



Impact of Covid-19 on higher education in India: A critical review

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic has forced almost all the countries of the world to enforce lockdown and brought everything to an abrupt halt for a certain period of time. The education sector has not left behind from the devastating impact of this pandemic. The teaching-learning process has gone through a drastic change with the use of digital platforms to conduct the academic activities. All the educational institutions have adopted the culture of virtual learning by adopting the online modes of teaching and learning. This paper intends to critically understand the issues related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Indian higher education system. It also tries to highlight the shift of educational/academic activities from traditional mode to new virtual mode of working. Further, this paper has discussed the major issues and challenges for Indian higher education system which has posed by the spread of Covid-19 pandemic like the issue of digital divide, the impact of online teaching on the learning outcomes and the impact on the research in higher education institutions are discussed in this paper. It has also highlighted various opportunities that can be taken by various stakeholders in a positive sense. New forms of collaboration in education and sharing of knowledge between higher education institutions globally through online programs, various webinars, virtual guest lectures and other initiatives have also created the opportunity to enrich the knowledge economy of the country.

Keywords: higher education, Covid-19, online teaching, digital divide

Introduction

The worldwide spread of COVID-19 Pandemic has significantly disrupted every sphere of life. It is not only a global health problem which has created devastating physical and mental health problems but also has severe impact on social life including employment and education. This global phenomenon has enormous economic consequences and on the other hand it has a more a devastating impact on the education sector globally. Higher Education Institutions including universities, colleges and other institutions in tertiary education are no exception. The lockdown has brought everything to a standstill including the teaching and learning process. Most of the countries around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to control the spread Covid-19. This worldwide closure has impacted drastically the education system globally. This sudden shutting down blocked all academic activities and caused immediate loss in learning and further loss in human capital, job opportunities, and economic growth, in the longer run. According to UNESCO, around 1.3 billion learners across the world were not able to attend school or university as of March 23, 2020, and current UNESCO statistics put this figure at over 1.5 billion (McCarthy, 2020) [9]. 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. All the educational institutions have adopted the culture of virtual learning by adopting the online modes of teaching and learning. This paper intends to critically understand the issues related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Indian higher education system. It also tries to highlight the shift of educational/academic

activities from traditional mode to new virtual mode of working. Further, this paper has discussed the major issues and challenges for Indian higher education system which has encountered with the spread of Covid-19 pandemic.

Impact on Higher Education

All the educational institutions including schools, colleges and universities across the world have responded to Covid-19 in different ways. Some renowned universities in the US, like Harvard University, and MIT decided to move online completely from 23 March 2020 onwards. Many universities in the US moved Spring Break by one week to allow the transition to online. It is reported that only 5 percent (260 out of 5,300) higher education institutions in the US could shift to online instruction with minimal on-campus presence, and most higher education institutions have made the transition to online mode (Crawford et al., 2020) [3]. In India, all academic activities were suspended after the announcement of the University Grants Commission (UGC) on 19 March to postpone examinations in all universities until the end of March. In India, we have world's third largest higher education system with 993 universities, 39931 colleges and 10725 stand alone institutions of higher education (AISHE, 2019) [1]. All these institutions faced temporary closure that impacted the academic activities, teaching-learning process and also put financial burden on the institutions.

The Sudden Shift

Covid-19 has accelerated adoption of digital technologies to deliver education. The sudden closure of all educational institutions has put a new challenge of how to continue teaching learning process when students, faculties and staff could no longer be physically present on the campuses. The

only solution for the institutions was to depend on online teaching and learning. Mobile applications or virtual meeting platforms like Zoom, Google Meet became the virtual meeting hubs. Educational institutions directed teachers to engage classes through online mode using the virtual meeting platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. The higher education institutions have started conducting orientation programmes, induction meetings and counselling 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 and learning and to create motivation among students for online activities (Jena, 2020)^[7].

Various Initiatives of e-learning platforms

The Ministry of Human Resource Development and various departments working under it have initiated and directed to use numerous online platforms effectively by engaging students with online learning through Information and Communication Technology techniques. The University Grants Commission and its Inter University Centres (IUC) - Informational and Library Network (INFLIBNET) and Consortium for Educational Communication (CEC) are part of this network. These platforms can be accessed by teachers, students and researchers. The UGC recommended that universities should develop virtual classrooms and video conference facilities, give staff training in the systems and upload materials to websites, with the aim of shifting about 25 per cent of syllabus online (Dhoot, 2020)^[5]. The UGC also urged flexibility in modes of conducting examinations. Assessments could be based half on various evaluations and half on the previous semester's performance. Various e-learning portals and apps like e-GyanKosh, Gyandarshan, Gyandhara, Swayam, e-Pathya, e-Adhyayan, National Digital Library of India, e-Yantra, Virtual Labs, e-ShodhSindhu, Shodhganga and many more have helped students to continue their learning and research work during the closure of institutions. Some studies describe that the e-learning technology provides 25 percent to 60 percent more materials by comparing with the conventional classroom learning as well as reduces 40 percent to 60 percent of time (Kantipudi et al., 2021)^[8]. Some of the initiatives are listed below:

- e-GyanKosh is a National Digital Repository to store and share the digital learning resources which is developed by the Open and Distance Learning Institutions of India.
- Gyandarshan is a web-based TV channel devoted to educational and developmental needs for Open and Distance Learners. A web-based TV channel devoted to educational and developmental needs of the society.
- Gyandhara is an internet audio counselling service offered by IGNOU. It is a web radio where students can listen to the live discussions by the teachers and experts on the topic of the day and interact with them through telephone, and through chat mode.
- Swayam provides Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) with 140 universities approved credit transfer feature. Swayam Prabha provides high quality educational programs through 32 DTH channels transmitting educational contents.
- National Digital Library of India (NDLI) is a repository of e-content on multiple disciplines for all kinds of

users like students (of all levels), teachers, researchers, librarians, library users, professionals, differently-abled users and all other lifelong learners. It is a virtual repository of learning resources with a single-window search facility. It is also available to access through mobile apps.

- Virtual Labs has developed web-enabled curriculum-based experiments designed for remote operation. It has over 100 Virtual Labs consisting of approximately 700+ web-enabled experiments which are designed for remote-operation. It provides remote access to Labs in various disciplines of Science and Engineering. These Virtual Labs cater to students at the undergraduate level, post graduate level as well as to research scholars.
- National Educational Alliance for Technology (NEAT) is an initiative for skilling of learners in latest technologies through a Public-Private partnership model between the Government (through its implementing agency AICTE) and the Education Technology companies of India. It brings the best technological products in education pedagogy on a single platform for the convenience of learners.

The Challenges

All the educational institutions have been facing many challenges to cope-up with this devastating situation till now. The shift from face-to-face to distance teaching did not come without challenges; the major one was to access the technical infrastructure, competencies and pedagogies for distance learning and the requirements of specific fields of study. The institutions are facing the challenge of financial crunch whereby the students and teachers are facing the challenge to adjust themselves according to the online teaching and learning process. The IAU Global Survey also reveals that almost 80 percent of the respondents believe that Covid-19 will have an impact on the enrolment numbers for the new academic year. Almost half (46 percent) believe that the impact will affect both international and local students. Some higher education institutions, especially private ones, reported that this impact would have negative financial consequences (IAU, 2020). On the other side, the biggest challenge is whether this digital mode of education is accessible to all students in the country.

The discourse of online teaching-learning

The sudden shift from classroom learning to digital learning has created the digital divide. While higher education institutions in developed countries have managed well to implement digital learning, higher education institutes in African and South Asian countries have to overcome many challenges before shifting completely to digital modes of learning (Bania & Banerjee, 2020)^[2]. A lot of students were just joining the classes to mark them present. They hardly paid attention towards what was being taught by the teacher as the factor like class control does not exist on these virtual platforms. Most of the students might not have the technical skills that are required to navigate through the online learning activities and at the same time the teachers who were not well versed with modern technology and mobile applications had to struggle a lot to engage online classes due to the sudden shift. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) have faced criticisms like the environment of learning is of an impersonal nature and the students may

have to learn largely on their own. Without any personal attention of the teacher and also without the interaction with the peer group the learning outcome would not be as wonderful as it might be. The sudden shift to online learning without any planning, especially in countries like India where the backbone for online learning was not ready and the curriculum was not designed for such a format, has posed various challenges to the system. It has created the risk of most of our students becoming passive learners and they seem to be losing interest due to low levels of attention span.

Digital Divide

Though during this tough time, the technology has proven itself as the savior of educational dreams of students to some extent. But in the case of a country like India where most of the population lives in rural areas (70 percent) and rural areas are still very much deprived of the technologies and internet connectivity, how does it impacted the rural students to access the educational platforms is a cause of concern. Attending online classes requires long hours of internet, peaceful space and one device/ phone dedicated to each student in a family, might not be affordable for everyone. According to the Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India report, based on the 2017-18 National Sample Survey, less than 15 percent of rural Indian households have Internet (as opposed to 42 percent urban Indian households). The poorest households cannot afford a smartphone or a computer (The Indian Express, June 8, 2020) ^[6]. Online classes have added to the already existing feelings of vulnerability among students (Sarkar, 2020). The digital divide has not only led to the exclusion of students from poor and marginalized backgrounds from digital learning but also pushed many underprivileged students towards depression and death. For instance, In Kerala, a 14 girl committed suicide as she was unable to join online classes (The Hindu, June 11, 2020). A 16-year-old boy (class 10 student), from a very poor family, took his life because he did not have a smartphone to attend online classes and examinations organized by his school in the Chirang district of Assam in India (The Hindustan Times, June 24, 2020). A 10th standard girl student, committed suicide at Bali in West Bengal because she had not been able to attend online classes and was afraid of failing her exams (Dalit Camera, June 19, 2020) ^[4]. The pandemic has exposed the deeply rooted inequality in the Indian education system and the lack of digital access further pushed out students from the system. So, here the understanding of the concept of the digital divide is important to know how accessing the internet and the impact of the use of the internet is deeply rooted in the social conditions of a students' day to day life. The access to technical gadgets, technical infrastructure are some major reasons behind access to higher education and thus, enabling the divide.

Impact on Research in Higher Education

The International Association of Universities (IAU, 2020) survey also indicates that the Covid-19 has had an impact on international student mobility by 89 percent of higher education institutions. The type of impact is diverse and varies from institution to institution, but everywhere it has been negative. As far as research is concerned, 80 percent of higher education institutions reported that research has been

affected by the Covid-19 pandemic at their institutions. The most common impact of Covid-19 has been the cancelling of international travel by 83 percent of higher education institutions and the cancellation or postponement of scientific conferences by 81 percent of higher education institutions. Moreover, scientific projects are at risk of not being completed at a bit more than half (52 percent) of higher education institutions (Bania & Banerjee, 2020) ^[2]. The displacement from the university campus owing to its closure had led to a large majority of scholars leaving without the resources needed for their research. With poor internet connectivity and most research-related resources unavailable online, scholars are helpless.

Finding the opportunities

Any change that is so disruptive is also likely to bring with it some new opportunities. Digital transformation has become a new norm with educational institutions across the country. The adoption of technology in education has led to an unprecedented transformation from teacher-centric education towards student-centric education. New ways of delivery and assessments of learning outcomes will have to be adopted which opens immense opportunities for a major transformation in the area of curriculum development and pedagogy. There is a great opportunity for universities and colleges to start improving the quality of the learning material that is used in the teaching and learning process. There is a new opportunity where collaborative teaching and learning can take on new forms and can even be monetized. Collaborations can also happen among faculty/teachers across the nation to benefit from each other. 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 (Ramakrishna, 2021) ^[10]. 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. 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.

Concluding Remarks

The Covid-19 pandemic has reshaped the teaching and learning process in many ways. On the one hand it has pushed the whole process in virtual mode and on the other hand it has posed a serious threat to the equal access of education to every student. The use of different digital resources, digital learning management systems (DLMS), mobile phone applications, massive open online course (MOOC) platforms and other digital learning solutions also created a gap between the population that are far from the access of this technology. Though, the concerned educational departments and institutions are not leaving any stone unturned for arranging/ scheduling study material via various platforms. The MHRD and University Grants Commission (UGC) have made several arrangements by launching of many virtual platforms with online depositories, e-books and other online teaching/learning materials, educational channels through Direct to Home TV, Radios

for students to continue their learning. This time could also become an opportunity to transform the higher education system. Curriculum design, academic collaborations, skill development and faculty training programs could help to transform the higher education in the near future. The quality of IT infrastructure and the training to use it by various stakeholders would help to make this change happen in education sector.

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