

Higher Education in India During Corona Pandemic

Aneesah Nishaat, Soka University, Japan

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Abstract

In 2019, COVID-19 virus swept the globe and wreaked havoc around the world. Many aspects of life have been destroyed by this pandemic including the education sector. In India, after the government declared a countrywide lockdown, all educational activities came to halt, affecting teachers, students and their families as a consequence. The purpose of this study is to find the effect of the Corona pandemic on higher education in India. In addition, researcher will suggest steps to be taken in the education sector to mitigate the effect of this pandemic. This research is based on secondary data. The desk research was conducted utilizing the secondary data from various reports, news, research papers and official websites of government and international organizations. During this research, researcher found that though the government and many higher education institutions wanted to adapt new technologies in effort to maintain academic continuity, already existing inequality in the society made it difficult. In addition, lack of farsightedness regarding plans for coming academic years made problems even worse. Furthermore, education sector may face the problem of less enrollments as the financial capacity of Indian families has shrunk due the pandemic. To solve the issues of higher education created by the pandemic, efforts should be made to make education accessible to all the students, to make inclusive learning solutions keeping the vulnerable and marginalized people in mind, to reform existing system and create cost-effective academic programs. Furthermore, it is important to be prepared to deal with similar situations in future.

Keywords: Higher Education, Covid-19, India

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Introduction

In the matter of few weeks, the COVID-19 virus swept the globe and wreaked havoc killing millions in the following months. Many aspects of life have been destroyed by this pandemic. It prompted countries around the world to implement emergency response systems (Zhang, Wang, Yang, & Wang, 2020). Work from home, lockdown, and social distancing have become buzzwords for last 2 and half years.

Since its emergence in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, the pandemic of coronavirus has created an unparalleled issue to the people and governments of countries around the world in a very short period of time.

In a developing country such as India, with one of the lowest healthcare expenditures per capita, COVID-19 pandemic has been proved to be catastrophic and disastrous, both in terms of lives and livelihoods (The Economic Times, 2020).

Health sector received a massive jolt due to this pandemic and it exposed the weaknesses that were prevalent but hidden up to then. Huge and uncontrollable growth in the number of patients of COVID-19 wreaked havoc in India in second wave. As of 15th Dec 2022, India is the 3rd most COVID-19 infected country with currently 44.1 million infected and 530 thousand deaths (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2022).

Indian economy was already facing a crisis even before pandemic started. Since start of pandemic, this crisis has grown exponentially. The day first lockdown was declared for the 21 days, government warned about a negative economic impact that lockdown will create. The All-India Association of Industries (AIAI) estimates that due to this pandemic, Indian economy will lose \$640 billion with growth slated to be between 5 and 5.6% till 2022 (Times Now News, 2020; Balajee, Tomar, & Udupa, 2020).

One of the sectors that was deeply affected due to this pandemic is education. The educational sector is very important for every nation as millions of students and teachers are connected within its structure and operation. In many parts of the world, the covid pandemic brought a temporary shutdown of educational institutions. This nationwide shutdown has impacted millions of students and their families also, particularly those from underprivileged communities (UNESCO, 2020).

Higher Education Sector in India

Higher education in India grew very fast since independence. At the present time, India has over thirty-eight million students enrolled in higher education (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2019). There have been significant changes in the field of higher education during the last three decades. The phenomenal growth in the number of colleges and universities, the high enrolment and turnover of degree holders provide some indication of the progress made (Urvashi, 2021). As per the statistics of the Indian HRD Ministry, there are 677 universities, 37,204 colleges and 11443 stand-alone institutions in India as of 2015. Meanwhile, resources for higher education are continuously shrinking.

The Effect of Covid in the Indian Education Sector

After the union government declared a countrywide lockdown of schools and colleges, all educational activities came to halt, affecting teachers, students and their families as a consequence. Nearly 321 million Indian children were affected by this stay-at-home order (Sukumar, 2020).

In the following weeks and months, the government implemented a new plan to mitigate the adverse effects on the educational sector of India. Distant learning using digital platform was introduced. But these plans were not good enough to successfully solve issues created by the sudden lockdown. On the contrary, it made underlying issues more visible in the society. The corona induced lockdown has changed educational sector in many different ways and also it has increased problems at all the levels of education which were already facing various problems even before the pandemic. Also, the educational scenario of the post-COVID-19 outbreak suggests that it will not be easy to manage teaching learning situations in that environment.

The current study will concentrate on higher education only. It is commendable that many higher education institutions responded with prompt adaptation of technology and effort to maintain academic continuity. But already existing inequality in the society has made it difficult to speedy adaptation of new way of teaching.

Apart from that most of the universities do not have the capacity to conduct examination under current conditions. Many of the educational institutions were already in crisis and will be beyond repair if the pandemic continues for the longer term. Public educational institutions will likely become more cash starved in the post-COVID era.

Also, the COVID-19 has interrupted the implementation of the National Education Policy (Lau, 2021). It is an ambitious project outlined for major expansion and internationalization of India's higher education system.

Also, when lockdown started in India, no one might have predicted that it will last so long. So, decisions made by policy makers showed lack of farsightedness regarding plans for next academic year such as admissions and exams. So as the pandemic persisted longer than expected, no concrete new long-term plans could be introduced by related government bodies.

Relevant Issues in Indian Higher Education

The corona pandemic brought a sudden shift in education. Classes moved from classroom teaching to an online mode of teaching and learning. It has affected the teaching and learning process in universities, and colleges. As a result, it has significantly disrupted the higher education sector in India, resulting in both certain positive and negative impacts.

First, because of the lockdown, many institutions chose a digital way to continue their curriculum. But this is not an option for many other institutions. In India, there are still many educational institutions which are not very well equipped with modern technology in the classroom. It is true mainly in the case of universities in rural areas. So, many institutions in rural areas have not been able to operate using digital platforms.

Also, those institutions who have moved their classes to digital platform, could not impart quality education, as the classes were not planned properly, given the short time between notification and implementation.

Second, we can say that with the introduction of a new method of learning through digital means, it has become very easy to the students who have access to the required technology (computer, internet) as they can sit at home and get access to classes from the comfort of their room. But this is not the case for many other students as they had to face different problems such as poor internet connectivity, not being able to afford laptops or a mobile phone. This situation shed light on the fact that India has just started adapting to online learning methods and numerous obstacles remain as the entire population does not have access to the internet, computers or E-learning facilities. Rural people are still deprived of technology.

It might also have contributed to the furthering of existing inequalities in academia. Those who have access to the internet and computer or mobile phones were able to transit comparatively smoothly. Others are left in limbo missing their classes.

This situation clearly illustrates the digital divide within India between the rich who can afford to purchase required equipment and the poor who cannot afford to do so for attending classes.

This divide has even resulted in tragic outcomes for people. As the digital divide has led to the exclusion of students who are poor and relegated to the fringe of the society from digital learning, it also pushed many underprivileged students towards depression and death. Many tragic incidents such as committing suicide have been reported in India (Naha, 2020).

Another issue that students faced was disruptions in the global supply chain which made it difficult and time consuming to get items such as webcams and microphones. So, the quality of online sessions was not without problems for those who could have access to it.

Third, as there wasn't apparent and immediate solution to prevention of the outbreak of COVID 19, college, school and university closures had to be made compulsory to prevent the spread of virus. This has affected more than 285 million young learners in India (Tari & Amonkar, 2021). Students had to face problems as they were not certain about of the future examinations they would face, especially students who were in their final year. Same was the case for those students who were preparing to participate in entrance exam. Though it was unavoidable and circumstantial to close the educational institutions, it became a reason for unnecessary stress for so many students.

Also, when lockdown was imposed and online classes were introduced, university students had to leave their hostels, and either go back home or arrange for alternative living place. While some could manage to arrange, a large number of students were left to fend for themselves.

Also, one of the most relevant questions in this situation is how the admission process would be conducted where entrance test is compulsory and admission is strictly based on the performances made on the test. Millions of students appear in various entrance exams every year in different institutions. It includes India's prestigious and reputed private as well as central universities. These examinations demand students to be present physically in the

designated place. But it wasn't possible for some time as students have high chances to be exposed to the virus. Exam can quickly turn into super spreader event.

The economy worldwide has been severely affected because of Covid-19, and India is not an exception. Its severe effect can be felt in the education sector also. While alternative paths will be available, many will be left in a limbo. Due to job loss, unemployment is predicted to increase and the financial capacity of Indian families will also shrink. So, a drop in new enrolments and continuing of education will be seen. People will feel it difficult to pay tuition fees. Public institutions too, may have to deal with less funding.

Finally, student's mobility and practical exposure through exchange programs, internships, participation in conferences, and more could likely be off the table for some time.

My Suggestions: Road Ahead

Since this pandemic started lots of people are facing lots of problems. Its same in the case of students of higher education. In order to mitigate the issues, all the stake holders should do their role.

Central and all the state governments of India should create strategies to make education accessible to all the students. They should be careful that marginalized, underprivileged and remote sections of the society do not fall behind in getting access to the education. To ensure continuity of learning in universities, it is essential to formulate immediate measures. It is necessary to make inclusive learning solutions keeping the vulnerable and marginalized in mind.

As the internet user will continuously grow and technology will enable access to education even to the remotest parts of the country. This will change the education system in coming days and increase the effectiveness of learning and teaching. It will give students and teachers multiple options to choose from. Many districts of India have already started to adapt these new technologies such as mobile-based learning models for effective delivery of education. Government should encourage with technical and financial support so that it can be adopted by other districts as well. Open-source digital learning solutions and Learning Management Software should be adopted so teachers can use it to teach online.

Subsidy in the cost of Internet is one good way of facilitating the change toward digital education as the monthly cost of internet use is an additional burden for many low-income families.

The Digital divide doesn't show only the gap of access to technology between two groups. It also illustrates the inherent social problems embodied in the overall gap between privileged and underprivileged. This time of crisis should be used as a factor of motivation to bridge this gap which is not at all beneficial for the country as a whole.

With the help of technology, it is possible to achieve universal quality education and improve the outcomes. But in order to make use of technology to its optimum potential, the digital divide (and gender divide) must be dealt with. Access to technology and the Internet is a requirement, not luxury, in the information age.

While changing into digital education, students, teachers, and institutions are bound to face various technical issues. Sometimes computers may shutdown all of sudden while doing video conferencing or Wi-Fi connection may be lost. So, in order to prevent that from happening frequently which would jeopardize the flow of imparting knowledge, every institution should establish a technical support team. Students also need to be in touch with related teachers and inform teachers about the situation if such a problem occurs to them. On teachers' part, being flexible about the situation as such is very necessary. Recording lectures as a backup and providing to students who had issue in accessing during the lecture will be good idea. Understanding each other's situation and issues is of paramount importance.

Also, certification and assessment criteria have to be revised. They should be modified according to the current situation that is not normal. While revising these parameters, it is important to keeping in mind the importance of meeting quality benchmarks. Examination approaches should also be reviewed in order to comply with online teaching demands and requirements.

As the pandemic has affected the economy as a whole and has had a severe effect on education also, it represents a good opportunity to reform existing fee structures and creation of more cost-effective programs. This would help keep students engaged in their academic engagements during the current circumstance.

On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of students who planned to go abroad for further study may have to find alternatives inside India. Current data (Chaudaha, 2019) indicate that India is the second-largest source of international students in the world. This situation may change at least for few years as students might influx into Indian institutions, given travel bans in various countries and potential risks related to health. That means millions of dollars spent as tuition fee and other expenses in foreign countries will be retained in India. It is a remarkable opportunity for Indian higher educational institutions to enhance their capacities and offer quality education with global standards. Also, it is a good time to develop strategies to prepare the higher education sector to engage evolving trends from around the world. Improving the quality of higher education will open opportunities for Indian institutes to attract foreign students in India.

Another related issue is that the opportunities for students to participate through exchange programs, internships, and conferences will not be readily available in the near future. New forms of collaboration between educational institutions across countries are needed to drive teaching, learning, and research. Sharing of knowledge between international institutions around the world will be an increasing necessity. Joint-teaching, virtual guest lectures, and joint projects with students from other countries etc. could give students an enriched global perspective. So, it is the duty of both government and educational institution to make such an interactive environment a readily accessible resource.

Increased digital education also means that students as well as teachers increasingly will not be attending class on a physical campus. Keeping motivation at acceptable levels is new necessity for students given that they won't be physically present within the education environment. Seeing one's own home as a space of work is a struggle that a majority of people will have to face. Keeping students interested in the courses offered in these modes will be an added challenge for teachers, leading to the development and pursuit of more innovative ways of interaction. Staying in touch with classmates, as well as reaching out to

faculty and academic staff as required will be an increasing necessity for a complete educational experience.

The next phase will be to move to a structured rebuilding of courses. Managing the online engagement of students will be very important. Elements of this will include breaking down course content of into more manageable parts so that students will be able to complete the course within the range of their available resources. Also, the credit system needs to be revised for online courses. Mixed sessions combining face-to-face and online modalities should be allowed.

One important step will be developing open-source learning resources. Many such platforms are already available which provide courses across a range of topics. If universities and government can create undergraduate level or graduate level courses for wide variety of subjects, it will go a long way in transitioning to online teaching and learning. The development of such courses will require extensive capacity building including training of staff and faculty.

The social side of the university experience for students is something that cannot be replicated in this situation. However, universities can create virtual social events in which students can participate. The creation of virtual forums to support students as well as faculty members in matters such as mental health is also very significant for the effective function educational institutions under these circumstances.

In light of the anxiety created by the corona virus, creating virtual health forums for students is equally important. Teaching them how to look after themselves and the people around them in this time of crisis through webinar engagements will be a good move. Career coaching sessions should be conducted with the help of a team of alumni and/or professionals. This can be done by universities as well as related governmental bodies. University staff well-being is equally important. Consequently, universities should actively keep track of how their employees are holding up within pandemic circumstances. Regular meetings, counselling sessions and surveys regarding their well-being all are useful tools to be employed in this regard. A “WhatsApp” group of Vice-Chancellors of universities can also be created that would enable the sharing of ideas, strategies, and experiences.

The pandemic will have effects not only on the education sector but on jobs that are also related to education. Given this linkage, practical policy measures are needed to lessen the effects on job offers and internship programs so that students can be kept motivated to complete their studies.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that higher education is facing a very important challenge in the form of corona virus pandemic. In many ways it has served to speed up changes that were bound to happen sometime in the future. Given this, the overall situation can be seen as an opportunity as well as a challenge. However, one chooses to view this and however the overall situation, it may be described, it is certain that this situation has made it compulsory to move forward with change in this field.

How related institutions (educational as well as governing) will react to this situation will define what path higher education will take in India. It is desirable that India prepare itself to

move to a next stage of development in this sector. In order to do that, all related stakeholders will have to participate actively. Though university and policymakers' roles are of paramount significance, other stakeholders--students, parents and society as a whole—cannot ignore their roles. Neither they should be denied opportunities for active participation.

As education is a vital sector of any country in the world and fully engaged in planning according to their capability to move forward, India in particular should also adopt and plan new programs and policies in order to minimize the academic loss of students during the pandemic and to move a step forward towards new paradigm of online education.

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