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CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION AMID AND BEYOND COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries. Closures of schools, institutions and other learning spaces have impacted more than 94% of the world's student population. This has brought far-reaching changes in all aspects of our lives. Social distancing and restrictive movement policies have significantly disturbed traditional educational practices. Reopening of schools after relaxation of restriction is another challenge with many new standard operating procedures put in place. Within a short span of the COVID-19 pandemic, many researchers have shared their works on teaching and learning in different ways. Several schools, colleges and universities have discontinued face-to-face teachings. There is a fear of losing 2020 academic year or even more in the coming future. The need of the hour is to innovate and implement alternative educational system and assessment strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to pave the way for introducing digital learning. This article aims to provide a comprehensive report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on online teaching and learning of various papers and indicate the way forward. COVID-19 has revealed vulnerabilities; it has also surfaced extraordinary human resourcefulness and potential. This is a time for pragmatism and quick action, but it is also a moment when more than ever we cannot abandon scientific evidence. Nor can we operate without principles. Choices must be based on a humanistic vision of education and development and human rights frameworks.

Keywords: COVID -19, Higher Education, Challenges

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges economically, socially, and politically across the globe. More than just a health crisis, it has resulted in an educational crisis. During lockdowns and quarantines, 87% of the world's student population was affected and 1.52 billion learners were out of school and related educational institutions. The suddenness, uncertainty, and volatility of COVID-19 left the education system in a rush of addressing the changing learning landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in at least one positive thing: a much greater appreciation for the importance of public schools. As parents struggle to work with their children at home due to school closures, public recognition of the essential caretaking role schools play in society has skyrocketed. As young people struggle to learn from home, parents' gratitude for teachers, their skills, and their invaluable role in student well-being, has risen. As communities struggle to take care of their vulnerable children and youth, decision makers have to devise new mechanisms for delivering essential services from food to education to health care.

The disruption of COVID-19 in the educational system is of great magnitude that universities have to cope with at the soonest possible time. The call is for higher education institutions to develop resilient learning system using evidence-based and needs-based information so that responsive and proactive measures can be instituted. Coping with the effects of COVID-19 in higher education institutions demands a variety of perspectives among stakeholders. Consultation needs to include the administration who supports the teaching-learning processes, the students who are the core of the system, the faculty members or teachers who perform various academic roles, parents, and guardians who share the responsibility of learning continuity, the community, and the external partners who contribute to the completion of the educational requirements of the students. These complicated identities show that an institution of higher learning has a large number of stakeholders. In the context of the pandemic, universities have to start understanding and identifying medium-term and long-term implications of this phenomenon on teaching, learning, student experience, infrastructure, operation, and staff. Scenario analysis and understanding of the context of each university are necessary to the current challenges they are confronted with. Universities have to be resilient in times of crisis. Resiliency in the educational system is the ability to overcome challenges of all kinds–trauma, tragedy, crises, and bounce back stronger, wiser, and more personally. The educational system must prepare to develop plans to move forward and address the new normal after the crisis. To be resilient, higher education needs to address teaching and learning continuity amid and beyond the pandemic.

Teaching and Learning in Times of Crisis

The teaching and learning process assumes a different shape in times of crisis. When disasters and crises (man-made and natural) occur, schools and colleges need to be resilient and find new ways to continue the teaching–learning activities. One emerging reality as a result of the world health crisis is the migration to online learning modalities to mitigate the risk of face-to-face interaction. Universities are forced to migrate from face-to-face delivery to online modality as a result of the pandemic. When online learning modality is

used as a result of the pandemic, the gap between those who have connectivity and those without widened. The continuing academic engagement has been a challenge for teachers and students due to access and internet connectivity.

Considering the limitation on connectivity, the concept of flexible learning emerged as an option for online learning especially in higher institutions in the Philippines. Flexible learning focuses on giving students choice in the pace, place, and mode of students' learning which can be promoted through appropriate pedagogical practice. The learners are provided with the option on how he/she will continue with his/her studies, where and when he/she can proceed, and in what ways the learners can comply with the requirements and show evidences of learning outcomes. Flexible learning and teaching span a multitude of approaches that can meet the varied needs of diverse learners. These include "independence in terms of time and location of learning, and the availability of some degree of choice in the curriculum (including content, learning strategies, and assessment) and the use of contemporary information and communication technologies to support a range of learning strategies"

The Role of Technology in Learning Continuity

Technology provides innovative and resilient solutions in times of crisis to combat disruption and helps people to communicate and even work virtually without the need for face-to-face interaction. This leads to many system changes in organizations as they adopt new technology for interacting and working. However, technological challenges like internet connectivity especially for places without signals can be the greatest obstacle in teaching and learning continuity especially for academic institutions that have opted for online learning as a teaching modality. Thus, the alternative models of learning during the pandemic should be supported by a well-designed technical and logistical implementation plan.

Four Emerging Global Trends in Education from Covid-19

1. Accelerating education inequality: Education inequality is accelerating in an unprecedented fashion, especially where before the pandemic it was already high

2. A leapfrog moment: Innovation has suddenly moved from the margins to the center of many education systems, and there is an opportunity to identify new strategies, that if sustained, can help young people get an education that prepares them for our changing times.

3. Rising public support: There is newfound public recognition of how essential schools are in society and a window of opportunity to leverage this support for making them stronger

4. New education allies: The pandemic has galvanized new actors in the community—from parents to social welfare organizations—to support children's learning like never before.

Pedagogy for Continuing Education through Online

Lockdown and social distancing measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have led to closures of schools, training institutes and higher education facilities in most countries. There is a paradigm shift in the way educators deliver quality education—through various online platforms. The online learning, distance and continuing education have become a panacea for this unprecedented global pandemic, despite the challenges posed to both educators and the learners. Transitioning from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning can be an entirely different experience for the learners and the educators, which they must adapt to with little or no other alternatives available. The education system and the educators have adopted "Education in Emergency" through various online platforms and are compelled to adopt a system that they are not prepared for. E-learning tools have played a crucial role during this pandemic, helping schools and universities facilitate student learning during the closure of universities and schools. While adapting to the new changes, staff and student readiness needs to be gauged and supported accordingly. The learners with a fixed mindset find it difficult to adapt and adjust, whereas the learners with a growth mindset quickly adapt to a new learning environment. There is no one-size-fits-all pedagogy for online learning. There are a variety of subjects with varying needs. Different subjects and age groups require different approaches to online learning. Online learning also allows physically challenged students with more freedom to participate in learning in the virtual environment, requiring limited movement.

Challenges in Teaching and Learning

With the availability of a sea of platforms and online educational tools, the users—both educators and learners—face frequent hiccups while using it or referring to these tools. Some of the challenges identified are summarized as follows:

- Broadly identified challenges with e-learning are accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning and educational policy. Many countries have substantial issues with a reliable Internet connection and access to digital devices. While, in many developing countries, the economically backward children are unable to afford online learning devices, the online education poses a risk of exposure to increased screen time for the learner. Therefore, it has become essential for students to engage in offline activities and self-exploratory learning. Lack of parental guidance, especially for young learners, is another challenge, as both parents are working. There are practical issues around physical workspaces conducive to different ways of learning.

- The innately motivated learners are relatively unaffected in their learning as they need minimum supervision and guidance, while the vulnerable group consisting of students who are weak in learning face difficulties. Some academically competent learners from economically disadvantaged background are unable to access and afford online learning.

- The level of academic performance of the students is likely to drop for the classes held for both year-end examination and internal examination due to reduced contact hour for learners and lack of consultation with teachers when facing difficulties in learning/understanding.

- Student assessments are carried out online, with a lot of trial and error, uncertainty and confusion among the teachers, students and parents. The approach adopted to conduct online examination varies as per the convenience and expertise among the educators and the compatibility of the learners. Appropriate measures to check plagiarism is yet to be put in place in many schools and institutions mainly due to the large number of student population

- School time also raises social skills and awareness besides being fun for the children. There are economic, social and psychological repercussions on the life of students while they are away from the normal schedule of schools. Many of these students have now taken online classes, spending additional time on virtual platforms, which have left children vulnerable to online exploitation. Increased and unstructured time spent on online learning has exposed children to potentially harmful and violent content as well as greater risk of cyberbullying. School closures and strict containment measures mean more families have been relying on technology and digital solutions to keep children engaged in learning, entertained and connected to the outside world, but not all children have the necessary knowledge, skills and resources to keep themselves safe online.

- In the case of online learning majority of the learners are from rural villages where parents are mostly illiterate farmers. Students are engaged in assisting parents in farm activities such as agriculture, tending to cattle and household chores. Some students even requested to postpone exam time towards the afternoon since they had to work on the fields during morning hours.

- Some students expressed that they had to attend to their ailing parents/grandparents/family members and take them to hospitals. By evening, when they are back home, it becomes difficult for them to keep abreast with the lessons. Parents whose children are in lower grades feel that it would be better to let the children repeat the next academic year. Majority of students do not have access to smartphones or TV at home in addition to poor Internet connectivity. There is no or less income for huge population due to closure of business and offices. The data package (costs) is comparatively high against average income earned, and continuous access to Internet is a costly business for the farming community.

- Online face-to-face classes (video) is encouraged by most; however, some students (economically disadvantaged) have expressed that the face-to-face online class consumes more data packages. The teachers are in dilemma as to whom to listen to and which tools to adopt. Some think pre-recorded videos could help; however, this would restrict interactions. It is difficult to design a proper system to fit the learning needs and convenience of all students.

Opportunities for Teaching and Learning

➢ Although there have been overwhelming challenges for educators, schools, institutes and the government regarding online education from a different angle, there are several opportunities created by the COVID-19 pandemic for the unprepared and the distant plans of implementing e- learning system.

➢ It has forged a strong connection between teachers and parents than ever before. The homeschooling requires parents to support the students' learning academically and economically. Children with disabilities need additional and special support during this ongoing emergency.

➢ The use of online platforms such as Google Classroom, Zoom, virtual learning environment and social media and various group forums like Telegram, Messenger, WhatsApp and WeChat are explored and tried for teaching and learning for the first time ever to continue education. This can be explored further even after face-to-face teaching resumes, and these platforms can provide additional resources and coaching to the learners.

➢ Teachers are obliged to develop creative initiatives that assist to overcome the limitations of virtual teaching. Teachers are actively collaborating with one another at a local level to improve online teaching methods. There are incomparable opportunities for cooperation, creative solutions and willingness to learn from others and try new tools as educators, parents and students share similar experiences.

➢ Many educational organizations are offering their tools and solutions for free to help and support teaching and learning in a more interactive and engaging environment. Online learning has provided the opportunity to teach and learn in innovative ways unlike the teaching and learning experiences in the normal classroom setting.

Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action:

1. STRENGTHENED PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION AS A COMMON GOOD
   The Commission calls for a strengthened public commitment to education as a common good that is based in inclusion and solidarity, and supports individual and collective flourishing.

2. AN EXPANDED UNDERSTANDING OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION
   The Commission calls for a global public discussion—that includes, among others, learners of all ages—on ways the right of education might need to be broadened to reflect changing contexts, learning throughout life, and the importance of access to knowledge and information.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION AND TEACHER COLLABORATION
   The Commission calls on policy-makers to value the professional expertise of teachers and create conditions that give frontline educators autonomy and flexibility to act collaboratively.

4. AN EMPHASIS ON STUDENT, YOUTH AND CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION AND RIGHTS

The Commission calls on everyone with educational responsibilities, from government officials to teachers to parents, to prioritize the participation of students and young people broadly in order to co construct with them the change they wish to see.

5. PROTECTING THE SOCIAL SPACE OF THE SCHOOL IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATION

The Commission calls on all educational stakeholders to protect and transform the school as a separate space-time, specific and different from home and other spaces of learning, where there is as much growth and expansion of social understanding as there is acquisition of skills, competencies and knowledge.

6. FREE AND OPEN SOURCE TECHNOLOGIES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS The Commission calls for global collaboration among governments, philanthropy, and non-profit organizations to develop and distribute open educational resources and open platforms, recognizing that much of what is currently provided by private companies should become a public undertaking where advancing the interests and capabilities of learners is the sole purpose.

7. SCIENTIFIC LITERACY WITHIN A CURRICULUM BASED ON STRONG PURPOSE

The Commission calls on all educational stakeholders to prioritize scientific literacy to ensure a curriculum with strong humanistic objectives that explores the relationship between fact and knowledge and is capable of leading students to understand and situate themselves in a complex world.

8. THE NEED TO PROTECT DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL FINANCING OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

The Commission calls on national governments, international organizations, civil society and citizens to mobilize around the protection of public education and its financing and that those responsible is held accountable for the just and effective use of these resources.

9. A GLOBAL SOLIDARITY THAT DOES NOT ACCEPT CURRENT LEVELS OF INEQUALITY

The Commission calls on governments to recommit to multilateralism and on all education actors to revitalize international cooperation and global solidarity with empathy and an appreciation of our common humanity at the core.

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