

## **Sustainability of Higher Education in GIG Economy: Evaluating the correlation of different fundamentals with special reference to Assam**

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### **Abstract**

*The mantra for survival in this 'VUCA' world is one's ability to build one's competence. One of the appellation of the future of the job world that the students are heading to is the GIG economy. Though GIG economy have become a part of the changing cultural and business environment, it is still in its infancy in Asia and practically absent in Assam. With the global, national and regional economies slowing down, organizational downsizing and cost-cutting have attributed to the rise of professionals opting for flexible arrangements due to lack of other arrangements. The pandemic together with the technological era has caused a major shift in the way we work. The paper focuses on teaching, learning and organisational aspect of the Higher Educational Institutions to measure their preparedness to embrace the gig economy*

*There is a long way to go for India, and for Assam the path is still dark. But the HEIs should apply the 3 Rs- Respond, Recover and Reshape*

**Key words:** *Gig, HEIs, Technology, Skill development*

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### **I. Introduction:**

Education specially Higher Education is going through turbulent times. At the macro levels information technology, globalisation, marketisation and massification of education act as challenges for higher education. While at micro level also numerous challenges in different forms, shapes and sizes also face different stakeholders of higher education. Issues of quality, curriculum, pedagogy, online programs policy implementation, economic challenges, etc are some of the arduous tasks the Higher Education Institution needs to overcome.

Change is the new normal. Disruption will go mainstream. Survival in this 'VUCA' world will depend on one's ability to build one's competence. One of the moniker for the future of the job world that the students are heading to, is the GIG economy. It is an economic situation that advocates freelance work, offers wide range of choices, promotes short-term labour or rather a temporary job contract. As opposed to a permanent job, it leads to casualisation of the labour.

But one sector that is transforming at a very rapid pace is the education sector. According to a recent report by industry experts, the Indian online education gamut is set to grow to 10 million users by 2021 from 2 million users. "E-learning platforms are bringing a measureable difference in students' engagement and performance. It is reducing gaps in the delivery of education and giving a new dimension to the education space" Pearson India Managing Director.

Automation, artificial intelligence, IoT, unprecedented access to data and computation has been acting as a catalyst in ushering in this dynamism or profound economic and social transformation in the Gig economy.

While a study conducted by McKinsey has revealed that upto 20-30% of the workforce in developed markets is engaged in independent work. While a report published by EY and FICCI India, 65% of the children, who are kindergarden or primary school today will be doing jobs that don't even exist today. One of the burning example of the fast transformation of the corporate workforce is Google, where majority of the workforce is made up of independent and temporary employees.

A developing country like India where education as a industry is considered to be the third largest industry in the world (Indian Country Summary of Higher Education, World Bank) needs to gear up to take up the call of digitization in the education system and gig culture.

The pandemic like Covid-19 has bought about a fundamental change in the way we learn, work and live. It has bought the entire Globe to a standstill. All sectors of the economy has been badly effected

The social, economic and cultural condition of the world and India has thrown up the following queries to us to ponder - Is there a need to Re-think the manner we are imparting education? Are the values of

life rightly instilled? Does the future citizens of India value Dignity of Labour? or they hankering for materialistic world?

**Objectives:**

The objective of the study was to conduct an analysis on the following themes:

1. To study the preparedness of the Higher Educational Institutions for the GIG economy.
2. To study the present pattern of teaching, learning and organisational setup and the demand of time.
3. Do any specific conditionalities cater to a job seekers inclusion into the gig work?

**II. Methodology**

An educational institution, is an embodiment of teaching, learning and organisation. To analyse the impact of the new system of job market operation or rather the FoW (Future of Work), the effect on all these three sectors have minutely studied.

The paper is mostly based on secondary data as digitization and the gig economy is yet to make a full impact in these part (i.e. Assam) of the country. The impact of technological revolution and the GIG economy is also not upto the mark in rest of the country as compared to the western countries.

Although primary data was collected through questionnaire from students of various colleges and universities of Assam. The method of convenience sampling was used while selecting the institutions and faculty members (327) and snowballing method was used while collecting information from students (604). Only students from the undergraduate level and postgraduate level was considered.

The collection of primary data was confined to Assam due to paucity of time and resources. The respondent were selected from urban area institutions as they enjoy the maximum facility in respect of digital technology and other modern amenities as compared to rural Assam.

The paper is basically qualitative as the researcher could not quantify the responses due to one sided answer of the respondents.

**Significance:**

The world is in an era that is ever evolving. This demands for a profound transformation in the HEIs. This cannot be achieved by changing learning technologies alone but also requires alteration of the ways the numerous teachers teach, learners learn, transformation is promoted and imperishable change in traditional institutions across hundreds of different disciplines. It is actually a combination of art, craft and science as well as technology.

Our current use of technology for education in our Higher Educational Institutions is actually a way of telling us how far we haven't come. Though there has been a considerable change on the technological front due to the Covid-19. Driven by the digital revolution, powered by apps and so on, many students coming into the classroom already pre-wired with content.

The Gig economy poses a formidable challenge to the academicians and the students as the college graduates will be transitioning to a world of work life that is dynamic.

The study seeks to find out the current level of technology utilization and the preparedness of the Higher Education sector of Assam and further, to comment on the future possibility on the adoption of CBCS system as a measure to combat the challenges faced by the sector. Whether CBCS can be a solution in the current state of higher education with the challenge of producing adaptable graduates with few or comparatively fewer resources is the area of focus under this study. The mindset of the stakeholders of the education sector also needs to be taken care of. As 'permanent' will no longer hold true in the near future. It will give way to 'temporary'.

To summarize, the significance of the study lies in the fact that there has been comparatively more use of technology and CBCS pattern of education in the western world compared to India, especially Assam. Education sector in Assam still has a long way to go when it comes to its capability to absorb the GIG economy.

**III. Review of Literature:**

There is a dearth of literature on the impact of Gig economy on higher education.

Mahon, Kathleen (2018) in her study found that Universities serve several important functions in the society, but not least helping people to leave meaningfully in society and to create a world worth living. This paper explores this concern by explicating the notion of critical educational praxis and examining enablers and constraints for critical educational praxis drawing on an empirical study conducted in one university setting and their impact on the society.

Srimathi H, Krishnamoorthy A (2019) in their study on challenges and opportunities in Indian higher education as a country likely have the world's largest workforce in the future, there is a deep level of

nervousness to sustain its growth due to the rise in gig economy and technology disruption. The study analysed the present higher education scenario to know about the perspective in the global market.

Deloitte Deans' Summit 2019 found that Indian higher education is at crossroads. The students demand adequate skill to be globally accepted. This requires the ecosystem of HEIs to be modernised.

Mulcahy, Diane (2019) in her study have found the in comparison to creating full-time jobs, corporate leaders are increasingly choosing to work with independent contractors, consultants, and freelancer. So to succeed how to self employed, entrepreneurial and enterprising

### **GIG economy-The new normal:**

'GIG economy' is the new normal. India is also embracing it at a high speed. The pandemic has added momentum to it. The new graduates will be or rather are entering an economy, where they can participate in part time, gig-based roles(i.e. independent contracting, freelancing and on-demand work) rather than labouring in nine-to-five jobs.

In a 'GIG' environment, working conditions are more flexible, workers have more control over their schedule and more importantly the workers have more autonomy over the types of work they decide to do.

Though gig-based work is in vogue, most of the universities in India are yet to make any substantial changes in their curriculum to fit in with this new trend. This will result in that many students will graduate without the knowledge necessary to thrive as a gig worker in future. Academic curricula should be designed in such a way so as to encourage students to think differently about their future career paths.

University education is marching forward in the right direction but much is left to be done. The CBCS system is making the academic boundaries more porous and have made possible programmes at the edges and intersections of traditional fields such as a engineering student with humanities training etc. But in Assam justice still remains to be done to the CBCS system. The present infrastructural framework together with the mindset of administrators, faculty and students needs to be dealt with. There is a need to prepare our students for a future where it will be vital to think and work across boundaries.

Many foreign universities and some private Indian Educational Institutes have adopted "T-shaped" teaching and learning ideologies, in which vertical (deep disciplinary)i.e. expertise is combined with horizontal (cross-cutting) i.e. knowledge. In other words, T- shaped professionals are assumed not only to be experts in one or two disciplines (vertical bar) but also to have expertise in other complimentary skills ( horizontal bar), thus making them adaptable to any environment.

The HEIs are entrusted with the task of creating a professional mindset before graduation. This means to ensure that the students are ready for non-traditional work arrangements and to prepare the students to prosper in any work environment they may encounter.

The survey highlighted that majority of the students are more interested in pursuing traditional, full-time jobs with a steady employer once they graduate or after post graduate or MBA degree. But the demand of time is that the courses need to be designed in such a way so as to teach students how to navigate the workplaces and manage their careers.

### **Arena of Education In Assam**

Gig economy is a fast-paced economy, where it is desired to be instilled in every student that as their work in the future will be technology-enabled and on-demand independent work, so learning will be a lifelong endeavour for individuals at every stage of their career. They are required to have a flexible mindset, cultivate and exploit creativity and leverage critical thinking.

In Assam also, the gig economy has grown steadily, with increasing number of people subscribing for application based platform for services such as booking a car or getting food delivered at the doorstep, etc. Thousands of people are employed as delivery men, cab drivers, etc which implies that the GIG economy contributes to the job market.

'Numbers' are a big problem to the system of Education in Assam. Be it CBCS system or T-based education, the main problem faced by the Universities and colleges of Assam or rather Northeast is the number of students per class. Either it is too many or too less. When in some colleges it is 150 per class while in some it is less than 15.

'Technology' requires a minimum setup which demands capital. With support from the government for funds is declining and the concept of free education being in vogue, funds are scarce.

The geographical location adds to the hurdle of connectivity. The Pandemic has highlighted the pathetic position of connection when 'classroom education' was suddenly transformed to 'Online education'.

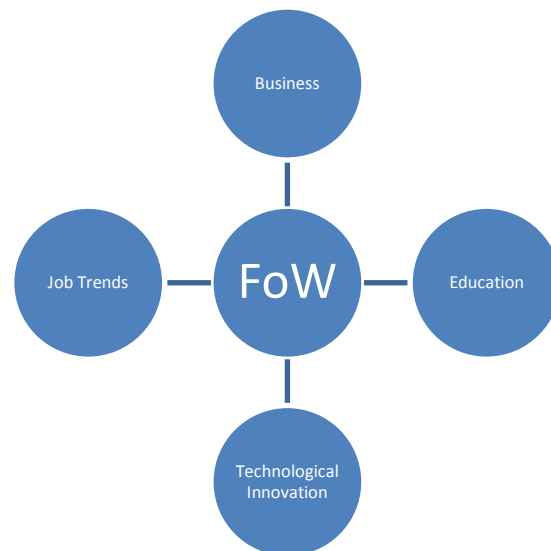
The arduous task before the HEIs is to prepare the students for a future, that is ever evolving.

HEIs are expected to offer courses that teaches students to navigate through their workplace, manage their careers, skill and re-skill themselves. The courses teach the students how best to participate in the GIG economy.

The mindset of the students in India and more so in Assam are still in pursuing traditional, full-time jobs with a steady employer once they graduate. But in GiG economy, freelancing, mobility or marketing themselves will be required for survival.

The ecosystem of the higher education has become very volatile. The educational praxis is so constraint that the scope of action is diminished.

The future of work (FoW) is impacted by four key factors - business, education, technological innovations and job trends.



**Fig 1:** Factors affecting the Future of Work

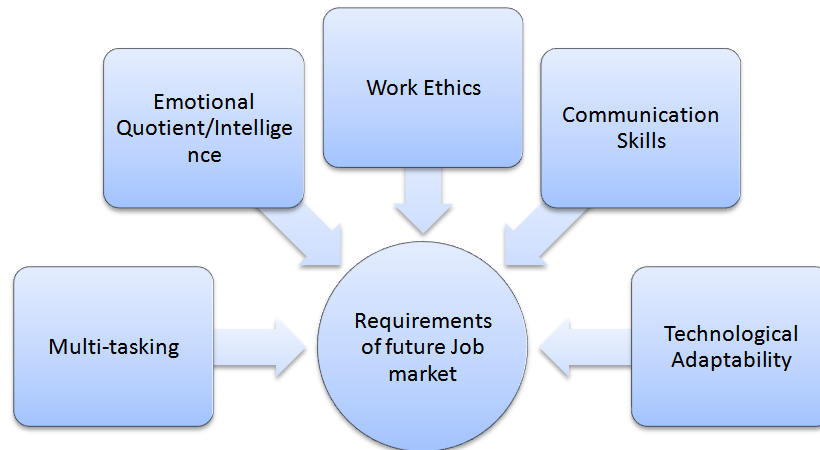
In the field of education, students are flooded with information and the online medium have transformed the role of the universities and colleges to become gatekeepers of knowledge and the faculties from teachers to facilitators. The role of the teachers is that of a 'teacherpreneur', who ensure the hybrid skilling of a student.

Though at a nascent stage, the Choice-based Credit systems (CBCS) are offering flexible pedagogies, allowing students to study the combination of subjects they want, choose the skills they want to learn and avoid the ones they feel redundant. The focal point of the CBCS system is shifting from classroom learning to experiential learning to make the students future talent job ready.

There is no argument to the fact that as low as one computer terminal with broadband connectivity can solve to a large extent the problem of implementing CBCS, as the teacher deliver the lecture online. But the faculties covered in the survey, have the opinion that the HEIs in Assam and also in Northeast are struggling to fund wireless access, standardise and upgrade classroom technologies.

### **Educational Institutions, Gig Economy and Assam**

The older modes of work are being replaced by technology at a very fast rate that in the near future man and machines will be working in collaboration, trying to find solutions together in an environment that will be disruptive and brimming with opportunities, often termed as 'Fourth Industrial Revolution'. The revolution has already started. To prepare the students to face this new world, Education 4.0 is required which inculcates the following competencies in the students. To make the students future ready, they will need to learn these skills early on.



**Fig 2:** Qualities required for the future job market

A survey conducted by The Economic Times in 2018, found that 70% corporates hire gig workers to supplement the skillsets of the existing workforce. But this trend has started only 5-7 years back.

Altering the HEIs is more necessary now than ever before as doing things the old way is no longer an option; as innovation and accepting change are now prerequisite for survival.

As majority of the colleges in Assam has at most two streams, so in the near future, three in four students will attend two or more colleges in the course of their college careers. As a result of which, certificates, credentials and job-related curricula are becoming more important considerations for leaders of traditional institutions.

Although the GIG economy offers a myriad of opportunities but there is a flip side to it in the sense that the future job seekers should be open to continuous learning and to be ever ready to adapt to new technologies, to avoid being obsolete and getting replaced by someone who has the latest knowledge. Another trend of the future will be that no one is likely to have one job for the entire career.

As the world is going digital, higher education is changing but there has been a paradigm shift in higher education economics. For its survival Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) will be required to adapt to these new economics.

Majority of the Indian HEIs, especially in Assam are facing a new challenge : how to equip students with not only adequate education but also arm them with the skills and knowledge to leverage technology in their workplace?

In order to survive in the race, every HEIs in Assam should build new business models with the help of digital technology, which can act as the differentiator by building the right environment. To make the students 'future ready' the Institutions must give impetus on brand, financial stability, academic excellence and student psychology.

Facilities like Virtual Lab will enthuse the curiosity and innovation into students. The students have now viewed as paying customers with sets of demands and expectations that needs to met. But the expansion of the Higher Educational Institutions is fraught with financial, infrastructural and human resource limitations.

'Flipped classrooms' will soon become a new reality as the students today are linked and alive outside the classroom.

Of the 327 faculties, none of the teachers surveyed have ever video recorded/ recorded in their mobile phone their lecture sessions. Neither of them had Blogs nor had the experience of Skype except 4 of them. 35 of them had no idea of it. But the pandemic has bought a positive change as the academicians have become more acquainted with the digital technology.

The surveyed faculties have also agreed that the vacancies in various post and subjects of faculties in different institutions are also hurdle in dealing with the progress of higher education.

In Assam there is dearth of dedicated platforms and apps that help students find short-term projects, assignments and gigs are rare. So in the lecture sessions, teachers need to instill the concept of 'gig'.

As the faculties of colleges and universities in Assam, are unconsciously involved in activities, which can be termed as 'gig' such as consultation, paid research, writing books speaking engagements, etc to elevate their brand and augment their income. This can be cited as practical examples in the class to educate the students.

Students using the online learning platforms have the option to decide how deep and broad they want to go into a specific subject.

All the student respondents are well versed in the real time communication services of Whatsapp , Facebook, Skype, etc for communication. Compared to it they feel significantly worse in terms of ease of use Word document, Spreadsheet or Powerpoint.

85% of the respondents, prefer printed materials instead of digital copies as most of them don't possess a computer and studying from the mobile handset becomes difficult. Interestingly, majority of them are not opposed to class lecture method. So technological adaptability is still a far cry for the students of Assam.

Fluency in English language is still a problem, as agreed by majority of the student respondents and they still prefer to pursue the traditional careers of doctor, engineering, chartered accountants, etc. In other words, they prefer permanent job which give surety of income.

To the query, Do you want to be an entrepreneur/ Businessman?

All of the 604 students surveyed, be it a student of science, arts or commerce, only 74 of them agreed to be a businessman if not a entrepreneur in the future. This question was asked to test the risk taking capacity as steady income is not assured and also there is a lack of social benefits and statutory protection akin to a worker in permanent employment . There is also the problem of pitching their services to prospective clients, how to work with a company effectively on a short-term basis.

Another important requirement of the GIG economy is the soft skills and counselling. Although the Indian government has been promoting and it is required in Institutions Assessment and Accrediation Procedure but it has not found a permanent place in the HEIs of Assam. But as shown in the figure 2 'communication skills ' will be important in the future, and so that the students know how to communicate effectively in gig-based roles. So there has to be provision in the institutions to rightly equip the students. Together with it, the psychology of the students will have to be strengthened so that survive in the world of 'temporary' and to be open to the concept of 'lifelong learning'.

### **The Way Out:**

Higher education require to adjust their views in this changing environment or the students will graduate with an obsolete view of what it means to be a worker in the 21st century. It will require educators and leaders of higher education to approach skill competency with a flexible growth mindset. In order the survive in the new wave of the economy, the Higher Education Institutions should do the following:

- Respond- The HEI cannot avoid the change nor can it ignore it . So to the best of its ability, must respond to the change and embrace the new work order. Though the ability to respond will vary depending on whether the HEI is in the private sector or public sector, on one hand, While on the other, a HEI in Delhi . Mumbai or any other Metro will be dealing with the change in a different manner compared to its counterpart located in Guwahati , Agartala or Kohima.
- Recover - The HEIs should be able to learn and emerge to stay afloat. They will need to reflect, recommit, reengage and rethink their theory and praxis.
- Reshape- The paradox of the entire scenario in Assam is that, the universities and colleges are active and enthusiastic participants in Gig economy (e.g. contractual teachers, etc) yet prepares its students to work as traditional employees in full-time jobs. The ecosystem of the HEI will be required to be altered with the changing times so as to enable them to thrive.

### **IV. Conclusion:**

There is also the need to change the mindset of the society. This shift in the manner of working, recruitment, freelancing, etc are here to stay. These needs to be accepted by the society at large so that there is no pressure on the youth while launching their career. One's survival will be determined by the ability to seize opportunities and the ability to continuously unlearn the old and redundant and learn the new which is relevant. There is a long way to go for India, and for Assam the path is still dark. But darker the cloud, brighter is the lining. The youth of Assam like Dhritiman Bora are making their mark not only in India but also in the world. In the same way, others will shine in the future.

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