

Covert Commercialization: Advent of Digital Platforms in Parallel Commercialization of Teacher Education in India

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ABSTRACT: India, a country once harbouring the socialist concerns of economy eventually transitioned into being a mixed one, thereby, nesting the interests of both public and private sector. The Educational paradigm of the country, marking its presence in the concurrent list of the country's constitution is if not direct, but in many ways, a reflection of the country's bent towards preferred philosophical concerns in economy. The problems of accessibility and availability further fuelled by the increasing demands for high-quality instructors, teachers and/or teacher educators paved way for country to rework its mode of operation in the domain of teacher education facilitating the advent and experimentations of private players in the space and not only limiting the government or state's control on the domain but also promoting competitive endeavours and able modelling for others to follow in the field.

The present study aims at studying the phenomenon of covert commercialization in the specific educational area of Teacher Education in the country, especially concerning the present age underlined by the evolving enterprise of the start-up culture and partially fuelled by the EdTech and digital platform revolution that the country is currently undergoing. Using the case study method under qualitative approach, the study aims at analysing the impacts of the rampant technologization of teacher education driven by commercialization in a seemingly high-end digital and covert fashion.

Key Words: Commercialization, Covert Commercialization, Teacher Education, Digital Commercialization, Online Commercialization

Introduction

The commercialization of education is a complex and evolving process, marked by the growing influence of market forces, profit motives, and corporate interests within the educational sector (Marginson, 2011). The historical roots of educational commercialization can be traced back to the industrialization era, when vocational and technical training programs emerged to meet the demands of a rapidly changing workforce (Schofield, 2001). However, the contemporary wave of commercialization has gained prominence in recent decades.

Scholars offer diverse definitions of commercialization in education. Some emphasize the involvement of for-profit entities in educational provision (Bok, 2003), while others highlight the commodification of education, treating it as a marketable product or service (Ball, 2012).

A variety of drivers underpin the commercialization of education. Economic considerations play a pivotal role in educational commercialization, attracting private investors and corporations to the sector (Levin, 2001). Globalization has facilitated the internationalization of education, resulting in cross-border partnerships, branch campuses, and transnational education programs (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The digital revolution has significantly impacted education, paving the way for online learning, digital content distribution, and the rise of for-profit ed-tech companies (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

Commercialization in education is visible in various forms. The proliferation of private schools, colleges, and universities diversifies educational options but raises concerns about access and affordability (Belfield & Levin, 2002). For-profit educational technology companies have reshaped education through digital platforms, adaptive software, and online courses (Bates & Sangra, 2011). These entities typically monetize through subscription fees or advertising. Cross-border education has become a global industry, with students pursuing education abroad and international institutions establishing global presence (Findlay, 2010).

The commercialization of education yields a range of impacts. While expanding choices, commercialization often exacerbates inequalities due to high costs, contributing to socio-economic disparities (Marginson, 2016). Maintaining educational quality within commercialized systems poses challenges, as profit motives may prioritize quantity over quality (Natale, Doran, & Cheng, 2019). Corporate interests can shape curriculum design, potentially emphasizing job-specific skills at the expense of a broader

education (McCowan, Unterhalter, & Walker, 2017). Commercialization raises ethical dilemmas concerning transparency, marketing practices, and the balance between educational objectives and profit-driven motives (Giroux, 2009).

The commercialization of education is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon with profound implications for access, quality, and the fundamental nature of education. Addressing the challenges and harnessing the potential benefits of commercialization necessitates ongoing research and informed policy decisions within the field of education.

Objectives of the Study

The present study encompasses the following objectives:

- To analyse and report the present situation of commercialization of teacher education through digital platforms
- To enlist the shortcomings and strengths of such commercialization of teacher education as undertaken through digital platforms
- To discuss the factors underpinning the commercialization of teacher education through digital platforms

Delimitation of the Study

The study is delimited to the technological or parallel commercialization of teacher education in the Indian subcontinent only. For the purpose of the study, selected platforms have been studied viz. Testbook Super Coaching, Byju's Exam Prep and Unacademy specifically with regard to their means of digital commercialization.

Methods and Procedures

The present study is a case study under the qualitative approach of research aiming at analysing the factors behind the parallel commercialization of teacher education in India. The study highlights the covert strategies behind the process of commercialization and throws light on the means employed to do the same.

Discussions and Findings

The space of teacher education has witnessed unprecedented changes in the recent times owing to multiple reasons including but not limited to the rampant inculcation of technology in the domain, the onset of the Covid-19 virus pandemic leading to teacher education institutions in the country revising their preferred mode of dissemination of educational concerns.

Factors responsible for commercialization of teacher education in India

Entrance Examination and Speciality Exams Preparation

The key factor behind the uncontrolled growth of such digital platforms aiding covert commercialization is the stronghold of entrance and speciality exam culture in the country. Specifically, exams like UGC NET and Ph.D. entrance examinations of universities throughout the country. The failure to opt for a single examination for Ph.D. enrolment has allowed these platforms to cater their services to students venturing in these domains.

Economic Factors

The relatively affordable quality of content, support materials and/or lectures available on various digital platforms led to the fuelling of the digitalization and eventual commercialization of teacher education in the country through similar means. The lack of funding and specificity to address tailored needs of the students and/or prospective teachers worked in favour of the digital commercialization in this regard. Moreover, the ability to achieve greater success at an additional fraction of the total cost allowed these forms of commercialization in teacher education to progress at a booming rate.

Factors related to Privatization

The eventual advances of the private sector into the space and the realization that such digital form of commercialization could easily enable them in minting money pushed them into foraying into the sector. Furthermore, takeovers of smaller existing players in the segment by larger commercial players and at times even the transfer of faculty for a premium price may represent the causative factors of the commercialization process.

Factors related to Globalization:

With more eyes than ever looking to become internationally suitable teachers, the lack for institutions with similar aims led to commercial enterprises occupying a chunk in the space. Moreover, the direct competition faced by these platforms from individual content creators, international ventures among others led to them devising feasible strategies to address to issues in the domain. Researches in the domain, especially the research trends at the global level and the need to inculcate or at least understand them also steered the commercial processes in the context.

Factors related to Technology

The growth of the educational technology (ed-tech) industry in the country enabled creation of multiple enterprises in the segment to foray into the segment. This foray was either through gradual takeovers by larger players or through faculty or technology transfer and even at times through rebranding

Factors related to the End-consumer

The Covid-19 pandemic led to adoption of the new normal among the end-consumers leading to the learners becoming more familiar and satisfied with the online mode of content learning. Moreover, the easy availability of the learning material led to the end-consumer’s buying behaviour being manipulated with the thought of the suitability of these options. Moreover, these platforms despite being commercial, allowed the end-user to get acquainted with specialist concepts that were earlier hindered by geographical barriers. The growing perception of education as a commodity that can be accessed in exchange for money also fuelled the rise of these platforms.

Factors concerning access to information

One thing that most of such platforms facilitate in common is easy access to well-structure information which would otherwise be needed to collect from various sources. Moreover, the availability of such information in an informal manner and the engagement drawn towards them through the use of social media sites and other platforms relevant to the tech-savvy generation enhanced the ability of these commercial players in reaching and catering to their target consumer base.

Shortcomings, Critique and Ethical Issues surrounding the Covert Commercialisation

The commercialization of teacher education, while offering various benefits and opportunities, also raises significant issues related to access, equity, regulatory framework, data misuse and quality control. The domain of teacher education becoming increasingly commodified and market-driven further hinders the overall quality and accountability in the context and may also give rise to disparities and challenges.

Issues of Access and Equity

Widening Achievement Gap: The commercialization is one of the key factors if not the only behind the exacerbated achievement gap, as students from affluent backgrounds have a wider and higher-permitting access.

Unequal Access to Technology: Access to the digital tools and resources necessary for online or technology-based education is not evenly distributed, disadvantaging students without reliable internet access or devices.

Quality Variations: The prioritization of profitability, quantity of content and available material on these platforms may hinder the quality of the learning.

Cream Skimming: Commercial players may engage in cream skimming by selectively enrolling high-performing students or students have missed their previous attempt in an examination by a negligible margin to boost their success rates thereby directly impacting the exam standards.

Lack of Accountability: Players under this label choose to cover-up their blunders and shortcomings rather than accounting for them. The ownership model of these platforms also makes it nearly impossible for internal information about them to be available in public domain.

Exploitative Employment Practices: Commercial players in teacher education may utilize exploitative employment practices including unequal pay, unfair pay and lack of job security among others. This in turn leads to anticompetitive practices among the giant players like buying out of faculty or transfer on the basis of lucrative pay thereby hindering the overall quality of education and failing upon the promise of quality made at the time of enrolment.

Shortcomings surrounding Policy and Regulatory Framework

The lack of able possible frameworks to monitor the various aspects of such players including accountability, practices, quality control and approaches to monetization works in favour of such enterprises to blossom. However, this directly impacts the quality of education and ultimately the quality of the teacher in the public domain.

Lucrative Advertising

Due to covert commercialization, several players may choose to initially provide free services on open access platforms and then forcing the consumer to transition to their proprietary platforms on a paid basis. The maintenance of free to access content and channels on several social and video streaming platforms by these giants is an approach to their covert intentions to commercialization. Moreover, lucrative advertising by flaunting of achievements of previous students through manipulation is also a known shortcoming in this regard.

Data Manipulation and Misuse

In an age where data rules the world, the unhindered and unaccountable access gained by these platforms may be used to manipulate buying behaviour and working towards the never-ending search for potential buyers/consumers through exploitative and often manipulative trade practices.

Quality Control

The bent of such platforms to enable popularization, fame, profitability and/or commercial benefits through any possible means hinders the entire foundation of quality control at such enterprises.

Conclusion

To conclude, the commercialization of teacher education represents a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that has significantly reshaped the landscape of teacher preparation worldwide. The influence of market forces, technological advancements, and changing educational paradigms has led to the emergence of diverse models and approaches to teacher education. This transformation has brought about both positive and negative consequences for educators, institutions, and the broader education system.

On the positive side, commercialization has expanded access to teacher education, making it more convenient and flexible for aspiring educators. The integration of digital technologies has enabled personalized learning experiences and innovative pedagogical methods, enhancing the quality of teacher preparation. Additionally, the emergence of specialized training programs and global collaborations has contributed to addressing specific workforce needs and promoting cross-cultural exchanges among educators.

However, the commercialization of teacher education also raises critical challenges. Issues of access and equity persist, as financial barriers, disparities in technological infrastructure, and quality variations in programs can hinder equitable access to high-quality teacher preparation. Concerns related to quality control, standardization, and the prioritization of profit motives over educational outcomes have highlighted the need for vigilant oversight and regulation. Ethical considerations, including data privacy and transparency, must guide the growth of digital and commercialized teacher education to ensure that it aligns with the best interests of educators, learners, and society.

Ultimately, the commercialization of teacher education represents an ongoing transformation that requires careful navigation. Striking a balance between market-driven approaches and the preservation of quality, accessibility, and equity in teacher preparation is essential. Policymakers, educators, and stakeholders must collaborate to shape the future of teacher education in a way that optimally serves the needs of educators and, by extension, benefits students and the broader education system. With thoughtful and inclusive planning, the commercialization of teacher education can contribute to the continuous improvement of teacher quality and the enhancement of educational outcomes.

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