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IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

The worldwide pandemic due to the new coronavirus Covid-19 is playing a vital role in higher education systems. Some of the important affects are disturbing the completion of the terminal exam, completing the syllabus, starting of the new academic year and loss of jobs. The Covid-19 pandemic motivates the education institutions and stakeholders for remote learning as well as it makes a new challenge in global economies. This article focuses the challenges on higher education in the era of Covid-19 pandemic as well as some solutions to continue the higher education. In India, about 32 crore learners stopped to move schools/colleges and all educational activities brought to an end. Despite of all these challenges, the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have reacted positively and managed to ensure the continuity of teaching-learning, research and service to the society with some tools and techniques during the pandemic. This article highlights on major impacts of Covid-19 on HEIs in India. Some measures taken by HEIs and educational authorities of India to provide seamless educational services during the crisis are discussed. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, many new modes of learning, new perspectives, new trends are emerged and the same may continue as we go ahead to a new tomorrow. So, some of the post Covid-19 trends which may allow imagining new ways of teaching learning of higher education in India are outlined. Some fruitful suggestions are also pointed to carry out educational activities during the pandemic situation.

Keywords: Covid-19, higher education, impact, Challenges, Opportunities

Introduction

On March 11, 2020 World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 as a pandemic. Covid-19 has affected more than 4.5 million peoples worldwide (WHO). In India, the first affected case of Covid-19 was detected on 30 January 2020 in the state of Kerala and the affected had a travel history from Wuhan, China. In India, the first death was reported on March 12, 2020 and the nation observed Janta Curfew for a day on March 22, 2020. India again observed 14 hours Janta Curfew on March 24 to combat the Coronavirus pandemic and assess the country's ability to fight the virus. Then, the 1st phase of lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister on March 25, 2020 for 21 days. Monitoring the effects of the virus, Indian Government has been extending the lockdown period in different phases and the lockdown 5.0 was declared on April 30 which is effective from 1st June to 30th June 2020. In all the phases of lockdown starting from lockdown1.0 to

lockdown 5.0, the educational institutions throughout the nation have never got any relaxation to start their educational activities. Thus, pandemic Covid-19 impacted significantly on the education sector. According to the UNESCO report, Covid-19 has affected nearly 68% of total world's student population as per the data taken during 1 stweek of June 2020.

Outbreak of Covid-19 has impacted about 1.2 billion students and youths across the globe by school and university closures. Several other countries have also implemented localized closures impacting millions of additional learners. In India, more than 32 crores of students have been affected by the various restrictions and the nationwide lockdown for Covid-19. Most Governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to control the spread of the pandemic Covid-19. This worldwide closure has impacted drastically the world's student population. Governments around the world are making efforts to diminish the immediate impact of closure of educational institutions particularly for more vulnerable and disadvantaged communities and trying to facilitate the continuity of education for all using different digital modes of learning. According to a survey report of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India, conducted on higher education it was observed that there are 993 universities, 39931 Colleges and 10725 stand- alone institutions listed on their portal, which contribute to education. Even though the country has been adapting to the new-age learning, but there still lies an obstacle in achieving entire success as only 45 crore people of our total population of the country have access to the internet/e-learning. The people residing in rural areas are still very much deprived of the technologies and therefore hampering the cause of online education. The Covid-19 pandemic taught the entire society on how necessity is the mother of invention by allowing educational institutions to adopt online learning and introduce a virtual learning culture. The pandemic has been steering the education sector forward with technological innovation and advancements. The pandemic has significantly disrupted the higher education sector. A large number of Indian students who are enrolled in many Universities abroad, especially in worst affected countries are now leaving those countries and if the situation persists, in the long run, Usually, this is the time young students write entrance exams, consider which colleges to apply to in India, or make plans for studies abroad. But there's nothing usual about the times today. The Covid-19 pandemic has shocked the world. The pressure on students and higher education institutions is high. Schools and universities have been closed and exams postponed. Classrooms are going virtual and admissions for the upcoming academic year are fraught with confusion. According to UNESCO, over 320 million students in Indian schools and colleges are currently impacted the pandemic has pushed the world to drastically reinvent ways of coping with the 'new normal'. After the initial phase of complete overhaul, it is critical to understand the short and long-term impact and future measures.

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.

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.

New trends in teaching & learning will emerge

Beyond the top band of institutional excellence with private universities setting best practices, Indian academia has been in need of transformation, long before the onset of the pandemic. There is an opportunity to rethink the traditional education system now. Digital learning is leading the charge as a mainstay, and many new trends are picking up momentum across the globe. Multidisciplinary and modular pedagogy that afford transferable skills and customised learning will succeed. Post-pandemic times could see a blend of e-learning and mainstream face-to-face teaching with a boost from traditional universities and the ed-tech sector. Opportunities for student mobility and practical exposure through exchange programmes, internships, participation in conferences, and more could likely be off the table for some time. Innovative new forms of collaboration and alternative paradigms are needed to drive learning, research and teaching. Sharing of knowledge between institutions globally through joint-teaching, virtual guest lectures, etc. could give students an enriched global perspective in these difficult times. A paucity of contemporary teachers has been a pressing challenge already, and it is growing more serious. Faculty are being called upon to redesign course content to meet the current and future needs. Moving away from traditional pedagogies in most average institutions, the demand for quality educators will shape the way higher education moves forward from this crisis.

Impact on Higher Education

Pandemic Covid-19 has severely affected the total educational system of India as well as the globe but some of the most impacted areas of higher education of India are as pointed below.

1. Destabilized all educational activities: Outbreak of Covid-19 has compelled lockdown in every sector including education. The institutions got closed with cease of educational activities and created many challenges for the stake holders. So, the various activities like admission, examinations, entrance tests, competitive examinations conducted by various boards/schools/colleges/ universities are postponed. Many entrance tests for higher study got cancelled which created a great challenge in the life of a student of higher education. The primary challenge was to continue teaching learning process when students, faculties and staff could no longer be physically present on the campuses. The obvious solution for the institutions was to depend online teaching learning. However, within a relatively short time, HEIs have been able to provide support to the students through online modes. Covid-19 has accelerated adoption of digital technologies to deliver education. It encouraged all teachers and students to become more technology savvy. The HEIs have started conducting orientation programmes, induction meetings and counseling classes with the help of different e-conferencing tools like Google Meet, Skype, Youtube live, Facebook live, WebEx etc. to provide support services to the students. This initiative has taken to create an effective virtual environment of teaching learning and to create motivation among students for online activities. The teachers and students improved the use of electronic media for sharing information by making use of WhatsApp, Google drive, Telegram, Twitter etc. They have been sharing important documents with the group members and creating online local repository also. Students are advised to submit the scanned copies of the assignments to the institution through email. Institutions have also started receiving internship reports and projects through email during the lockdown forCovid-19.

2. Mixed impact on Academic research & Professional Development: Covid-19 has both negative and positive impacts on research. If we take the negative side, it has made impossible for researchers to travel and work together with others nationally and internationally. Some joint research work or project work are made complicated to complete. Some scientific laboratory testing/research work could not be conducted. Ifwe look at the positive side, academicians got much time to improve their theoretical research work. Academicians got acquainted with technological methods and improved their research. Webinars and conferences became normal methods for sharing expertise among students and academicians around the globe with similar issues. They could get much time to concentrate on professional development by doing research and to improve knowledge by sharing ideas through webinars and e-conferences. They enhanced their technical skill and could get the scope for publishing articles in journals, publishing books in this free time.

3. Severely affected the educational assessment system: Most of the external examinations have been postponed and almost all the internal assessments have been cancelled. The cancellation of assessments has negative impact on students' learning. Many institutions have been managing the internal assessments through online

mode using different digital tools but the postponement of the external assessments, has a direct impact on the educational and occupational future of students' life. This uncertainty has created anxiety among students as they are stuck in the same grade/class without promotion. Similarly, many students who had appeared final/board examinations would suffer a lot as by the time they get their certificates, it might be too late for them to apply for the forthcoming academic year in other countries due tolockdown.

4. Reduced employment opportunities: Many entrance tests job recruitments got cancelled which created negative impact with a great challenge in the life of a student of higher education. The Indians who have been doing their jobs abroad became upset of their job withdrawal also. In India, there is no recruitment in Govt. sector and fresh graduates are in pressure of fearing withdrawal of job offers from corporate sectors because of the pandemic situation. Many students may lose their jobs from India and overseas. The pass out students may not get their job outside India due to various restrictions caused by Covid-19. All these facts imply towards increase of unemployment rate due to this pandemic. With increase of unemployment situation, the interest for education may gradually decrease as people struggle for food rather than education.

Online Teaching-Learning Adoption: An Opportunity

The ongoing pandemic changed the extremely conventional, chalk–talk education model to new ambitious web-based innovation and technology. This unsettling influence in the conveyance of schooling is pushing policymakers to sort out how to drive responsibility at scale while ensuring complete e-learning action plans and taking care of the advanced digital devices. It has allowed growing as good as ever proficient aptitudes/information through internet learning more effectively and beneficially Internet erudition is the most excellent arrangement amid the current pandemic circumstance. Along these lines, the computerized India vision of the legislature is rising as an imperative apparatus for illuminating the current emergency because of Covid-19. Technology-based instruction is more straightforward with all regard. Keeping in view of pandemic challenges, the Universities and Schools being closed as per the legislature of India, just as state governments and private players have attempted legitimate activities (The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has made a couple of strategies, including on the web entries and education channels through Direct to Home TV, Radios for understudies to continue learning. For the duration of the lockdown, understudies scholars and students are utilizing famous web-based media apparatuses like WhatsApp, Zoom, Google meets, Telegram, Youtube live, Facebook live, and so forth for the online teaching-learning system. A multi-pronged technique is critical to manage the crisis and assemble a strong Indian education structure eventually.

Diksha platform contains e-Learning content for students, teachers, and parents adjusted to the educational program, including video works out, worksheets, course readings, and assessments. Under the direction of Central Board Secondary Education (CBSE) and National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the substance has been made by more than 250 teachers who educate in various vernaculars. The app

is available to use in offline mode also. It has in excess of 80,000 digital books for classes 1 to 12 made by CBSE, NCERT in numerous dialects. Other than Diksha, different platforms like the National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) entrance give a large group of assets to understudies, and educators in numerous dialects are including books, intelligent modules, and

recordings including a large group of STEM-based games. Swayam is the public online training stage facilitating 1900 courses covering both school (classes 9 to 12) and advanced education (under alumni, postgraduate projects) in all subjects including designing, humanities and sociologies, law, and the board courses. Swayam Prabha has thirty two direct to home television (DTH TV) channels sending instructive substance on twenty four hours by seven days premises. These channels are accessible for surveys all over the nation utilizing DD (Doordarshan) free dish set top box and antenna. The e-PG Pathshala is dedicated to postgraduate understudies and they can utilize this platform for digital books, online courses, and study resources during the lockdown period and ongoing public health emergency.

Further, there is a need to create comprehensive learning arrangements, particularly for the most powerless and underestimated. With a speedy augmentation of versatile web customers in India, which is needed to show up at 85% nuclear families by 2024, development is enabling ubiquitous access and personalization of guidance even in the remotest bits of the country. This can change the coaching structure and augment the suitability of learning and educating, giving understudies and teachers different choices to investigate Educational institutions of India have acknowledged the demands and are making an honest effort to offer consistent help administrations to the students during the pandemic. Pandemic has accelerated the adoption of advanced innovations to deliver education. Instructive organizations moved towards a mixed method of learning. It supported all educators and students to turn out to be more innovative and insightful. The utilization of learning the board frameworks by educational institutions turned into an incredible interest. The use of a soft copy of the learning material has improved. There is a gigantic demand for open and distance learning courses

Challenges in Adopting Online Teaching-Learning

Besides the willingness of a larger part of educators and students in schools and other educational foundations towards utilization of different computerized and E-learning platforms, the most well-known difficulties looked by both understudies and instructors are technical issues, interruptions and time management, staying motivated, understanding course expectations, absence of in-person interaction, adjusting to innovation and vulnerability about the future. Indeed, fundamental e-learning components are absent, for example, PCs, power, skills, and dynamic cooperation of students and instructors in distant and not so developed regions of the country The greatest challenge most likely sets in guaranteeing that specific preconditions are required for e-learning, for example, admittance to ICT apparatuses and network foundation. Orienting the perception of instructors and students in favor of e-learning and persuading them to acknowledge it is additionally also very

crucial Another perspective that should be taken care of is the specialized competency of the individuals which will connect with the e-learning scheme. One of the most widely recognized issues revealed by both the partners is that there were no experts to prepare   them in the utilization of e-learning stages and that there was insufficient preparation when it went to the utilization of the innovation The cost of getting, overseeing, and keeping up ICT Infrastructure has been recognized as a significant hindrance in the course of action and determination of e-Learning by organizations and academic bodies. A portion of the elements, for example, inadequately prepared lecture rooms and absence of power have frustrated the organization and the resulting selection of e-adapting, particularly in rustic and remote territories. Further absence of a legitimate e-learning educational program is a significant boundary to the successful sending and reception of e-learning. Another course issue is the conveyance method of the course. The factor concerns whether understudies ought to be permitted to pick the mode of content delivery.

Educators who are deficiently prepared in their subjects, and have next to zero PC experience are a block to a successful organization and reception of online learning in institutions. The blending of ICT advances would necessitate noteworthy pre-administration and in-administration instructors preparing in fundamental PC proficiency just as how to educate with e-learning advances for powerful sending and reception of e-learning in educational institutes. Specialized aptitudes are a huge part of the execution and incorporation of e-learning innovations in the instruction framework. Establishment, accessibility of the most recent technologies, quick web association, continuous delivery of electric power, up to date maintenance, organizational administration, security, and lack of skilled technical assistance are different big issues.

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