

Online Teaching during the COVID 19 Outbreak

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Introduction

The sudden outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic has become the only matter of concern to people. It has appeared as the biggest killer for now. We are, in fact, living in the mortal dread of the microscopic creature called COVID-19. A deathly hush has descended on this planet. Alarm bells are ringing. A chill of fear is haunting the whole humankind. The World Health Organization has declared a state of global public health emergency and urged caution. People are worrying about their existence and are striving to find out ways to fight the deadliest pandemic. And the South and Southeast Asian University Network is no exception. I would appreciate the present initiative of the Forum to take on the responsibility to facilitate regional people to people exchanges and thereby contribute to the establishment of a community with a shared future. And it is heartening to see that fifty seven universities from twelve countries have expressed solidarity with S&SE ASIAN UN and pledged their continued support in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic.

The adverse effect of COVID-19 on higher education

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has reached dangerous proportions all over the world and brought great difficulties in its train. The prolonged situation is taking its toll on human lives, global economy and education. The educational institutions across the globe have gone into abrupt and unscheduled closures in response to WHO's call for international pandemic action such as, social distancing, home-quarantine, self- isolation and lockdown. UNESCO has given a

ballpark estimate that 1.5 billion or more than 90% of the students in about 190 countries in the world are stuck at home. The highest ranked universities like MIT, Oxford, Harvard, Stanford, Cambridge, Caltech, and Chicago are also laden with the threat COVID 19 has posed to education.

Bangladesh perspective

Forty two public and about a hundred private universities are operational in Bangladesh where around 3.5 million students are studying. The universities have been remaining closed since the mid- March 2020 and the students have been stuck at home with the growing apprehension of session jams. Though the private universities have little scope for conducting online academic activities, the public universities, yet to introduce virtual education, are standing idle.

Finding a solution

Since there is a slim chance to get rid of the situation before long, the concerned authorities are grappling to work out a solution to the problem to help minimize the impact of the calamitous situation on education. The Ministry of Education and the University Grants Commission in a recent brainstorming session have arrived at a decision in favour of maintaining continuity of the academic activities at the universities by way of online teaching as alternative mode of education. It has been suggested that online classes should be there for students placed on lockdown in a bid to ensure sustainability in the academia. The University Grants Commission is carrying out a comprehensive survey with all the universities to make the emergency academic move towards online education more effective.

Importance of Online Education in a state of emergency

In the global academia ravaged by the COVID 19 outbreak, virtual education has emerged as the best crisis management solution and a roadmap to the future post-COVID education. The emergence of this new 'normal' education method will surely become the essential part of the mainstream education system supported by ICT-enabled smart education. ICT has brought to us the facilities of online libraries, the interactive digital whiteboards and the virtual classroom

where students can watch lectures at home on the computer. And all these are not new to education sector in Bangladesh. As a matter of fact, education in Bangladesh has thrived under the dynamic leadership of the current Premier Sheikh Hasina. Her Government has already achieved the goals of quality enhancement in higher education, conducted comprehensive quality assurance activities at the public and private universities and is now working for the acceleration and transformation of higher education. In addition, the Government has established Bangladesh Accreditation Council with a view to developing the quality of higher education in the country. However, the machinery of the government for the promotion of higher education cannot be confident of a successful outcome if the universities stay closed for so long and if something is not done to make up for the loss incurred by the closure. And this well justifies the necessity of online education in the state of such emergency.

The challenges of implementing Online Education in Bangladesh

Though some universities have already started conducting online classes sporadically, the Government has yet to develop a standardized infrastructure for online education. Besides, the situations in all universities are not equal. Many teachers are not skilled at taking online classes and some are even reluctant to do it. However, this can be brought under control through motivation. But to get all students connected to the Internet appears to be the biggest challenge. The private universities can conduct online teaching activities more easily because their students mostly come from well-to-do families and have the ability to buy all essential tools and devices for virtual learning. But a large number of public university students are reluctant to welcome the online measures on the pretext of being cut off from Internet access and financial crisis. It is difficult for them to have a good reliable computer or a laptop or even a smartphone, the necessary computer peripherals and Internet access at their own expense when they are in dire straits due to the sudden outbreak of the pandemic. Besides the shadow of gloom and depression caused by the discontinuity in academic life, the considerable uncertainty about return to normality and the apprehension of delay in career have upset them at this moment in time. And hence it will not be very effective to run the online teaching activities only with the ones who are willing to and who are inside the range of Internet connectivity. This may create 'an inequality of opportunity' and dampen the spirits of the ones dropped from the world of virtual education and thereby vitiate the true spirit of the emergency academic move.

Online education at Islamic University: prospects and problems

Islamic University is a large public university with 16000 students studying in 34 disciplines under 8 faculties including Humanities, Social Sciences, Theology, Business Studies, Law, Science and Technology and Engineering. Online classes are being held at Islamic University since the end of March 2020 on a small scale.

A quick survey reveals that the percentage of students attending the online classes at Islamic University is around 60%. 40% students are not being able to be connected to the classes despite their willingness due to their staying in the remotest corners of the country and being cut off from the Internet access. Though all teachers are not equally skilled at doing the online classes most are conducting the online classes fairly comfortably using their suitable virtual meeting platforms. However, the students are faced with many difficulties in regard to the online connectivity. The ones connected through the broadband Network in the urban areas are in a better condition, while the ones connected through mobile data from the rural areas are suffering from frequent interruptions caused by low Network speed, weather issues and power outages. The teachers are, however, making videos of the class and posting them on their personal/departmental YouTube Channel for the students to watch later on their own. However, both the teachers and students are gradually trying to get used to the online academic activities particularly at this moment in time on one common consideration that this will help get rid of the potential dangers of session jams.

Conclusion: Universities should keep running

The Government, the university-authorities, the educators and policy makers in Bangladesh have well awoken to the adverse effects of COVID-19 pandemic on education and decided to implement the online education method taking into consideration the potential practical problems the students may be faced with. Given the gravity of the situation, this sounds quite reasonable.

The move towards online teaching can be implemented in two phases. In the initial phase, the course teachers should manage to connect their students to any of the readily available virtual meeting platforms just to render the bare minimum of academic activities. That must be better than nothing. And in the final phase the universities should fully develop an online education infrastructure professionally and permanently on the basis of experiments and surveys which will run in parallel with the prevalent traditional system. They may be used both separately and jointly as the situation demands to keep all the universities running. Keeping the universities

operational is the main thing. Universities are like bicycles. If you don't ride and keep pushing the pedals, they will fall. And we sure want our universities to continue to run, not to fall.

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