Distance learning in higher education during pandemic: challenges and opportunities

Dr. Pushkar Dubey[1], Dr. Deepak Pandey[2]*

ABSTRACT

Sudden Breakout of Covid-19 Pandemic has called for a pause in the ways and means of learning in higher educational institutions. The situation has prevented the learning actions for the students. The activities of the higher educational institutions are being affected and it is unknown how far the situation will last. At the prevailing circumstances it is important to shift to distance platform of learning through the online process. In a country like India with diverse learner group and infrastructural challenges, the possibilities of learning through online mode has always been under debate. The present paper highlights the common problems faced by the higher educational institutions and the possible measures which can be initiated in the present situation for uninterrupted learning to occur.

A sudden sprout of the Covid-19 pandemic across the globe has made the life of millions of people motionless. All of a sudden the quench of thirst for competition among the human kind have suddenly turned for, looking for survival. The unidentified shape of Covid-19 and the nature of its spread, has not marked any differentiation among individuals. Moreover, unavailability of proper curative measures has left the humankind in daunting situations, where there are no options except for prevention. The biggest strength in the form of socialization has been a curse and the need for isolation has been the key factor for survival. Preventive measures in the for form of social distancing and oneself safe under isolation has been the drivers for safety. In this short span of time, situations have changed drastically and is like never before. The disaster has called for the shifts in requirements and priorities for mankind. Despite of the fact that human wants and endless and unlimited and the same strive for achieving higher satisfaction by fulfilling the higher level of need by their higher demands, the same seems to be meaningless in present context. The pandemic has also taught a lesson to switch to our essential priorities leaving the rest.

The pandemic has also influenced the ways and means of learning. It has influenced all the stakeholders viz. teacher, students and institutions. The functioning of higher educational

---

[1] Head, Department of Management, Pt. Sundarlal Sharma (Open) University Chhattisgarh, India
[2] Coordinator/Consultant, Department of Psychology, Pt. Sundarlal Sharma (Open) University Chhattisgarh, India
*Responding Author

institutions in India has been affected. Due to the pandemic, currently many of the institutions are unable to conduct examination and the face to face teaching learning process has been affected due to severe lockdown. The present situation is expected to continue for long and we all need to be cautious in handling the situation with ease. Keeping in mind the effect of long time shut down and maintaining social distancing, it is imperative to change the learning process by formulating strategic plans with respect to online learning. online or digital learning is only alternative platform for continuing higher education at present scenario. However, in a country like India the cause is a challenge with huge number of educational institutions and diverse group of learners. Before formulation of any strategic initiatives it is important to access the strength and weakness of a system, which can lead to possibilities and limitations. Therefore, it becomes necessary to understand some common problems at present for online learning to be imparted by higher educational institutions in India.

COMMON PROBLEMS

1. Majority of learners' population resides in remote rural areas: It is a known fact that majority of the learner's population (especially who are enrolled in ODL system) reside in remote areas, the technological facilities in this region is not well defined and managed.

2. Lack of adequate infrastructure: Adequate infrastructure has always been a major problem behind any functional implementation. For implementing digital learning, infrastructure at institution and learners end should be adequate.

3. Paradigm shift in thinking for adoption of digital learning of learners would be difficult: This is a situation which calls for paradigm shift in the thinking process of the learners, to suddenly adopt digital education. It may be difficult for them to suddenly change their mindset.

4. Lack of appropriate faculty learner's ratio: In order to guide the learners for digitized education the faculty learner's ratio in the country is inadequate. Permanent faculties and staff members are not available in majority of the higher educational institutions and hence is a problem at large to manage larger population of learners.

5. Access to technology: Although we have advanced a lot in technological perspective, there has been questions that how far we have been able to adopt technology for constructivism. Access to technology doesn't means its appropriate use. The presumption of every single student having necessary technology, time, motivation and support to participate in distance education is simply not real life. Rural and low-income communities have less access to broadband internet access than the urban counterparts.

6. Preparedness for delivery: There is also a question to ask for the preparedness of faculties who have to involve themselves for digital learning platform. The varying demography of faculties across the country is also a challenge, since these faculties are the fulcrum for delivering the contents to the learners' group. Preparedness of faculties can access from three different perspective. Firstly, whether the faculties are prepared in advance with complete learning mechanism to stand before the online platform? Secondly if they are learned are, they competent enough to handle the existing technology used for digital delivery of course? Thirdly if the faculties are prepared and able to handle technology, can they address the possible roadblocks quickly and promptly?

Despite of all the possible hurdles the opportunity for success can be visionised. Although there exist number of problems in the current situation to implement online learning in higher educational institutions in India, still there can be a number of possibilities with which it can

be executed. The possible solutions with which the execution of digitized learning can be made possible are as under:

POSSIBLE MEASURES

1. Inculcate awareness: There is a severe need to inculcate awareness among the learner groups about adoption of digital initiative by the higher educational institutions. Learners at their base should be made clear that why such steps have been taken and how they can adopt for a change. This can be done by reaching out to the students, possibly by the university.
2. There is a need to strengthen the IT platform by making necessary changes with respect to its continuous availability and uninterrupted services. Government should facilitate more use of its platform with less price to encourage learners adopt the same.
3. More of IT enabled person in educational institutions: Faculties should be empowered with IT enabled persons attached in the department to solve the technical difficulties which are faced by the faculties now and then during the making and dissemination of materials in the digital platform.
4. Preparedness of teachers: Teacher should get themselves more prepared, and should be ready to work an extra mile, since the condition demand for rapid change and quick adoption for the online platform.
5. Some of the institutions preferably with higher resources should take the initiative to communicate plans and policies, and provide adequate training to the faculties in relation to online platform.
6. There is an urgent need for the higher educational institutions to acquire certain minimum facilities, if not there earlier, to encourage and facilitate online learning platform.
7. All education all higher educational institutions should conduct online training, to integrate their non-academic staff to be a supportive part of online platform for better implementation of the initiative.

CONCLUSION

The present situations which exist due to the widespread of covid-19 pandemic has caused lot of problems for the learners and for the higher educational institutions. However, we need to come up with some strategic initiative, both at individual as well as institutional level to combat the situation. The entire framework of mind and working components of the institution should be changed in accordance with the requirement of digital learning, then only we can win the battle over corona.

REFERENCES

Amanda, C.C. (2020). Expert available to discuss tips for Successful Distance Learning during Pandemic. https://today.ttu.edu/posts/2020/03/Stories/Expert-Available-tips-Distance-Learning-During-Pandemic (Retrieved on 28/04/2020).

Cacault, H., & Laurent-Lucchetti, P. (2020). Distance learning in higher education. Economics.

Colin, S. (2020). Distance Learning during the Coronavirus Pandemic: Equality and access Questions for School Leaders.
https://www.forbes.com/sites/colinseale/2020/03/17/distance-learning-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-equity-and-access-questions-for-school-leaders/#2b9c651c1d4d (Retrieved on 27/04/2020).

Hart, J. L., Turnbull, A. E., Oppenheim, I. M., & Courtright, K. R. (2020). Family-Centered Care During the COVID-19 Era. Journal of Pain and Symptom Management.

Khoo, E. J., & Lantos, J. D. (2020). Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. Acta Paediatrica.

Meagher, K. M., Cummins, N. W., Bharucha, A. E., Badley, A. D., Chlan, L. L., & Wright, R. S. (2020, April). COVID-19 Ethics and Research. In Mayo Clinic Proceedings. Elsevier.

Obiakor, T., & Adeniran, A. P. (2020). Covid-19: Impending Situation Threatens to Deepen Nigeria's Education Crisis.

Reich, J., Buttimer, C. J., Fang, A., Hillaire, G., Hirsch, K., Larke, L., ... & Slama, R. (2020). Remote Learning Guidance From State Education Agencies During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A First Look.

Sara, T. S. (2020). Countries face an Online Education Learning Curve. https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-04-02/coronavirus-pandemic-tests-countries-abilities-to-create-effective-online-education (Retrieved on 29/04/2020).

The World Bank (2020). How countries are using EdTech (including online learning, radio, television, texting) to support access to remote learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/edutech/brief/how-countries-are-using-edtech-to-support-remote-learning-during-the-covid-19-pandemic (Retrieved on 30/04/2020).

Conflict of Interest
The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Dubey. P & Pandey. D (2020). Distance learning in higher education during pandemic: challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, *8*(2), 43-46. DIP:18.01.204/20200802, DOI:10.25215/0802.204