IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 has seriously affected India's entire education system and that of the world. Due to forced lockdowns, all educational practices are destabilised. Different routine activities such as registration, entrance tests, admissions, student union elections, and examinations are postponed or cancelled. Besides, regular and competitive exams administered by various boards/universities/schools are also delayed. The education evaluation system has been severely affected: most external assessments are delayed, and almost all internal evaluations are cancelled. The cancellation and deferment of examinations harm students' learning. Many institutions conduct internal evaluations using various digital methods but postponing external assessment directly affects students' education and job prospects.

Keywords: *Covid-19, Pandemic, Lockdown, Virus, Education, Examination, Evaluation, Online, Virtual, E-learning, Digital, Technology, Internet.*

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Introduction

Covid-19 was announced pandemic by the WHO (World Health Organization) on March 11 2020. Covid-19 infected over 4.5 million people around the world (WHO). In India, on January 30 2020, the first affected case of Covid-19 was found in Kerala, with travel history from Wuhan in China. The first death was recorded in India on March 12 2020, and Janta Curfew was observed for one day on March 22 2020. On March 24, India kept Janta Curfew for 14 hours to fight the coronavirus pandemic and determine the nation's ability to combat the virus. The Prime Minister then declared the first period of the lockdown for 21 days on March 25 2020. The Covid-19 epidemic has affected approximately 1.2 billion students and young people worldwide due to school and university closures. This worldwide closure has dramatically influenced the education of students. The Indian Government's monitoring of the virus's impact extended the lockdown duration at various stages and announced lockdown 5.0, effective from June 1 to June 30 2020. From lockdown1.0 to lockdown5.0, schools across the nation have never had the relaxation to start their education in all lockdown stages. It is only January 18, 2021, onwards; the Indian Government permitted the schools, colleges and universities to run classes for a few students. Precisely, schools started running classes from IX onwards, whereas colleges and universities were running classes for Bachelors final and Masters final only till April 15, 2021.Regular classes were conducted for other courses, like Bachelors I and II years and Masters previous year. Schools, colleges and Universities have again closed till May 03, 2021, as per guidelines from the government. According to the latest guidelines, all higher education institutes will have summer vacation in the months of May and June as usual. Therefore, there might not be any offline learning and teaching activity till June 30, 2021.

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prospects. Later, the government decided to promote students to the next classes without any examination so that students do not lose an academic session. Since there were no examinations, no marks sheets were issued to students. Students were given relaxation in the eligibility criterion of various scholarships too. However, it was essential to hold the final examination for Bachelors and Masters final year students. Therefore, their examinations were conducted in August and September 2020, maintaining the social distance and other government's guidelines. In the subsequent months, teachers were called in rotation to make online admissions and other official works.

All education institutions remain closed for students; therefore, learning and teaching activities had come to a standstill for a few months. It was later realised that some alternative teaching methods should be adopted to impart education to students. Therefore, the teachers were motivated to conduct online classes. Initially, what appeared to be a cumbersome task, the teachers later got accustomed to holding online classes. The online teaching mode has proved beneficial only for the rich and urban students and teachers and not for the rural poor.

Nonetheless, Covid-19 has boosted the acceptance of digital education technology. It has motivated both teachers and students to make themselves sound in new educational technology. Covid-19 has, besides, increased the use of emerging technology in education and has enabled educational institutions to step into a mixed learning mode called Blended learning.

The colleges and universities have begun providing guidance programmes, induction meetings, and therapy classes with various e-conference tools, such as Skype, Zoom, Google Meet, YouTube Live, WebEx, Facebook Live to facilitate online learning and teaching. This initiative created a successful interactive learning experience and encouraged students to participate in online activity. Teachers have started making videos and uploading them on YouTube for their students. They also give them PDF notes and assignments on WhatsApp groups. Students send scanned copies of assignments through email or WhatsApp to their teachers.

Covid-19 has turned out to be both a boon and a bane for college and university students. Research scholars need to collaborate with others and visit and collect material from the national and international libraries; however, they cannot fly abroad or within their own country due to lockdown. Any collaborative research or project work is made difficult to complete in the present circumstances. Their entire discourse is done through emails and WhatsApp chats or video conferencing. Besides, the face-to-face meetings of the researchers and research guides is not possible due to lockdown. Many international higher education conferences are cancelled or transformed into a series of webinars. College and University teachers are motivated to hold national and international webinars so that research activities may continue, and thus teachers may keep themselves refreshed and updated. Even Orientation and Refresher Courses are conducted online for the College and University teachers.

There has been a positive aspect too of the Covid-19.There are no real and actual seminars, conferences, and workshops because people observe social distancing. Nevertheless, webinars and e-conferences are also standard ways for students and scholars worldwide to share information, facts, data and experiences on related issues. During the first few months of the lockdown, people had sufficient time to focus on their professional growth through research and information sharing and develop technical skills through webinars and e-conferences. Some people who had great ideas but had no time to write books and articles have written beautiful articles, fiction and non-fiction works and have even got them published. Students have completed and revised their syllabi many times over. For the diligent, intelligent and sincere students, Covid-19 has turned out to be a blessing, whereas the slothful, dull and leisurely students could not avail of the opportunity.

The Indian Government had opened schools and colleges for the final year students from the18[th]of January onwards, but the strength remained meager. Many parents were reluctant to send their children to schools and colleges even after the lockdown. Some parents were not sending their children because of the fear of catching the contagion. Some poor parents who lost their livelihoods in the pandemic could not bear the costs of sending their children to institutions. Educational institutes cannot spare the fee because they have to pay their teaching faculty. Teachers, parents, and institute owners continue to face problems of their own even in 2021 because of Covid-19.

Online learning has increased the gap between privileged and unprivileged students. Learners from low-income families and disadvantaged groups do not have expensive smartphones, high-speed Internet and technical devices to learn online. Therefore, the government should help colleges and universities improve their virtual education resources. Students also need improved internet and technology connectivity since most students cannot afford the facilities.

Covid-19 has badly affected students who work in schools, factories, and other places to seek education. Their employers have removed them from jobs or have reduced their salary. It is a pity that these poor, unemployed students have to fight for food rather than education.

Measures: Vaccination against Covid-19

WHO had earlier said that Covid-19 could never be eradicated and that it was essential for people to live with it. However, the vaccine against Covid-19 has been developed, and there are now several vaccines in use. The first mass vaccination programme started in early December 2020, and as of February15, 2021, 175.3 million vaccine doses have been administered. At least seven different vaccines (3 platforms) have been administered. WHO issued an Emergency Use Listing (EULs) for the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine (BNT162b2) on December 31 2020. On February 15 2021, WHO issued EULs for two versions of the AstraZeneca/Oxford COVID-19 vaccine, manufactured by the Serum Institute of India and SKBio. WHO is working with partners worldwide to help coordinate key steps in this process, including facilitating equitable access to safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines for the billions of people who will need them. In India, two vaccines were available initially, Covaxin and Covishield. Now, another vaccine called Sputnik-V is also made available by the Government. Until April 30, 2021, people above 45 were vaccinated, but now from May 01, 2021, onwards, those above 18 are also being vaccinated.

Conclusion

Digital education is the safest form of learning during the Covid-19 crisis. The post-Covid19virtual education has turned out to be a parallel education framework. Innovations are seldom welcome because they challenge conventional patterns; however, people accept them later on because they seem inevitable in a given situation. The same can be said about the online mode of learning and teaching in the present pandemic situation. Online classes that teachers generally resist have become a reality as most learning and teaching have moved to virtual platforms because of the pandemic. Education cannot be confined to the four walls of a classroom. The teaching paradigms can be changed according to different types of learning and requirements of learners.

The Covid-19 has provided an opportunity to make necessary amendments in pedagogical practices and integrate interactive online education at all educational levels. It is uncertain how long the pandemic situation lasts; therefore, online/virtual education seems suitable. UGC and MHRD have launched various online teaching/learning sites, including online depository, eBooks and other online materials. An intelligent fusion of traditional technology like overhead projectors, audio-tapes, DVDs with current technologies such as the Internet and smartphones into a single platform will increase educational accessibility and adaptability.

Teachers and students should be qualified to use technology for the online learning process. It is not easy for both teachers and students to become perfect quickly. Some are very slow to pick up digital technology; therefore, they need time and training to keep pace with the digitally savvy students and teachers. Government/educational institutions must follow policies to offer free digital gadgets and free Internet to all pupils to facilitate online learning.

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