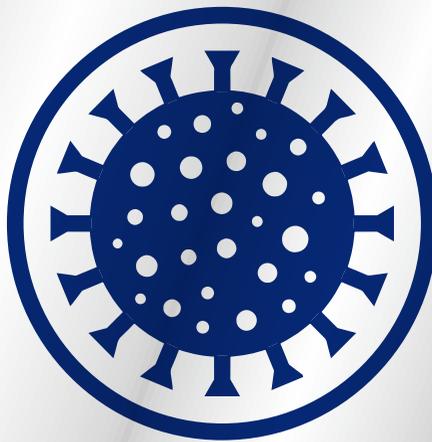


Coping with COVID-19

The experience of Birla Institute of Management Technology (BIMTECH), in India in facing the disruptions caused by COVID-19

By **Harivansh Chaturvedi, Ajoy K Dey and Nimisha Singh**



The sudden and disruptive nature of COVID-19 rendered the famous quote of the Chinese general and military strategist Sun Tsu that: 'The supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy' inconsequential.

Before the world could wake up to devise countermeasures, it brought life on this planet to a complete halt, impacting many economies.

This short article captures the experience of Birla Institute of Management Technology (BIMTECH) in India as it faced the disruptions caused by COVID-19 and contained the impact to a minimum.

Response of Indian Government

On 11 March, 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 situation as a pandemic. Four days later the Indian Government issued canceled classes in schools and higher education institutions and advised institutions to allow people to work from home wherever possible.

To combat the spread of COVID-19 the Indian Prime Minister declared *Janata* (Public) Curfew on Sunday the 22 March 2020 for nine hours. Perhaps it was also to condition the mindset of people for lockdown for a longer period. After *Janata* Curfew, the Indian Government put the entire country in lockdown for three weeks till 14 April 2020, now further extended till 17 May 2020.

BIMTECH

The Birla Institute of Management Technology (BIMTECH), promoted by the Birla family and located at a residential campus in Greater NOIDA, U. P., about 30 kilometres from the capital city of New Delhi, has carved out a niche in "value-based education" over the 32 years since inception. Like many other institutes, BIMTECH was not prepared to face the wrath of the COVID-19.

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Managing in a VUCA world

VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) is a trendy managerial acronym that comes up frequently in a management class. The vision of BIMTECH is developing ethical leaders with entrepreneurial and global mindsets striving for sustainability and inclusive growth so they can operate in a VUCA world.

Students are taught that a volatile situation can be faced if an organisation has a clear vision and values aligned with its end goals. When faced with uncertainty, developing an understanding by taking multiple perspectives and diverse views of stakeholders helps to find new creative approaches to solve the problem.

A culture of collaboration and commitment develops high levels of trust and encourages a focus on changing circumstances to tackle a complex situation. Agility, the ability to quickly adjust to a new situation, is needed to deal with the unknown. Dealing with ambiguity requires quick decision making, trying new approaches and creating multiple contingency plans.

Resilience

The focus of any organisation concerned with resilience should be on assuring the continuity of business operations in co-existence with the environment in which the business is embedded. Being resilient demands a strategy that is less focused on mitigating risk than designing for it.

The attributes of a resilient system include: *robustness*, or the ability to absorb shocks and continue to operate; *resourcefulness*, being able to manage a crisis as it unfolds; rapid recovery, the ability to get services back as quickly as possible; and *adaptability*, being able to learn from experience and incorporate lessons learned to improve resilience.

Designing for resilience

Only after facing a pandemic, BIMTECH realised that the institute could absorb the shock and control the impacts because it had three resilient strategies in place:

- business agility and organisational resilience
- capability enhancement of individuals with tools to rebuild a life
- evolving humanitarian services to be more responsive to people's needs.

From now onwards these three strategies will serve as the foundation of the business continuity plan for BIMTECH. The following three paragraphs describe in brief the combination of tactics under each of these:

Business agility and organisational resilience

The Birla family of founders is known for helping society and building institutions that provide value-based education; strong support of top management; good governance; open and experimentative culture driven by faculty; "future conscious", stable and humane leadership; and the support of a network of leading industry associations

Capability enhancement of individuals with tools to rebuild a life

Empowered employees; regular development workshops for faculty and staff; encouragement to attend workshops and conferences within India and abroad; institutionalised research focus; faculty and staff allowed to experiment with novel ideas, failures are not reprimanded; the presence of Atal incubation for entrepreneurs; clubs and conduits managed by students provide the opportunity for sharpening leadership, team building, communication, and interpersonal skills

Evolving humanitarian services to be more responsive to people's needs

Investing resources in community outreach, CSR projects are taken up by BIMTECH Foundation and Ranganathan Society for Social Welfare and Library Development; experiential learning for students by exposing them to the lives of underprivileged, established Education Promotion Society of India to serve as an interface between the government and the higher management education sector



Opportunities delivered "gift-wrapped"

Along with COVID-19 came three opportunities – almost gift wrapped. For the past few years, many of the BIMTECH faculty had been experimenting with blended learning in trying to integrate technology for classroom delivery to influence the learning experience of the students.

Since October 2019 the institute has been busy implementing a phased plan to shift to blended learning using simulation packages for courses. The plan gained impetus from the pandemic.

BIMTECH was lucky because at the time of the pandemic all teaching in the third trimester was over and there was no teaching load. Hence there was no urgency to shift to conducting online classes.

Further, as a part of global CSR activity most of the online learning platforms allowed free access to their credit courses.

Major processes

This section summarises the actions taken to reorient some of the major processes of the business school.

Placement

The placement scene at BIMTECH was smooth because of its early start. Most of the students in the passing-out cohort had job offers in hand. The only mild set back was that their joining would be delayed.





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Admission of the new batch

The qualified students who secured admission were to come to the institute to get their documents verified and pay the first installment of fees to secure their seats. This part of the process has been put on hold. The candidates have been offered conditional admission to the programmes and once the situation returns to normal, the process will be undertaken.

Effective communication helps in controlling the anxiety level in a situation of high uncertainty.

Continuous communication between faculty and the new batch of students using WhatsApp groups helped in managing the situation. Riding on the good mobile network penetration throughout India, WhatsApp helped the institute to address the queries of students of the existing and new batches. The admission interviews of the final phase of applicants were conducted via Skype. For some, place connectivity was a big issue but most of the faculty were satisfied with the video-based remote interviews. It may become a regular part of admission operations from next year.

Summer internship projects

The major operation that had to be executed under the pressure of time was reorienting the three-month summer internship projects for the students. Out of the 420 students, about 20% had joined the organisations as interns. So, they were guided by the social distancing norms of their target organisations.

For the remaining students, the opportunity to gain exposure to corporate life by doing a project suddenly vanished. Further, the start date of the internship was uncertain. In many cases the offer stands indefinitely withdrawn.



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Convocation

The convocation ceremony for the batch 2018-20 was scheduled to be held on April 11. Even before the nationwide lockdown was announced, graduating students were notified of the postponement of the event..

Students on the exchange programme

Many BIMTECH students were studying at universities in Austria, Australia, France and Poland. The institute had been observing developments since the end of January and sending students advisories issued by the WHO. To get a clear picture and to make a decision, the institute was taking updates from partner universities and students. It was crucial to keep students engaged so that they will be ready in case they were to come back at short notice.

On March 12, it was decided to call back all the students who were pursuing their exchange term at partners. When this decision was made, students were advised to come back in the middle of their semester. Fortunately, one week later all the partner universities had to close and they arranged online classes for all students.

Acclimatisation to the work from home culture

After a few days into the lockdown, faculty and staff realised that there are many challenges to working from home. Partitioning time for office and home works, finding a quiet place to set up an office with all facilities, unwanted intrusion and noise, lack of competency to handle different communication software and hardware, some time shortage of laptops, headphones, and availability of internet bandwidth was of major concern.

Planning for immersion and classes in first and fourth trimesters

If the regular schedule is implemented, the immersion programme for the new batch to start on 18th June 2020 and the first and the fourth trimester to start in the first week of July 2020.

Going by the current estimate it seems unlikely that classes will be allowed to be held. Even students may hesitate to report to the campus. Their parents may not allow and may ask for online classes to be conducted.

Even if the government allows physical classes to be conducted, social distancing norms may apply, which will double the number of sections due to the norm of 30 students per section. Availability of classrooms, time to conduct classes and the number of faculty needed will be severely stretched. The institute may have to run online classes. The good news is that all the concerned faculty are confident about conducting online classes.

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