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Learning Space in the COVID19 Pandemic: What Can India Learn from the Rest of the World?

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Introduction

Within the education paradigm, there have been extensive research into blended learning. COVID-19 pandemic forced academic institutions to shift from traditional teaching to online teaching. However, this transition will not happen overnight and comes with its own challenges. The following questions remain unanswered:

- Do academics have sufficient recording and internet bandwidth available?
- How students in remote locations can access online and virtual content?
- How can a fair system of assessment be established in the online classroom?

The scope of the paper is limited to the evolution of learning spaces in higher education institutes amidst the pandemic. It examines the perspectives of key stakeholders in the education system. Then, it presents the immediate and medium-term implications of the pandemic. A comparative study of the individual responses from universities and state governments all over the world is done to provide recommendations for the Indian scenario. The study is divided into two sections: one which presents fragmented approaches to the disruption and the other, which presents a case study of an integrated schooling approach to the post-COVID era undertaken by the Republic of Korea's government. Space in the context of education is referred to the physical spaces in which learning takes place[i].

Executive Summary

The paper presents the rapid evolution of learning spaces amidst COVID-19. The shift to online medium has created difficulties for students who are now questioning the worth of distance learning. Student engagement and assessment remains the key challenge for all institutions. The digital divide has added to students' difficulties with unequal access to institutional resources putting them at a disadvantage.
On the other hand, institutes are facing difficulties in training teachers, adaptation of curriculum to online medium and managing financial uncertainty. This crisis presents a unique opportunity to reshape India's higher education learning landscape.

Recommendations

For Government of India

➔ Setup of state broadcast media for lectures in remote areas
➔ Online training of teacher though webinars and pilot schools
➔ Encouragement of bridging loans at subsidised rates
➔ Creation of innovation fund for reskilling
➔ Creation of transformation fund to support universities over the next five years

For Higher Education Institutes

➔ Creation of crisis management team
➔ Setup of online portal for information dissemination and query redressal
➔ Redesign of curriculum to introduce blended learning as the new normal

With technological advancement, it has been further defined to include virtual spaces[ii]. The current pandemic has led to emergence of remote learning spaces[iii]. This reconceptualized leaning space is framed on three important factors: dialogue, structure, and autonomy. Dialogue covers all the interactions between students and teachers while structure accounts for the components of instruction such as syllabus, strategies, and assessments. And autonomy covers the sense of independence and interconnectedness experienced by the learners. The following sections shall present how each of these factors have been affected and what are the different responses under consideration to prepare for the new normal in education.

Stakeholder's Analysis

There are 2 key stakeholders in the higher education system, namely, students and teachers.

The transition to online medium has created a sense of short-change. Student groups in the UK have signed a formal petition for a return of a significant portion of their tuition fees. Students believe online teaching is not worth the cost of the regular annual tuition. A recent survey shows that 43% of MBA students from top 20 B-schools expect at least third of their fees to be returned since professional network creation and knowledge exchange, originally part of the program package, was an undelivered due to the

pandemic[iv]. At this time, there is no country where a moratorium or a suspension of fees has been offered, largely due to the assumption that will be a short-term phenomenon.

Students graduating in 2020 and 2021 are uncertain about job opportunities due to an expected slow market which will hinder their ability to pay back their educational loans. The traditional dispensation of distance education which includes a live broadcast supported by retrieval on a delayed basis is the first step all institutions have taken. Any radical changes in operating rules will be largely resisted by undergraduates than postgraduates[v].

The source of the dissatisfaction stems from the need to be self-disciplined for distance learning to be effective and the exclusion of social and experiential elements. The social learning space provided by colleges is crucial for vulnerable students who never had opportunities to develop soft skills and the prolonged closure puts them at a considerable disadvantage.

The effectiveness of online teaching is dependent on the experience of the teachers. The experience is undermined if the transition is seen as a mere replacement for face-to-face interactions and the circulation is not modified. Engagement methods in virtual classrooms are different from the practices in physical classrooms. Subjects which require competency development through practice (medicine, design, science) are difficult to adapt to online learning.

Impact

In the short term, there is an expected shortfall in new students, especially international students. The first reason is of economic nature, as higher unemployment rates would make education less affordable for some families. Some students would defer their admissions in the hopes of market recovery and the resumption of pre-covid learning spaces. Without individualized follow-up and adoption of modified curriculum, it is possible that many students will disengage and drop out from the programs[vi]. The reasons for decline in learning include: (i) lack of familiarity with the online tools, (ii) minimal incentive within the family to make home classes successful, (iii) and misalignment between in-class and online content.

In the medium term, it is likely that there will be a rebound in the demand for higher education. The causes are mostly exogenous to the sector and the desire of young people to reposition themselves in the economic downturn. There can be a trend towards apprenticeship programs or other skill development programs such as machine learning, data analytics which cost relatively less.

Institutes will face the difficulty of handling fixed outflows like salary, rent when fee collection is low due to postponement of the upcoming batches. There is a pause on traditional channels for student recruitments such as events, walk-ins, and campus tours. In case of resumption of physical classes, social distancing guidelines would require staggered scheduling of classes and resumption of classes on holidays.

In the short term, the major challenge is to bring student cohorts online and train teachers in an environment with limited or no internet connectivity.

Response

None of the developed countries have extended their semester break, instead, have closed campuses and moved to online instruction. Brazil and Singapore continue to have localised closures. China, India, South Korea, and South Africa took the approach of moving semester break dates and have implemented an online instruction strategy to continue studies.

Jordan has implemented several low technology solutions to support online learning. These include narrated PowerPoint presentations, Google Classroom, Moodle and Facebook. To cater to students with different learning styles and residing in multiple time zones, universities in Hong Kong developed synchronous and asynchronous online learning approaches[vii]. Universities in Italy have introduced video on demand with a viewership of 9000 students, averaging around 12 videos per student[viii]. Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University which is an e-university in UAE is assisting other higher education institutions in implementing online classes[ix]. Virtual learning tools such as Adobe Connect, Blackboard and Vision are adopted by universities in UAE for digital delivery of content[x].

In countries like Morocco, Spain, and South Africa, with limited or no educational television

programs, broadcast of recorded lessons is done[xi]. In Morocco, for example, Arryadiaya, a sports channel has begun broadcasting university lessons from March 25. Mexico which has a long tradition in this area is utilizing Telesecundaria, a system of distance learning programs. Brazil has expanded the capacity of its Rede Nacional de Ensino e Pesquisa (RNEP) to provide online classes to approximately 190,000 university students at institutions which do not have a platform of their own. Supplementary material like text messages and print material are encouraged. Other countries like Estonia, Romania, and Serbia have pursued a combination of television and on demand video broadcasting[xii].

National Technological University (Argentina) created 1000 virtual classrooms in 20 days serving around 13,500 students. This is part of the strategy that focuses on reinforcing existing virtual education offices of institutions.

In many countries where there is a mix of for profit and non-profit institutions, there is a possibility of consolidation in the private sector as independent institutions will have difficulty in sustaining their cash flows. The decision-making process in universities is based on consensus and wider consultations. But this makes any measures to deal with the pandemic and provide students with certainty ineffective due to the delayed nature of such decisions. For this reason, New Zealand's government has decided to take control of all schools and universities to facilitate urgent decision making as an emergency measure.

To compensate for the loss of part-time jobs which provide many students with sustenance, Australian government has provided direct aid to around 230,000 students. The USA has taken a different approach with the creation of a Higher Education Emergency Assistance Fund incorporating 14.5 billion dollars. Similarly, Chile has redirected around 30,000 million pesos from public funds to creation of a state distance education network.

Alternative assessment schemes are explored instead of removal of exam requirements which may prejudice the students. One option being considered in England is to use the achievements and past grades to predict a grade and provide the student to resort to exams later in case one wants to upgrade. In the Philippines, institutions have been allowed to give the option of fulfilling class requirements later to students with low or no internet connectivity. Alternative learning activities such as case studies, assignments have been suggested with deadlines of 2-3 weeks to give students time. For students with low or no internet connectivity, phone calls and messages have been helpful in transferring relevant information. In their cases, deadlines are set for 2-3 weeks after resumption of classes.

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has suggested the modification of curriculum to incorporate concepts relative to students' experiences amidst the COVID-19 crisis. The focus is on students' mental health with the reduced scope of syllabus and to lift some burden from teachers who are simultaneously handling family affairs. University of the Philippines has been conducting webinars for teachers' training and on providing psycho-social support in terms of psychological first aid[xiii].

Lessons from South Korea: A study in integrated approach

South Korea has adopted a whole-of-government approach. It introduced voluntary online learning for three weeks as an adjustment period to self-directed learning in early March. The next phase introduced teacher managed online learning to conduct real-time lessons including provision for learning content and assignments in both public and private online classrooms.

The Ministry of Education is expecting a surge in users to its two public online learning platforms (i.e., KERIS e-learning site and EBS Online Class) expanded the infrastructure. KERIS witnessed seven-fold expansion in two weeks while EBS witnessed 300-fold expansion in a month. EBS introduced more channels to cater to different schooling needs. EBS's pay to access content, Naver's audio textbooks and video lectures were provided free of charge. Government also temporarily relaxed the application of copyrights to help teachers create their own teaching materials.

Pilot schools to share knowledge of conduction online teaching were established. Online community platforms such as the government's School-On and independent Teacher-On have been providing teacher support and encouraging peer learning in the form of best practices.

To track attendance and engagement, the Learning Management System (LMS) records log-on history, and monitors students' learning progress. Attendance for students who missed classes can be confirmed based on class submissions within a week of class.

Local governments and 17 Metropolitan and Provincial Offices of Education in cooperation with the Ministry of Science and ICT, Statistics Korea, Ministry of Education, and private companies provided digital devices and subsidized internet data pack charges to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The devices are rented without cost and educational websites can be temporarily accessed for free.

Students from multicultural families and with disabilities are provided by curated learning materials. For students with disabilities, provision of home visits has been introduced along with modification of online content to suit their needs. After-school program instructors and ICT instructors are dispatched to students' homes in case they encounter any difficulties in online learning[xiv].

Recommendations for India

Majority of students still access the internet through mobile data. With poor connectivity and limited data packs, high speed streaming options are not a viable option for online learning. To enhance remote learning capabilities, the use of state media apparatus such as radio and television for broadcast of lectures in areas of low connectivity is a feasible option.

The Government of India should promote and organize training programs for higher education institutes where universities with experience in e-learning programs can provide guidance. Individual institutes can tie up with online content providers such as MOOCs to provide access to their courses to the students enrolled in the institute.

To counter high unemployment and ensure universities participate in the recovery process, Indian government should initiate apprenticeship and reskilling programs. Government should provide funds under an innovation program to these institutes which would support local growth and reskilling. These courses would be part-time in nature to accommodate flexible adult learning through shorter credit bearing courses.

To help institutes facing financial crunch, bridge loans at subsidized rates can be provided. Government can also create a pool fund mechanism through which institutes can apply for grants. Rather than providing returns for accommodation charges to students, the amount can be adjusted in fees for future terms to prevent outflow of funds.

Government as part of the repositioning of the education paradigm should create a transformation fund to support universities as they switch to blended learning for the new normal over the next 5 years. It would help in reshaping the higher education landscape through mergers or federations and partnerships. The state should introduce additional visa flexibilities to support international students planning to start degree programs this year.

For the institutes, to ensure students' welfare, creation of an online portal is recommended. This portal would provide forums for administrative queries, creation of discussion rooms for students and access pages for interactions with the faculty. Regular updates on the steps taken by the institute with regards to the pandemic should be posted on the portal. To foster faster decision making, a crisis management team should be formed which would include representatives from technical as well as pedagogical sides of the degree programs.

Institutes should explore the possibility of individualized tutoring and providing hardware to students who do not have access to it. The institute may partner with telecom companies to provide students with free or subsidized access to institutional online resources. They should implement measures to collect regular feedback from students and faculties to understand the impact of the online transition. Alternate assessments and teaching pedagogies such as case studies, online demonstrations, assignments should be explored to enhance online learning. Creation of small learning groups can increase students' engagement supported by moderated discussions and group activities rather than traditional lecture approach.

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