

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE ACADEMIC LIFE OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS OF RAJASTHAN: A CHANCE ENCOUNTER WITH E-LEARNING AND ITS CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

In order to understand the impact of the sudden outbreak of pandemic COVID-19 on higher education, the researcher has surveyed students of higher education using questionnaire method to shed the light on the online-learning mode of education. This unprecedented & unfortunate phase of 21st century has called for the closure of institutes; & to cope with anxiety & panic among students, higher education institutes have resorted to online-learning through online classes to make sure that the learning process doesn't discontinue. This research aims to examine the effectiveness, satisfaction level, and barriers of online education on various parameters in higher education in Rajasthan. Using Google forms, the survey was conducted online. The total of 100 students participated in this survey. A questionnaire designed by the researcher was sent to students digitally, to investigate the status of implementation of e-learning. The survey shows that online learning has helped students to not lose touch with the academic life. The research has come to an interpretation that this pandemic has given rise to e-learning, a new normal, but e-learning has its own barriers & challenges that it needs to overcome to enhance the quality & productivity of higher education. Finally, this report offers some recommendations with regard to overcoming the challenging barriers & highlights the importance of online learning in COVID-19, an action taken expeditiously to combat the temporary cessation of face to face teaching.

Keywords: COVID-19, Online Learning, e-Learning, WHO, Pandemic.

Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), declared pandemic, by World Health Organization (WHO), has jolted the world, and India is not an exception. It has hit India with a pervasive impact on almost all sectors including the higher education system. As a precautionary measure restrictions including closure of higher educational institutes have been introduced to keep the recommended social distancing. Higher education students have been affected due to institution closure. This has caused disruption in the academic system such as in examination, syllabus completion, etc. COVID-19 has devastating impact on the higher education students with serious implications on their learning approach, workload, physical well-being & mental health in a profound way. Gravity of these catastrophic effects can't be neglected. But education can't wait.

In an attempt to arrest the transmission risk of COVID-19, higher education institutes all around Rajasthan have embraced e-learning to keep the momentum of education. E-learning is, learning done through internet without being physically present. E-learning is doing its job & evidently has become the unavoidable substitute of in-person learning in pandemic. 98% students in this study said that classroom learning has been replaced by online learning. To capture the disruptive impact of on-going COVID-19 crisis on higher education in Rajasthan, the researcher conducted online survey entitled "Impact of COVID-19 on the academic life of higher education students of Rajasthan: a chance encounter with e-learning and its challenges" targeting students of higher education.

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This research work explores the areas of online study & underlines the effect of pandemic on higher education students, as most immediate impact of university/ college closure was on students. While personal adjustment to daily life was obvious thing to do, studying on a whole different platform was complicated. For example, 42% students in this study said that they have experienced anxiety and depression sometimes as a result of the crisis. It also highlights the teacher-students interaction on online learning platforms where they discuss the lessons & the educators provide required learning material to the students. The study throws the light on how the students are dealing with e-learning, how they are supported in this different educational environment, what their satisfaction level with different online learning methods is, and what their expectations are from future education. The study also reveals that students of higher education faced countless challenges with this radical shift from face-to-face learning to e-learning. Cancellation/postponement of examinations, drastic change in learning methods, etc. have perplexed the students. Even ordinary troubles like lack of device, & connectivity issues have posed a danger to the quality of online education. More than 80% students faced network troubles.

Research Methodology

This research is based on primary data collected through questionnaire from higher education students through WhatsApp application & e-mail invitations.

Statement of the Problem

This study addresses the issue of effect of COVID-19 on the students' academic life that how they are coping with the challenges of online education and what their level of satisfactions. It also attempts to learn if the online education can make up for the traditional face-to-face learning system.

Research Objective

- The objective of this research is to find out the status of satisfaction of higher education students in online learning.
- This study recognizes the barriers of the online learning mode of education.

Design of Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed in English entitled "Impact of COVID-19 on the academic life of higher education students of Rajasthan: a chance encounter with e-learning and its challenges." It was based on the effectiveness of e-learning, students' satisfaction level & encountered barriers in the online learning. The survey was programmed to understand students' experience with the ongoing e-learning system in COVID-19 & their future expectations.

The data has been collected through online questionnaire, composed of twenty-five questions in five sections, from higher education students in Rajasthan.

- First section tells about the academic characteristics of students, e.g. student's name, institution's name, age, gender, and name of degree program.
- Section two is consist of seven educational life questions, e.g. visit to university/ college; rescheduling of exams; pandemic effect on learning; & satisfaction through different modes of e-learning.
- five questions in section three ask about the satisfaction level with some institutional parameters, e.g. effectiveness of lectures; syllabus completion; etc.
- Section four in this questionnaire deals with the barriers in e-learning; and workload in pandemic. It is consist of mainly three questions.
- The last section five has four questions, e.g. enjoyment through online learning; level of confidence; and future educational opportunities.

The questions were mainly closed-ended questions with the option of 'other' if the respondent had different opinion than the researcher. Two ranking questions were also included to know students' enjoyment & confidence level in the wake of e-learning during pandemic.

Sample

Higher education students pursuing bachelor's, and master's degree in Rajasthan had been surveyed. A total of 100 respondents have completed the survey.

Significance of the Study

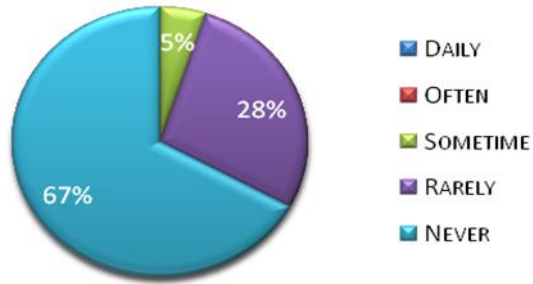
This research will serve as a step to develop an analysis of the online learning implementation in student's academic life in times of critical situations such as the COVID-19. The findings of this study can be used to further improve the decisions in the area of online learning.

Data Analysis

Responses collected through Google form have been analyzed and interpreted with the help of various charts such as pie chart, bar charts & doughnut charts.

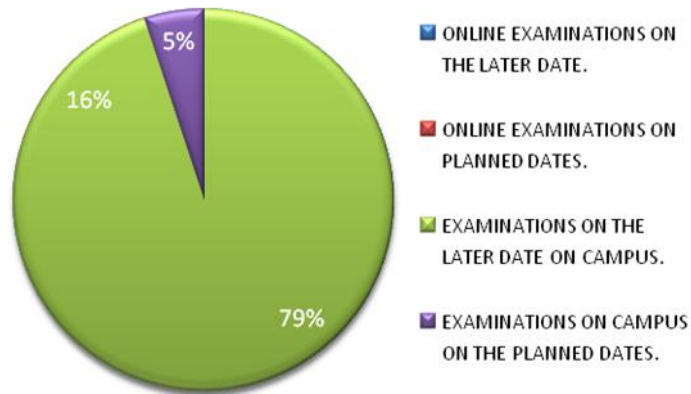
Section I

Visit to university/ college



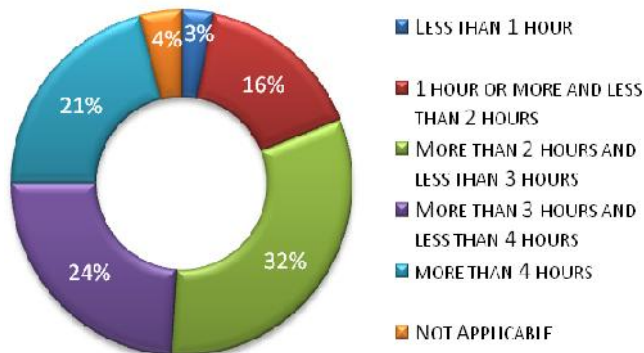
43% female and 57% male higher education students participated in this survey. 59% students were pursuing master’s degree & 41% were pursuing bachelor’s.

Examination rescheduling

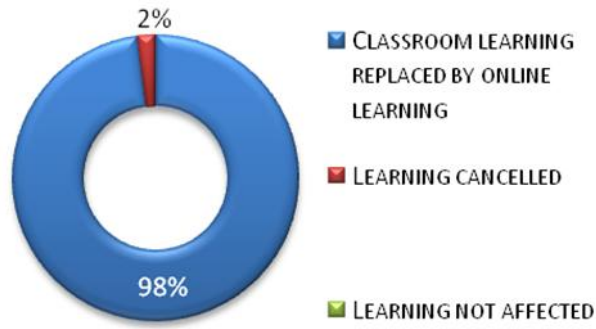


Section II

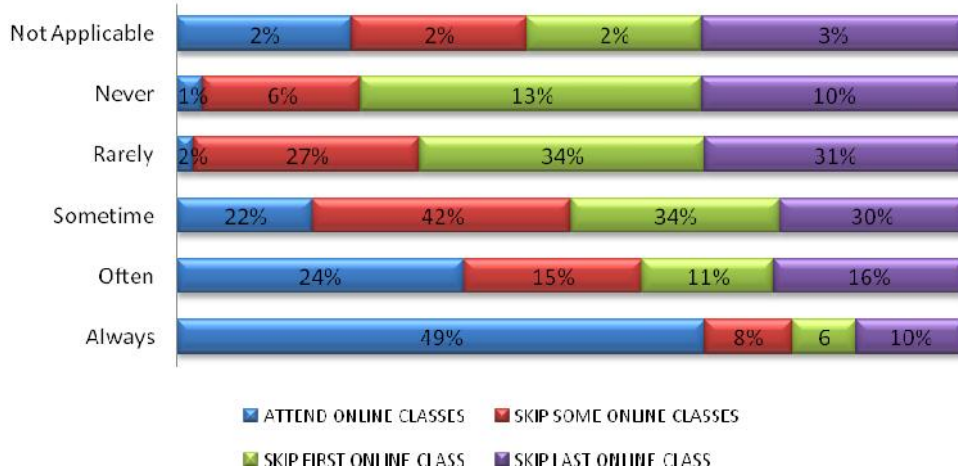
Time spent on e-learning



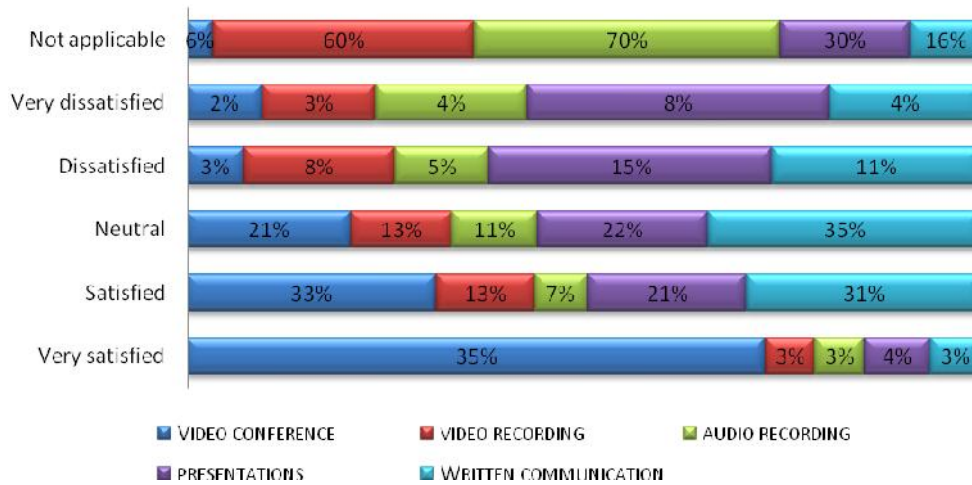
Effect of COVID-19 on learning



Attending online classes

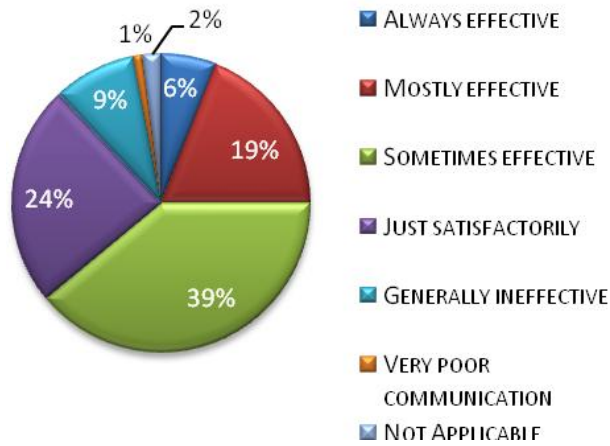


Satisfaction level of online modes of education

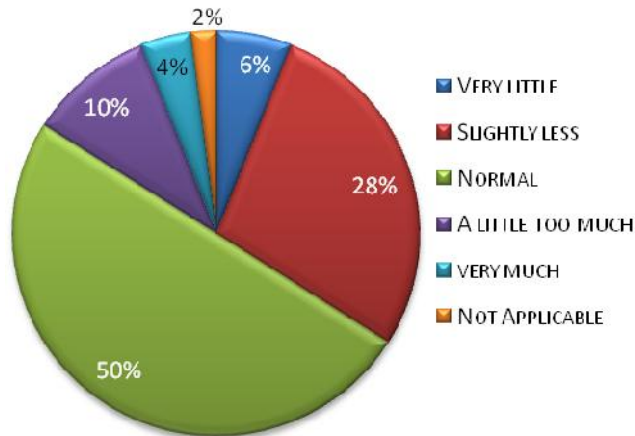


Section III

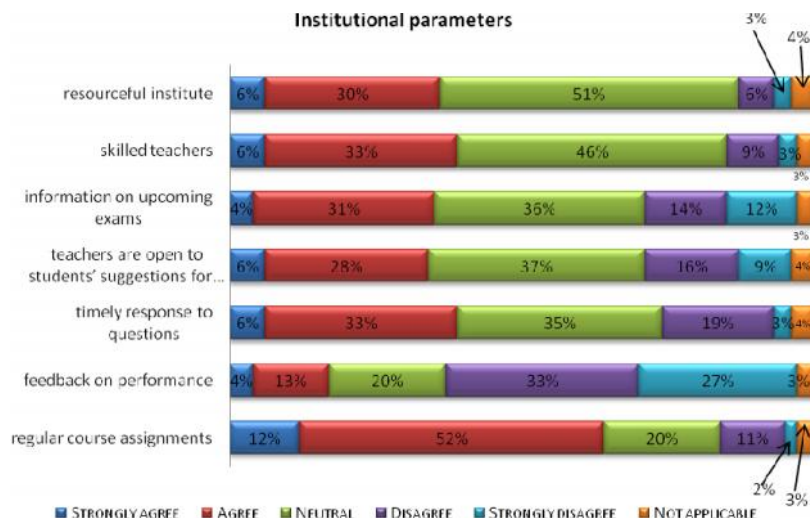
Effectiveness of lectures



Amount of study given in online classes

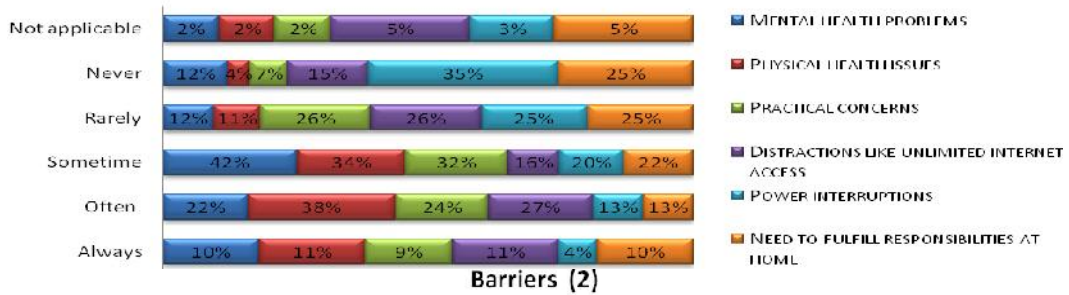


Institutional parameters

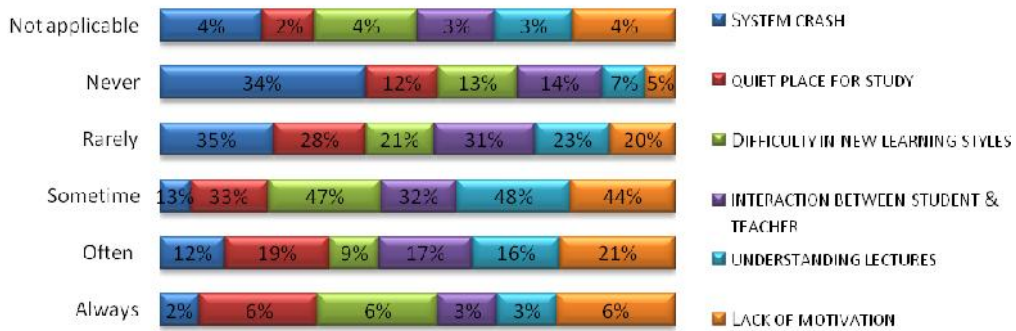


Section IV

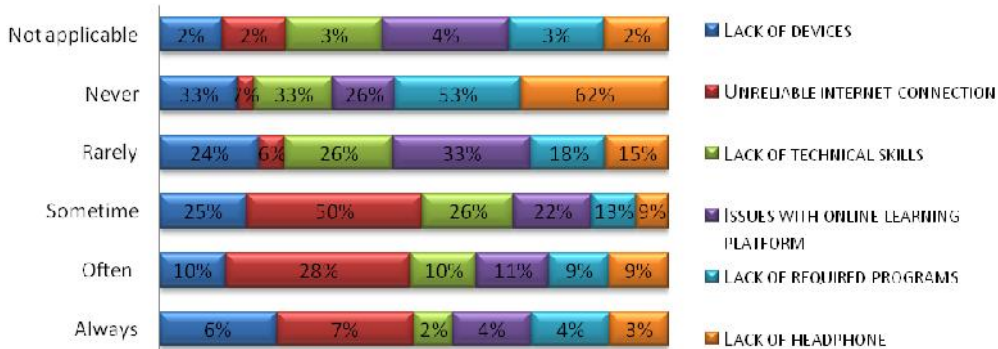
Barriers (3)



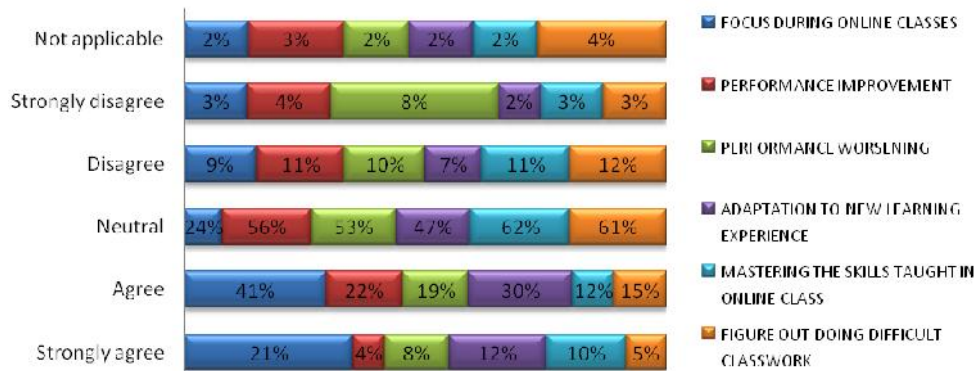
Barriers (2)



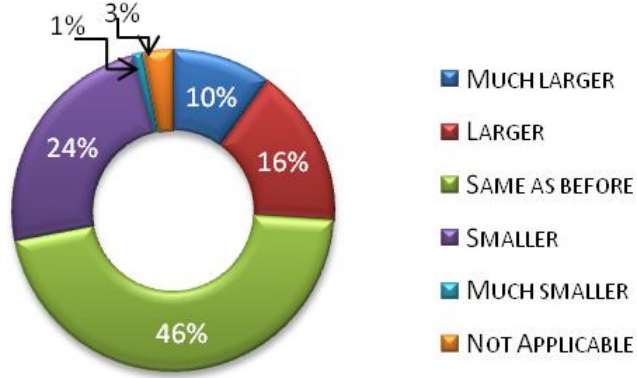
Barriers (1)



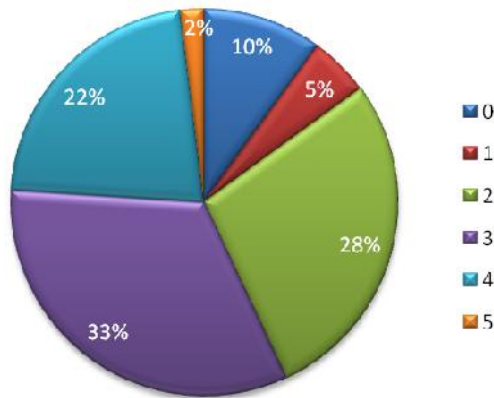
Barriers (4)



Workload in online education



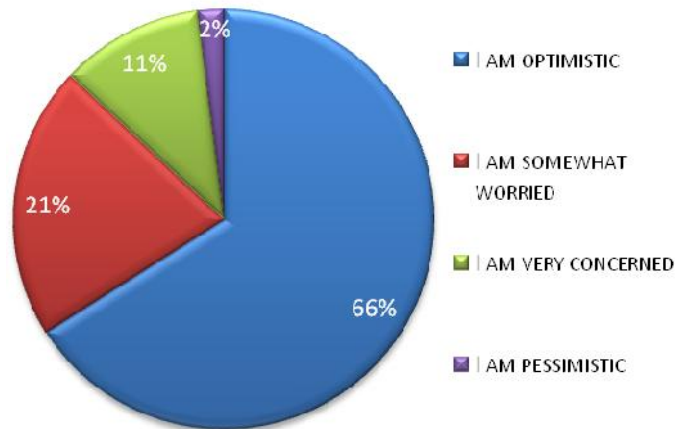
**Section V
Online study enjoyment level**



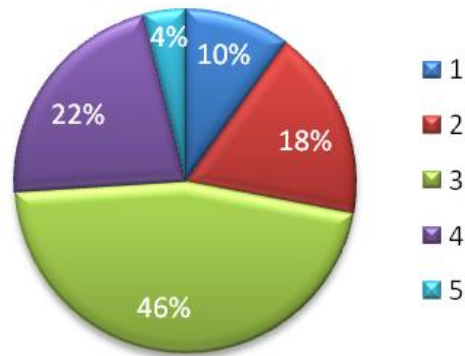
0 = Not at all

5 = Very much

Future education optimism



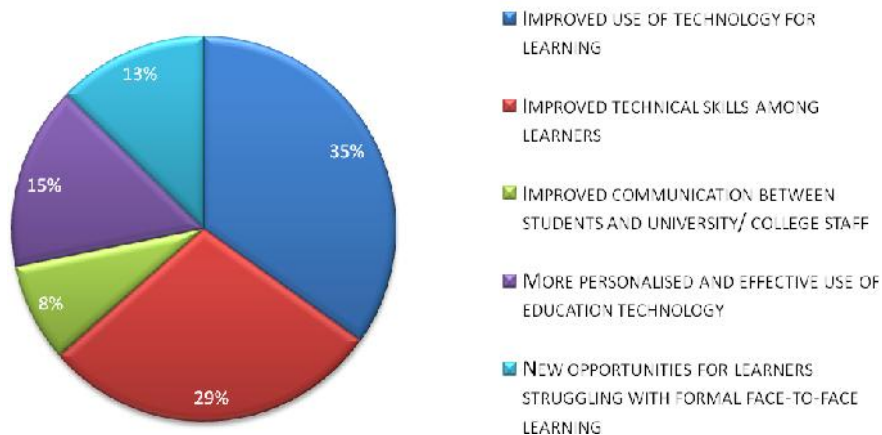
Online study confidence level



1 = Not confident

5 = Very confident

Educational opportunities



Findings

- Findings indicate that higher education institutes in Rajasthan were struck by pandemic like thunderstorm with no prior weather report. Due to the threat of COVID-19, many institutions suspended on-campus classes to stop the unfolding of pandemic. 67% students denied going to institute & 28% rarely visited. Fear of pandemic was certain in responses.
- The abrupt impact of COVID-19 gave higher education institutes no time to prepare themselves. Examinations were rescheduled & in the meantime institutes geared themselves up to carry out exams with technical aid. 79% students said that exams were conducted online on later dates.
- In pandemic, the thought of in-person classes was dreadful. To survive in the present scenario was a challenging phase for higher education institutes, therefore with trial & error, e-classes started to make the learning convenient. 98% said that classes have been shifted to online mode.
- Online learning helps students beyond the bounds of physical presence. 95% students said that they attend classes. 51% students had the tendency to skip first class & 56% skip last class.

- Time spent in e-classes, makes up for the halted conventional classroom learning due to COVID-19. 78% students spend more than 2 hours on online learning.
- Findings tell that students had good experience in introducing the online learning as an immediate response to the obstacles thrown in the way of in-person study by pandemic. 86% students use video-conferencing in real time tool to join online classes. E-classes engage students in learning within the confines of their familiar setting. 68% students were satisfied with the e-learning through video conferencing. 38% students were dissatisfied with the presentations (not in real time). 34% were satisfied with the written communication mode such as chat & e-mail.
- Effective lectures determine the alertness of students in the online class. 64% students said that lectures are effective. According to 10%, lectures were not effective.
- Too much study burdens students while little study causes them to slack, both the conditions may generate pointless outcome. 14% said that amount of study in the given time was more than conventional classes & 34% said less amount of study was given during the e-session. According to 50% amount was normal. Optimum amount of study keep them motivated to learn further.
- Satisfied students keep the institute alive. 64% students said that teachers provide assignments, e.g. homework & quizzes in timely manner. 39% said that the teachers answer queries timely.
- Only 39% students said that their teachers are skilled enough for online classes. 46% were neutral. Only 36% said that their institute has proper arrangement & resources for conducting online classes. 51% were neutral.
- 69% said they never or rarely lack required software for e-learning sessions. 77% never or rarely lacked headphone. 69% never or rarely experienced system crash during online study.
- Online learning overcame geographical barriers. 26% students said their performance has improved since online classes. 56% students were neutral. 22% agreed to mastering the skills taught in the online classes. While 62% were neutral.

Barriers

- 41% students said lack of device sometime & more. Only 33% had access to a reliable resource always. While 24% rarely lacked the device.
- Network issues are the biggest hurdle in online learning. 85% said they have unreliable & interrupted internet connection.
- Digital learning is not without barriers like students should be technology savvy. 38% students had experienced lack of technical skills. 39% students said that they had issues with the e-learning platform sometimes or more.
- 58% didn't have a quiet place to study online which made it hard to concentrate. 71% said they lack motivation while studying online alone.
- In online learning, student's comprehension with the study material cannot be assessed. 62% students faced difficulties in the new learning & had difficulty focusing and paying attention.
- When classes are carried online, it limits the teacher to notice whether students have understood the lecture or not. 52% students met with poor interaction troubles between them & teachers. 60% disagreed on teachers providing feedback on the performance in the given assignment.
- No one was ready for the sudden shift to online teaching-learning & most of lectures results in just engaging the students in the name of learning. 48% students said they sometime don't understand lecture while 30% rarely or never understand.
- Consistent use of cellphone/ computer triggered the mental health problems such as anxiety & stress in 74% students. Increased screen time causes physical health issues such as headache & eye strain. 83% suffered from these issues because of the longer use of computer/ mobile phone while studying online.
- 65% students experienced concerns like lack of course material.
- There is no inspection in online study environment. So distraction is more likely to be witnessed, such as gaming or internet surfing. 54% students distracted due to unlimited access to internet.
- 45% students said that they had to fulfill responsibilities at home during online classes.

- Teachers should take cognizance of varying learning pace of various. 62% students said they lose focus during online class. 27% said their performance has worsened since online classes. 53% remained neutral.
- Some students enjoy online study while some students lose interest in e-learning due to the low levels of attention & are at the risk of becoming passive learners. 10% said they don't enjoy e-classes & have no confidence to continue it further. Prolonged closure of institute can affect study unfavorably 66% students ranked enjoyment level at three or less out of zero to five levels. 74% ranked their confidence level at 3 or less out of one to five levels.

A Futuristic Outlook

- 63% students said that because of the COVID-19 technology will be used very much in future for the educational purpose.
- 52% students were of the opinion that students will improve their technical skills.
- 15% students believed that pandemic has given an opportunity to lessen the communication gap between students & university/ college personnel.
- 28% students said that in future there will be more personalized & effective use of technology in education.
- 23% students held the view that now there will be new opportunities for those students who struggle with classroom study.
- 66% responses recorded optimistic attitude of learners regarding future education after pandemic.

Suggestions

Undeniably, online learning has helped in making up for the classroom learning yet it needs improvement and upgrades.

- Real time video conferencing is a great tool for two-way communication. However, too much relying on it may increase the possibility for burnout & disengagement of students. For merely sharing of information, recorded message/presentation can be used.
- Recorded e-learning sessions give an opportunity to better understand difficult problems in flexible hours for those students who have interrupted internet connection.
- Workshops are a good way for preparing students to enhance productivity by providing advance lessons & presentations.
- E-libraries should be created regarding the course as students cannot go to the physical libraries. Institutional college forums should be created where relevant study notes can be uploaded to remove the lack of study material.
- Along with assessment results, teachers should discuss the assessment so that students learn from their mistakes. Interactive sessions between student-teacher prompt the students to listen & understand. This two-way interaction keeps students on their toes & leads them to become attentive in the lecture.
- The students should be physically & mentally active during virtual study session. Students should learn how to read from distance. Dull engagement in online classes is never a welcoming move. It just increases passive learning.
- Collaborations can be done among institutions to benefit each other & in turn providing quality online education to students.

Conclusion

COVID-19 pandemic, has radically transformed the lives of people around the globe, including higher education students. The survey results show that e-classes were a boon for higher education students although not superior to on-campus classes. It was clear from the results that while students are satisfied to an acceptable extent, the obtrusive drawbacks of online learning such as poor internet connection issue; lack of student-teacher interaction; inexperienced faculty; & course material unavailability; etc. should be taken care of. But, undoubtedly, online education, with the aid of video conferencing, succeeded by filling the void of classroom learning in pandemic. Though, not having a crystal ball in hand, students held optimistic views like more technological development in education will be seen in future, & improving technical skills among the higher education students. The study concludes that online learning has no geographical bounds; hence if students avail it properly their academic life in pandemic will become easier, yielding good outcomes.

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