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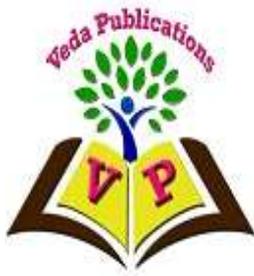


IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES OF COVID -19 IN EDUCATIONAL SECTOR: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT



The present research aims to highlight the immediate, global impacts of the swift and rapid spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) on teaching and learning in schools as well as in higher educational institutions. The pandemic brought about huge turmoil on education systems in the whole human history, striking almost 1.6 billion learners across the world. Most schools, colleges, and universities have discontinued face-to-face teaching and adopted remote learning. The pressing need of the hour is not only to innovate and provide alternative educational systems and assessment strategies but also to analyze, how the use of information and communication technologies impacted students, faculty, and staff experiences during the lockdown period. In view of the present scenario, this paper attempts to investigate new strategies, opportunities and pitfalls of integrating emerging technologies to meet the organisation's teaching and learning needs.

Keywords: *Online education, Challenges, Opportunities, Innovation.*



INTRODUCTION

Online education has traditionally been considered as an alternative bridge path, one that is particularly well suited to higher educational institutions. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led the educators and students across all (Dhawan, 2020) Implementation of national lockdowns, Social distancing and restrictive movement policies have remarkably hindered traditional educational practices. As a result, most educators and students were forced to use new technologies, techniques and educational resources that they were not familiar with.

Restarting of schools after easing restrictions is another challenge because many new standard operating policies were put in place. In some cases, education was shifted online, then returned to face-to-face teachings, and then moved back to online due to further surge in the rate of infection. Students lost a lot of time as the institutions tried to make necessary plans to move the learning activities as well as the assessment methods online. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) states that the pandemic has affected at least 9 in 10 students. There is a fear of losing academic year 2021 or even more in the near future. The need of the hour is to address this setback and implement effective educational system and assessment strategies. Within the short span of COVID-19, several studies have come out, addressing the major challenges of online teaching. Limited exposure of teachers and students to distance education, non-conducive environment, lack of accessibility, and affordability are some of the crucial challenges.

Although there are certain challenges, distance learning offers numerous opportunities. It provides expertise and exposure to information and communications technology (ICT) for both educators and the learners. Apart from the actual content of the text book, the students are also exposed to learning skills like, problem-solving, critical thinking and self-directed learning. The interplay with technology ultimately prepares the learners to meet the labour market needs.

Taking everything into consideration, the current research aims to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning process across schools and higher education institutions. The challenges and opportunities of online and continuing education during the COVID-19 pandemic is summarized and way forward is suggested.

PANDEMIC AND EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the education sector to change the traditional teaching techniques and to engage in the extensive use of virtual learning (Stein, 2020). There is a paradigm shift in the way educators impart knowledge through various online platforms (Maloy, 2020). The online learning, distance and continuing education have become the only remedy for this unparalleled global pandemic, despite the challenges posed to both educators and the students all over. Transitioning from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning can be an entirely different experience for the learners and the educators. It is an educational innovation which must be adapted to meet the changing learning needs of the students. The education system and the educators have embraced education in emergency through various online platforms like LMS, black board learn, google classroom; making it easy and simple for teachers and trainers to manage the course (Sumitra, 2021). Teachers are compelled to adopt a system that they are neither familiar with nor prepared for.

Thanks to the information and communication technology, (ICT) that have played a prominent role during the pandemic, assisting schools and universities facilitate student learning during the closure of universities and schools (Subedi, 2020). While governments, frontline workers and health officials are trying all the possible ways to slow down the outbreak, educational institutions across the world are trying to continue imparting quality education for all during these difficult times. Although the benefits of e-learning are



numerous, many students have undergone psychological and emotional torment and have been unable to engage productively. Therefore, the best practices for online home schooling are yet to be developed through studies (Petrie,2020).

The year 2020 has witnessed an increase in the availability and adoption of electronic resources and activities, due to the education emergency that broke out in the whole world. Some of the extensively used online platforms that support education currently are Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Canvas and Blackboard. These applications allow the teachers to create virtual lectures, training and skill development programmes (Petrie,2020). They include options of workplace chat, white board sharing, video meeting and file storage that keep classes organized. Additionally, they support the sharing of a variety of content like Word, PDF, Excel file, audio, videos and many more. These also facilitate the tracking of student learning through quizzes, assessments, discussions and assignments.

Furthermore, the restrictions of the pandemic are a gateway to new opportunities for educators to consider diverse strategies to teach targeted concepts. Although, the implementation of distant learning approaches is forced and hurried, the experience has served as a rare chance to reconsider strategies that best facilitate learning within the affordances and constraints of the online context. While the distinctions between traditional and online education have been observed for several decades; the pandemic has quickly advanced the elimination of these boundaries (McIsaac, 1996). The shift from traditional to online education has paved the way for enhanced infrastructure and developed skill-sets that allow teachers to move across different delivery systems. The virtual teaching and learning that have been established in response to the pandemic, served as a guide for new combinations of instructional delivery. The use of multiple instructional modes is likely to continue, and it will be employed with learners of all ages (Maloy, 2020).

CHALLENGES

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the educators to embrace distance learning. The challenges encountered by those outside distance education practice as they move into digitally-mediated learning are myriad. With the accessibility of a sea of platforms and online educational tools, both the teachers and students encounter frequent technical issues while using them. Some of the broadly identified challenges with distance learning are as follows:

A. Social challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to affecting the education sector, it has also overblown societies and economies (UNDP, 2020). Due to the lockdown, the economies of most countries suffered and this resulted in the loss of jobs, especially in middle- and low- income class. Consequently, economically backward children are unable to afford online learning devices like smart phone, laptop or TV at home. The data package cost is comparatively high against average income earned, and so the students were not able to afford to buy the data they needed to access online resources.

Traditional schooling raises students' awareness of social skills besides being fun for the children; whereas, in online education they are exposed to economic, social and psychological consequences. The online education constitutes the risk of exposure to prolonged screen time for the learner. Also, spending additional time on virtual platforms 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 cyber bullying. Lack of parental guidance, especially for young learners, is another serious concern, as both parents are away for work.



B. Technological challenges

Undoubtedly, distance learning provides learning opportunities which are not restricted by geographical locations. However, studies prove that these opportunities might be hindered due to lack of well-developed IT infrastructure particularly in developing countries. Economically backward students faced difficulties like lack of internet connectivity, high cost of internet data, poor network coverage and insufficient devices to access internet (Ogunleye, 2018).

Other significant issues in implementing online education are insufficient IT knowledge and digital skills of educators and learners (Rafiq, 2020). Absence of training for using online resources by both, students and teachers have notably hindered the effectiveness of virtual learning environment (L. Mishra, 2020). Some of the teachers were not prepared to teach online courses owing to lack of experience and unfamiliarity with technology such as, videorecording and editing software. Training on effective use of technology will enable the educators to be well informed about the available online applications and be more confident, creative and effective while designing online courses.

C. Pedagogical and assessment challenges

Although, a range of pedagogy has been devised for online and distance learning, several obstacles were encountered due to insufficient knowledge and skills on how to engage learners effectively in online classes. A very crucial part of online distance learning is the accessibility of helpful formative assessments and ensuring timely feedback to the learners (Doucet, 2020). One of the issues that many faculty members grappled with was conducting fair online assessments. It is challenging for educators to find the authenticity of the work and the actual learning taking place, since all assignments and examinations are carried out from home. Almost all the assessments in the academic year 2020 are conducted online, with a lot of trial and error, uncertainty and confusion among the teachers, students and parents. All of these are some of the outstanding problems in running online classes and conducting assessments.

The lockdown of schools and colleges has not only affected internal assessments, but also resulted in cancellation of main public examinations. Various state-level board exams, recruitment exams, university-level exams and entrance exams have been delayed across the world. The entire education system in schools, colleges and universities have been severely impacted due to the ongoing situation.

OPPORTUNITIES

Although, the unplanned and rapid shift to virtual education with little or no preparation, has resulted in a poor user experience; a brighter side still exists. It may lead to a fundamental change in the way we approach education and emerge as a new hybrid model of education with significant benefits. Studies reveal that the faculty members voiced heightened interest in the practice of distance learning. Having gained 23 years of traditional teaching experience, I can strongly state that the virtual classes forced me to be more creative than ever before. It pushed me into new directions of spending more class time in group work, solving problems and discussing issues and less time lecturing.

In view of the researches conducted and my own experience as a teacher, transitioning the courses from traditional to online has brought out the following new opportunities in the field of education:

A. Flexible education

E-learning provides a supple and cost-effective form of education that meets different needs of diverse range of students. The flexibility in distance learning includes modes of teaching, types of assessments and the time of learning. Many teachers have amended the ways in which they measure student achievement, by altering the assessment strategies. (Johnson, 2020). Such changes include mode of lecture delivery, encouraging



student-led teaching, group discussions, collaborative problem-solving skills, and stimulating the use of multiple social media tools. Also, it enables the students to handle their studies, work and social life effectively.

B. Skill development

Online education comes in so many shapes and sizes, offering ample platforms to learn new things and develop one's skills. Several virtual classroom platforms are widely used, in order to enhance learners' skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and self-directed learning (Doucet, 2020). In today's high-tech world, expanding the skills is becoming increasingly important simply because technology changes so fast. Online education provide ample opportunities for increased teacher-student interaction, study with students from different cultural and social background, expand professional network, develop collaborative problem-solving skills, and stimulating the use of multiple social media tools. It is certainly a smart move in an uncertain economy; allowing people to merge unusual skills to make their presence felt in today's world of competition.

C. Increased use of ICT

The year 2020 has witnessed an increased availability and demand for electronic resources to enhance online learning experiences. Synchronous online conferencing systems, such as Zoom and Google Meet, makes it possible for educators from anywhere in the world to deliver and record online lectures and presentations. The learners can listen to the recorded lectures at a time most convenient for them.

D. Diversity

Virtual learning offers educational institutions, the opportunity to reach and serve large number of students in various locations. It has proved effective in catering the educational needs of adult learners as well as the younger learners belonging to primary and secondary education. In addition, online learning allows differently-abled students with more freedom to participate in learning in the virtual environment.(Basilaia, 2020)

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE CLASSES

Online classes have become an increasingly popular and preferred way for students and teachers to advance their education or professional development.

Online teaching requires different strategies and techniques from the traditional classroom. Success in online education, to a great extent, depends on the expertise and exposure to information and communications technology (ICT) for both educators and the learners. The following strategies might help both, the teachers and students to improve online teaching skills and to have a successful learning experience.

A. Provide empowering learning experience.

First and foremost, set an empowering learning environment by reassuring the students and the parents that the teachers' 'virtual door' is always open for them. Developing a social and emotional bond between them won't take much time, but it can have a very strong positive impact on students' attitudes towards learning. Keep lines of communication always open, using different tools like emails, phone calls, WhatsApp web, and having occasional zoom meetings with parents and students are great way to stay connected with families.

Furthermore, it's essential that teachers establish their virtual presence at the very beginning of the online course. Teachers need to be stimulating, engaging and supporting students right from the beginning to maintain an effective learning community. Through this engagement, the teacher can build up professional association with the students and make their experience far more personal and unforgettable.

**B. Know the technology**

Knowing the technology is indispensable to success in online teaching. Due to rapid switch from the familiar face-to-face teaching to the alien screen-to-screen format has brought far-reaching changes in teaching. Therefore, it is crucial to familiarize oneself to technology with additional training.

C. Flexible teaching and assessment policies

Due to lack of high speed Internet connectivity in some areas, students are unable to run with the swiftness of online classes (Waqar, 2020). There can be also chances of failure in technology leading to denial of access to live sessions, assignments or classroom discussions. Have a backup plan for all assignments and assessments that count on technology. To deal with such issues, there should be a policy in place that defines the actions students should take if they fail to submit assignments due to technical issues.

D. Establish a sense of comfort

One of the prominent features in online teaching is alleviating fear, anxiety and isolation. Studies prove that effective communication between students and teachers is an important criterion for success. As body language, eye contact, and physical gestures are significant tools in face-to-face class; teachers should focus more on their voice and vocal functions in online teaching. Demonstrate enthusiasm and excitement about the courses by posting a welcome video, a biography, and photos that describe what you do in order to keep yourself busy during social isolation.

E. Select the right tools for better engagement

These days, we're favoured to have the technology to create different virtual learning tools that allow us to integrate and engage learners just as we were in traditional classroom. Researches and my own experience as a teacher demonstrate that working with a mix of activities makes the content more interesting and exciting, leading to intense engagement with both the teacher and learners. Synchronous teaching through live virtual sessions, video lessons, or live chats allows students to clear doubts and interact with the teacher and the class. Asynchronous activities like discussion boards or recorded lectures, allow students to learn at their own time and pace.

CONCLUSION

The present study on the impact and consequences of the COVID-19, provides important insight into the effectiveness, challenges and opportunities that have come to light as a result of the sudden shift from traditional to remote education. Although, the transition from face-to-face learning to distant learning was extremely difficult, the educators took up the challenge with the help of various online platforms. Yet, studies show that, in the case of developing countries, teachers and students face frequent hiccups while using these tools. It is indeed a challenge for the economically backward children to afford the cost of the data package and online learning devices. Intervention of the government and policy makers is required to improve this situation. Exploration and implementation of effective pedagogy for online teaching and learning is an important area for further research. Another significant issue is conducting fair online assessments. There is an urgent need for developing tools for authentic assessments and timed feedback. Finally, the researcher comes to the conclusion that the education system across the world needs to invest on familiarizing the teachers with ICT and effective pedagogy. It is hoped that the educators and administrators will find this study enlightening and helpful as they plan ahead to address discrepancies regarding instructional delivery and digital infrastructure.

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