COVID-19 and the Indian Higher Education Scenario: Challenges and Recommendations

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Abstract: *COVID-19 has impact the daily routine of people worldwide. It not only affected the economic and medical health of nations but also affected adversely the emotional well being of the population worldwide. To talk of the most vulnerable lot, it is the children, the students and the learners who are striving hard to survive in this topsy turvy environment. The structure of schooling and learning was the first to be affected by this COVID-19 pandemic. On 16 March, the government of India declared a countrywide lock-down due to which all the educational institutes including schools, colleges and universities were shutdown. The pandemic has significantly disrupted the higher education system. This paper suggests measures which may be adopted by the higher educational institutes to ensure that there is no disruption of learning for the learners. Approaches like teaching and learning with greater enactment of technology will strengthen the future of education in schools and colleges. In this paper, the author has also recommended adaptable and effective educational practices needed by the education system of our country in this time of crisis.*

Introduction

The novel corona virus was first identified in Wuhan district of China in December 2019. The same was confirmed by the World Health Organization, who declared it a pandemic in January, 2020. Since the virus can be transmitted through droplets, touching surfaces which would have been in contact with an infected person, or to that extent coming in the periphery of one meter of an infected person, it has become fatal to even step out of the house for the common man.

Today, the world that we are surviving in, the world that is captivated in the midst of global health crisis, threatens the very existence of human being post the pandemic. There is no denying the fact that the world we will return to will be completely altered than the one in which we used to breathe carefree. This health crisis has bought

everyone to a standstill. But to talk of the most vulnerable lot, it has to be the children, the students and the learners worldwide.

Nelson Mandela once said that education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to change the world. This is rightly said. The very foundation of a successful person lies in his deep rooted learning, whether it is imbibed at home or at any educational institution. Education in itself is a lifelong learning process. There is no denying the fact that a human mind is like a blank piece of paper which can be painted by the plethora of knowledge available in the world. With this crafted human mind a person can develop knowledge and skills which would expand his vision and outlook of reaching out to the world. Having said that, it is imperative to highlight that a sound education system has helped in expansion of trade and commerce, eradicated poverty by making people knowledgeable, developed law and order, empowered women worldwide and what not. Hence, it is pivotal to have a sound education system for the creation of a successful and content society.

Having a sound education system means no roadblocks. But the fact is that the constant shift in educational policies worldwide has brought it at the center stage of economic discussions. Health crisis, economic crisis, poverty, lack of standardized education system, are a few major hindrances for reaching out to the masses as far as education is concerned.

The Corona virus pandemic has affected the educational systems worldwide, leading to closure of schools, colleges and universities. According to UNESCO, close to 1,268,164,088 (as on 5th May, 2020) learners have been impacted adversely due to closure of schools worldwide which constitutes 72.4% of the total learners enrolled. Given the importance of education for the holistic development of students, UNESCO recommended the use of distance learning programs and open educational practices and platforms that can reach out to the students remotely and limit the disruption of education (UNESCO, 2020). In lieu of this, there are platforms like Zoom and Google meet, which have offered their services free of cost to the community.

On the receiving end is the learners' community which is striving hard to make all ends meet in terms of the paradigm shift from classroom learning to electronic literacy. The pandemic forced the governments around the globe to temporarily shut down the educational institutions in order to combat its effect. As for the current status, more than 166 countries have implemented nationwide lockdown, adversely impacting around 87% of the learners worldwide. Not to forget, approximately 60.2 million teachers are missing from the classroom and are now confined in the periphery of their respective houses delivering the curriculum virtually.

Even after the presence of enormous number of researches related to COVID-19 worldwide, no fruitful strategies or proper planning or procedures to deal with problems faced by educational institutions are highlighted anywhere. This paper focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education institutions in India, including examples of practices adopted by them with respect to teaching, research and community service. The paper also focuses on the challenges faced by educational institutions in India along with the recommendations which would be beneficial for them.

The Indian Scenario

The Indian scenario is no different. With the present status of corona virus patients standing at 1.5 lakh (as on 27th May, 2020), the pandemic has brought the tiger economy to a standstill. With all sectors, including real estate, tourism, aviation, railways, finance, etc drifting in the bane wave, education sector is striving hard to meet the ends by reaching out to the masses virtually. On 16th March, 2020, the Indian government announced temporary closure of all educational institutions ranging from play schools to higher education institutes. The move was shortly followed by the nationwide lockdown which was brought into effect on 24th March, 2020 by the central government. Since then everything taught is being delivered online through virtual meeting platforms.

Challenges for Higher Education in India

The Corona virus pandemic has affected the educational systems worldwide, leading to closure of schools, colleges and universities. According to UNESCO, close 32 crore learners have been impacted adversely due to closure of schools in India alone. Given the importance of education for the holistic development of students, UNESCO recommended the use of distance learning programs and open educational practices and platforms that can reach out to the students remotely and limit the disruption of education (UNESCO, 2020). In lieu of this, there are platforms like Zoom and Google meet, which have offered their services free of cost to the community. In fact the Union Ministry of Human Resource Development initiated the Direct to Home TV for the students to continue learning.

On the receiving end is the learners' community which is striving hard to make all ends meet in terms of the paradigm shift from classroom learning to electronic literacy. This also makes us ponder as to the importance of distance learning mode. Till recent times, any degree earned via distance learning mode was not considered a relevant degree in terms of getting admissions or to that matter earning an employment in any organization. With the complete reversal of the medium of education, now distance learning has found a place in everyone's map of understanding. The perception of education system has changed.

But the focus is not distance learning. The distance learning medium has made education reach the doorsteps of learners through electronic media so that it keeps them up to date about the events and occurrences around the globe and at the same time enhance their knowledge by expanding their horizon in terms of standard, system and ideology of the institutions they are enrolled in.

Who has actually been the most vulnerable class is the one which is not adept to this new media. With a good proportion of student population of the India living in the rural areas and not having access to basic amenities, it is the most affected of the lot. This also shifts our focus on those impoverished children living in the rural areas who do not have a home environment that is cordial enough to harness their learning skills.

Recommendations for Higher Education Institutes in India

- **Incorporate value based environmental education in the pedagogy**

As COVID-19 continues to spread in masses posing a serious threat to our health and somehow the environment also, the higher educational institutions in India should incorporate value based environmental education in the curriculum which must be accessible to the students which would foster their analytical abilities towards adoption of effective environmental policies to be implemented. The universities must provide teaching and learning materials to enhance the knowledge. It is believed that environmental health is not only a part of the educational system but also the political system where actions, policies and plans can be formulated and executed at national level. Environmental health programs should be organised by the universities to provide environmental literacy to the citizens of the nation. Faculty concerned must also be trained in order to make them adept to the changes in the curriculum. In this crucial time of nationwide lockdown due to corona virus pandemic, higher education systems in India must collaborate to provide quality education by integrating environment and health courses for its students.

- **Proper Hygiene Practices**

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a consequential impact on higher educational institutes globally. In India, the closure of educational institutes has a pivotal role in reducing pandemic, whereby the cases might have been multiplied manifold owing to mass gatherings at such places. With respect to corona virus disease, effective environmental policies, and hygiene practices have been implemented by the country.
There is a scope of environmental policies and hygiene practices and measures that can be implemented in the educational institutes to slow down the transmission of the virus amongst its students post lockdown. Apparently, UNICEF has delivered a checklist and guidelines for school administrations, colleges and other educational institutes to provide a shield for students, which promotes positive hygiene behaviours.

Accordingly, in India, environmental policies and hygiene factors must be practiced for the continuity of learning in schools and colleges. These measures include a keeping a clean, hygienic, and maintained infrastructure of the educational institutes, with focus on social distancing. This could change the educational system and enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning

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- **Mandatory Mental Health Awareness Programs**

As the number of cases of COVID-19 is ascending vertically, so is the anxiety and mental illness associated with home confinement increasing. There is a need to take personal and professional measures to address medical and mental health issues. Educational institutions need to strengthen their medical services and support services for students, faculty, and staff by adoption and implementation of mental health

awareness programs during this pandemic which would further accentuate the need for stress management.

Due to COVID-19, higher education institutes need to prioritize the mental health needs of students. There is a wave of growing and unmet need for mental health services for the students. School counsellors, psychologists, and social workers could provide a vast majority of school-based mental health and medical services. Free virtual services like medical counselling, medical teleconferencing, and other online health services by experts such as guidance counsellors and psychologists from the educational institutes should be readily accessible for the students. Students and staff need to stay informed about COVID-19 pandemic through easy to understand guidelines that explain COVID-19 awareness and prevention information, and forums such as UNICEF, WHO, and national health advisories providing information to authenticate the same.

- **Teacher training for Virtual Reality**

With the spread of COVID-19, India has implemented emergency plans to slow down and limit the spread of the virus and prepare for a possible longer term disruption of school and university attendance by introducing distance learning technique. Impressively many schools and universities in India have accepted the concept of online classes. Teaching and learning from home is a challenging task for most students and educators and they have shown extraordinary resilience during this difficult time.

The emphasis should not only be on the delivery of resources but also on generating engagement and active feedback – a situation where, instead of simply maximizing the time online, educators prioritize the quality of the learning experience by providing teachers with digital learning opportunities. Universities provide teachers with online teacher training resources on how to teach online and also with online collaborative platforms which allow them to share their views and receive feedbacks. Indian institutions have empowered teachers to make most of the advances from digital platforms and given them the opportunity to test out different digital learning solutions, and understand how technology can be used to advanced student learning. Teachers need to be encouraged to think creatively about their role as facilitators of student learning, and how they can use technology in doing so, and how they can combine their expertise as a profession.

- **Strengthen Research-Based Practices**

Due to the pandemic, all the educational institutions are supposed to deal with this problem in an effective and efficient manner wherein they should run their programs as scheduled or with minimal disruption by shifting to online delivery. Whereas the institutions present in India are continuously re-scheduling the classes and exams to a future date, which is yet to be finalised. However, this situation can be dealt by strengthening the research efforts, data monitoring and implementing the evidence-based practices in the education system.

Evidence-based teaching involves the use of evidence to establish where students are in their learning, decide on appropriate teaching strategies and interventions and monitor student progress and evaluate teaching effectiveness. Improvements in

student learning and educational outcomes depend on the wider use of reliable evidence in online learning practice.

Also, strengthening the research efforts provides the building block upon which societal growth and advancement is hinged. Our understanding of the way things are, how things happen and the reason behind such occurrences is due to the extensive research. The faculty engaged must implement these to win the fight over COVID-19 and improve the current situation of education and also be prepared for any sort of epidemic which might occur in future.

Scope for Future Studies

This paper focuses on pedagogical shift in redesigning the educational curriculum. It focuses on the implementation and incorporation of environmental practices and policies as a pivotal tool for eradicating pandemic caused by viral infections. This paper can serve as a reference for future academic studies on COVID-19. Also, it may be used for assessing the impact of COVID-19 on educational institutions worldwide. Further studies may be conducted on assessing the impact of distance learning on education system of India.

Conclusion

In the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic which has confined the learners of all age groups to their respective house frames, indoor learning is the new normal. Therefore, learners must be provided with a nurturing home environment which plays a pivotal role in life-long education in times of crisis. From the previous pandemics which include SARS and Ebola, we have to learn that preparedness is the key to success. Be it enhancing the preparedness by keeping educational institutes open or selective closing of these institutes or for that matter even using remote learning to make up for the loss due to pandemic, focus should be to bridge the gap between the educator and the learner by providing the learner with an amicable learning environment where he can harness the much needed skills. Further, by implementing proper hygiene practices, adopting effective environmental policies and adapting evidence based learning; educational institutions may foster a healthy learning environment.

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