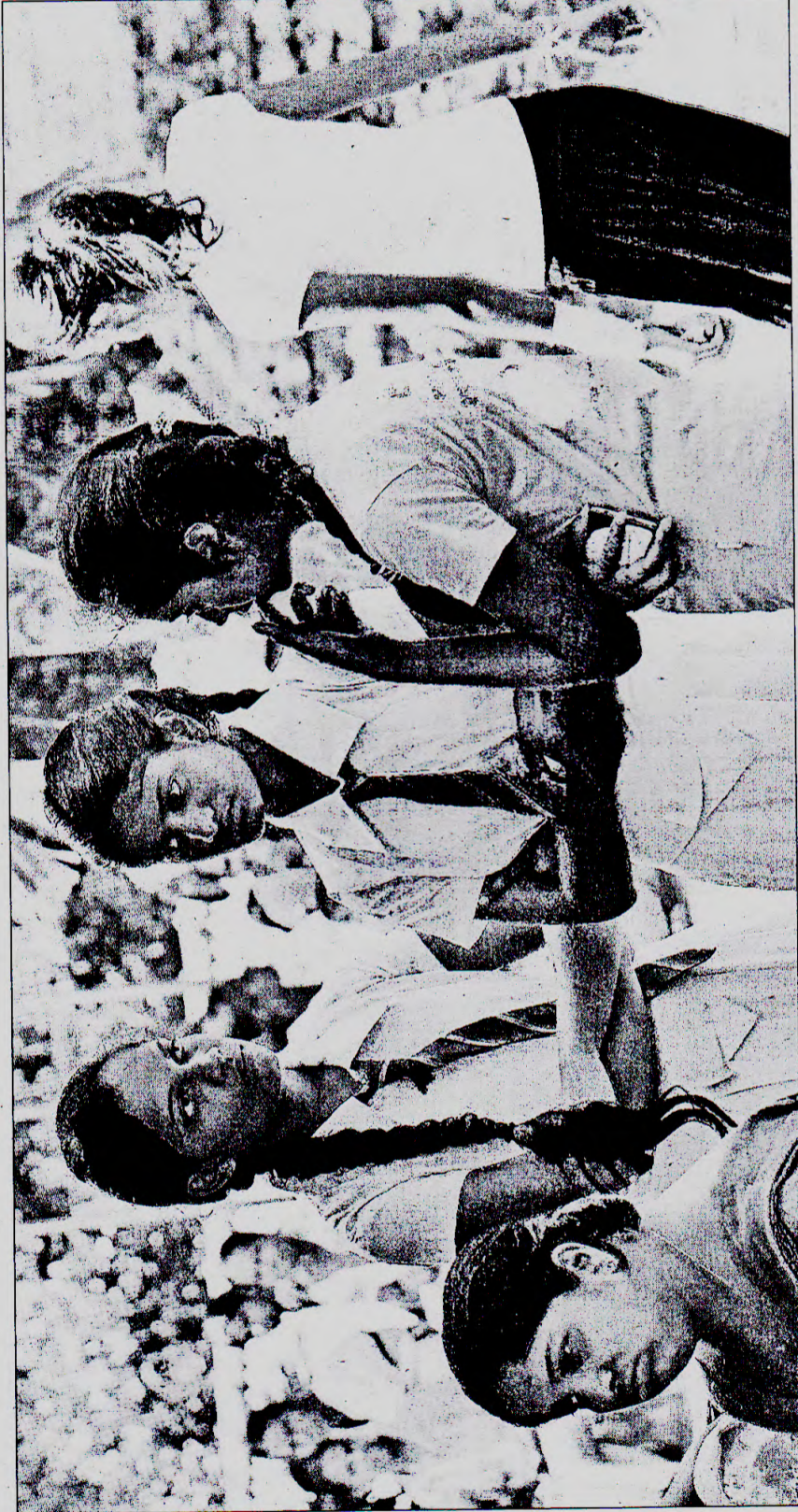
By PRIYAL E. PERERA AND MAYURA FERNANDO

DUE to the current COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgency on the part of the government and the higher education sector to assess the possibility of providing online education nationwide. This is an opportune time that Sri Lanka can avail itself with transiting to an online mode of education as it can position itself to cater to a wider student body at a reasonable cost to provide higher quality education in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced global experimentation with remote teaching. Though online education is not new, the pandemic has revived the interest in this disruptive innovation with some urgency. Given the resource limitations that prevent large numbers of A-Level students from getting a university education at present, an online education platform offers many more of them the opportunity to obtain a valuable degree and join the workforce.

Moreover, courses can be tailor-made to students' needs with greater selection in course offerings. For the year 2017-18, 267,000 students sat for the Advanced Level examination, and out of which 163,160 (61.1%) qualified to enter the university. Out of the qualified, only 31,415 (19.3%) actually entered the university and 136,500 (80.7%) didn't gain a university education (Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka and https://www.ugc.ac.lk/downloads/statistics/stat_2018/Chapter2.pdf). With an online education, not only would these excluded students have an opportunity to get a university education, but the country too would benefit by having a greater number of educated work force for its future economic development.

With an online education model, in addition to increasing the number of students, parts of some of the residential programs can be substituted, supplemented and complemented with digital technologies at a very low cost. One of the main attractions of online education for universities is that the marginal cost of providing online content to a large student audience is almost zero or very low. Hence, valuable resources can be saved for research-based teaching, problem solving and mentorship.



Given the resource limitations that prevent large numbers of A-Level students from getting a university education at present, an online education platform offers many more of them the opportunity to obtain a valuable degree and join the workforce - Pic by Shehan Gunasekara

or Coursera for access and online delivery of courses. These options have to be negotiated with these two platforms. With a significant one-time contribution to the edX, their platform can be used for offering programs/courses, blended learning solutions for on campus use, and access and offer edX courses on 'My Campus' on edX. (<https://partnerships.edx.org>)

An immediate opportunity that Sri Lanka can make use of, being the world's most renowned destination for learning 'Theravada Buddhism', is to offer some of its courses on the MOOCs platform. These courses can be designed in a blended format, so that part of it is provided online and the rest to be done face-to-face at the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka. This approach may bring in the much needed funding to the university through foreign student-fees and popularise Sri Lanka as a study/learning/cultural destination.

There are benefits of using the MOOCs platform as the quality of the courses/programs offered by other international universities will be visible on the platform and therefore the local universities will get a chance to put in greater effort to match them by designing and developing better courses. For faculty, the MOOCs platforms offer access to new content on subjects,

From the students' perspective, they benefit as they can save on associated costs relating to their...

local curriculum/syllabuses. This approach has the added advantage that the local universities will have ample time to initially sort out the examinations and submitting assignments. To prevent or minimise such behaviour, the universities can have a blended approach where students attend the universities during exam period. With new technology and assessment methods, some of these shortcomings

The edX platform currently offers 2,800+ courses in 31 subject areas whereas Coursera provides over 5,000+ courses in diverse subject areas. Although not every discipline or program (e.g. medicine) is suitable for such an approach, a range of new courses can be accommodated

Options available
There are different approaches available for Sri Lankan higher education institutions to consider when choosing an online learning environment for teaching. These institutions can use a virtual learning environment with a learning