

A RELATIONSHIP IN REGRESSION AND A PROCESS IN TRANSITION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF COVID AFFECTED HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Covid 19 pandemic and the consequent Lockdowns had an instant impact on higher education institutions across the world. With campus life unlikely to return to normal very soon, it has posed a serious threat to institutions of higher learning in terms of adopting new strategies and means for their survival and growth. India has the third largest higher education system in the world in terms of size and its diversity next to China and United States and largest in the world in terms of number of educational institutions. The objective of this research is to assess how Covid 19 pandemic has affected Indian higher education system and based on the analysis suggesting the way forward. In executing the research qualitative analysis of secondary data has been done. The study opens with exploring the impact of COVID-19 on higher education sector in India followed by brief discussions on policy, procedural, economic and socio-cultural implications of this academic disruption and finally propositions are placed regarding effectually dealing with major challenges faced by Indian higher education leading to creation of a new educational paradigm
Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic , Higher Education , Online Education , Digital Divide ,India

Introduction:

The Covid 19 pandemic has seriously disrupted the higher education sector which is a critical determinant of the country's future. The pandemic has thrown the entire system of higher education into uncertainty. *This study* based on secondary data *attempts* to make a qualitative analysis of what has been the impact of COVID-19 on Indian higher education system and recommends how Indian higher education institutions can respond effectively to this unprecedented new challenge.

The Context

Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), that causes coronavirus disease (COVID-19), was identified for the first time in December 2019 in Wuhan city, China, and later spread to all over the world , at the pick of 3rd wave of the pandemic as on February 2022, there had been 376,478,335 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 5,666,064 deaths, reported to WHO (<https://covid19.who.int/>) . On January 30th, 2020, the WHO officially confirmed COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. In India social distancing as a technique of keeping the virus away was first officially initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he addressed the nation on March 19 in order to announce a one-day 'Janata Curfew' for March 22nd March 2020 . The first national containment devise in the form of a nationwide lockdown was launched on 25th March 2020 , three months after the first COVID-19 case was

reported and two months after the WHO's declaring it as pandemic. Sometime in the second week of March 20, central government and state governments all over the country began temporarily closing down schools, colleges and institutions of higher learning as a devise to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. It has been about 6 months now and there is no certainty when they will reopen. This period has been a crucial and challenging time for the education sector in general and higher education sector in particular —board examinations, admissions, entrance tests of various universities - all were held during this period.

Research Methodology

This work presents a description of secondary data analysis. Way back in 1963, Barney Glaser (1963: 11) suggested secondary analysis carried out by an independent researcher could, among other things, 'lend new strength to the body of fundamental social knowledge'. This researcher have applied secondary analysis to data as he wanted to perform additional analysis of an original dataset or additional analysis of a sub-set of the original dataset (Hinds et al., 1997; Heaton 1998) and apply a new perspective or a new conceptual focus to the original research issues (Heaton, 1998).

The Process of Disruption:

COVID is every sense of the term a disruption in human society—a disruption last seen 100 years ago. Naturally, education in general or for that matter higher education could not escape this disruption and is severely hit by coronavirus crisis.

COVID-19 is highly infectious, hence it spreads very fast. In order to curtail its spread in India central and state governments have enforced lockdown, partially or complete including the official closure of all academic institutions . Therefore in order to continue the academic deliberations and delivery technology is being integrated in the academic delivery platform as a supplement to the face-to-face teaching or interaction as integrating technology in education provides “high-quality, non-delayed, multi-form live interactive classrooms, and realizes live teaching in multi-person online classes”, Longjun Li,(2020) [3, p. 513]. Online meeting/teaching platforms, like Zoom, Google classroom, Microsoft Teams, Webex etc. are operational in full swing. Education has so far been a domain largely ruled by human to human interaction, and there has been a slow integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Education to develop the necessary human-like attributes of responsiveness, adaptability, and understanding , but now artificial intelligence development companies specializing in automation of business processes and intelligent instruction design have started emphasising on and accelerating the process of creation of a suite of smart content services . “Smart content” creation, from digitized guides of textbooks to customizable learning digital interfaces, are being introduced at all levels. E-Learning and Digital Education is the " New Normal" in Academics in general and Higher Education in particular. In this context it is a matter of serious concern to note that without a holistic approach and meaningful understanding, the jetting zeal with which university administrators, sections of teachers, some students and others involved in higher education have started embracing digital technology almost overnight amidst this devastating Covid-19 pandemic . Conference-hopping professors, have quickly accustomed themselves to "Webinar"s and "Facebook live"s and students and learners are forced to "enjoy" the online classes, sessions,

seminars, conferences. In this regard academic agendas are to an extent dictated by market and lords of education business. In this time of crisis, the major challenge in edu-tech reforms at the national policy and execution level is duly considering the digital divide and its socio-economic and cultural implications, the seamless integration of technology in the present Indian higher education system, which is extremely diverse and large.

Policy and Procedural Implication

Many think that greater dependence on the online teaching-learning process may provide entree to higher learning for a whole range of social groups who could not avail it so far. However, the crucial question remains: is India ready for this transformation in the higher education system? A Government of India study itself confirmed 55,000 villages are without mobile phone coverage, while digital literacy in India is barely 10 percent of the population and only 26 percent of the population has access to internet connectivity that too internet access in India is blighted by problems of quality and reliability as confirmed by the Niti Aayog in a report published in November 2018 titled “Strategy for New India @ 75”, - all these are indicative of the strong presence of digital divide in Indian society (“ E-learning can complement ...” , 2020) .Moreover for Indian population in general so far has used the digital platform mainly for entertainment and commercial purpose thus the stake holders of higher education system need to be ready socially , economically , psychologically , culturally and technically to be compatible with this sudden change so far intellectual ignition and interaction is concerned . For example the pandemic has transmuted the centuries-old, chalk–talk teaching model to technology driven one precisely through smartphone and internet whereas many households do not even have access to high-speed internet or requisite devices .Of late a 50-year-old farmer allegedly committed suicide subsequent to an argument with his daughter over his failure to buy her a smartphone to continue her school studies at a village in Sepahijala District of Tripura (“Tripura man ends life...”, 2020) .Therefore, in such circumstances abrupt introduction and emphasis on digital learning will deepen the inequalities in the Indian education system and widen socio-economic polarisation through this digital divide. Even recently UNESCO has cautioned a move towards remote, web-based learning will deepen inequalities not just in the poor nations but also in the richer ones (UN agencies flag online..., 2020). There is an impending requirement to develop inclusive learning solutions, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized section of Indian society to address this issue. We must strike a balance between attainment of new heights of excellence in higher education through digital intervention in tune with the principles of equity and access. (“E-learning can complement... ”, 2020) .

Some Indian University administrators are of the opinion various issues have already emerged in connection with Credit transfer from SWAYAM Courses as university academics observed the Course Curriculum has no compatibility etc. These issues may create serious problems of accepting online courses and online degrees in many Indian universities unless a comprehensive and well-designed scheme is launched based on consensus.

Economic and Socio-Cultural Implication

This pandemic has led to perhaps the biggest ever reverse migration of knowledge and skill so far Indian education sector is concerned. One of the hardest hit areas by pandemic triggered Indian economic distress is "The Private Education System". In cities and small towns across the country where private schools, colleges and institutions of higher learning were seen as a gateway to aspiration, teachers are blanched, with parents not able to pay fees and managements left without fund to pay their salaries. Therefore in order to survive and support their family these teachers are taking up jobs like selling insurance policies, food items, etc. ("Meet private school principal...", 2020). Moreover faculty recruitment to institutions of higher learning has slowed down or to certain extent stopped as these institutions are not fully operational contributing to unemployment of highly qualified potential faculty. ("Indore: Vegetable seller with PhD...", 2020). Beside this, not to be overlooked is the apparent fear of the probability of human educators being replaced by Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies in the coming decade.

The biggest concern, however, on everybody's mind is the impact of the pandemic on the employment rate. Recent graduates in India apprehend withdrawal of job offers from corporates because of the prevalent situation. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy estimated unemployment to shoot up from 8.4% in mid-March to 23% in early April and the urban unemployment rate to 30.9%. (Choudhary, 2020) India's unemployment rate soared to a nine-week high of 9.1% for the week ended August 16 ("Jobless: India's unemployment...", 2020). Meanwhile, an ADB-ILO report's prognosis for unemployment is 6.1 million young Indians (15-24 years) may lose jobs even if the virus is controlled by September 20 ("6.1 million youth may lose...", 2020). As per the NCRB report, a spike of 10 per cent in the number of deaths by suicide was recorded in India in 2020 as compared to 2019 - 1.53 lakh suicides in 2020 -- highest in the last 10 years. Daily wage earners constituted the highest share, a total of 37,666(24.6 per cent) wage workers died by committing suicide. (www.news18.com...) Urgent steps are needed to be taken to alleviate the impact of the pandemic on job offers, internship programs, and research projects (Choudhary, 2020). In this time of crisis, a well-thought out comprehensive and effective educational practice is must for the capacity-building of young minds which shall develop their skills and aptitude ultimately resulting to their employability, productivity (Choudhary, 2020)

Another very pertinent question is being raised in the current pandemic situation and for post-covid era - in a virtual classroom how students can develop their interpersonal skills and build social capital? A section of academicians feel physical proximity does not necessarily makes things REAL and the notion that interpersonal skills can be cultivated only by proximity is a myth. Cultivating a good relationship is now possible through online. They argue, social media has helped millions of people around the globe to connect with like-minded people. It is a sort of boon to humanity that physical distances have shrunk to the size of the screen of mobile phones. Therefore, modern technologies or for that matter digital education can create more social capital than anything else (Nagi Kuldeep, personal communication, 2020). Another community of educationists feel gregariousness which stands for instinctively or temperamentally seeking and enjoying the company of others is but the second nature of human beings. "We need to show more human concern and empathy" eminent Indian scientist

Bharatratna Prof. C N R Rao commented while objecting to introduction of online teaching-learning process (“Online classes cannot...” 2020). Recent researches have also suggested online teaching cannot develop or improve social communication skills of the learners (Wang et al.,2020, Jan ,2020) In this connection UNESCO has strongly recommended that nations to “recommit” their students to teachers for face-to-face learning after the lockdown (“UN agencies flag online.....”, 2020) .

Another very serious issue cropped up during this “ingress of onlineism” in the field of education in general and Higher Education to be specific. It has been observed by some experts teaching-learning is no more to inspire learners to think, imagine, making it a life changing experience!!! In this era of “onlinism “ for a teacher it is all about delivery of subjects like deliveryman and like a salesman to fulfil the target of completing the syllabus " on line" and for a student it is to consume and watch like a consumer viewer rather than to learn enjoyingly . " Experts are sceptical during this online regime whether the teachers have been able to inculcate the habit or practice of art of thinking and art of imagination among their students taking advantage of the recess due to covid lockdown. In this connection eminent Indian scientist Bharatratna Prof. C N R Rao commented " We need human interface with students for good communication. That is how young minds can be inspired". (“Online classes cannot...” 2020) which is furthermore highlighted by Prof. Suranjan Das, Vice Chancellor of Jadavpur University “It is feared that e-based learning will go against the holistic learning experience which remains the sine qua non for producing creative and discerning citizens.” while addressing the VCs' round-table on ‘Higher Education post COVID-19’, a webinar hosted by ABP Education on 30th May 2020. (“VCs’ round table on Higher...2020) Basically our system of education is a conformist one devoid of the element of inspiring creativity and enquiry, if this very system also gets mechanised without the scope of infusing imagination and thinking, it becomes a matter of serious concern for future of education or for that matter higher education. Here metaphorically taking cue from legendary filmmaker Satyajit Ray's famous movie "Hirak Rajar Deshe" it can be said:” the more they think, the more they question, the less they obey .therefore under any circumstances they should not be allowed to practice thinking, keep them engaged somehow else it can lead to questioning the system and establishment .” Moreover recent studies have found that “there is also a lack of discipline and ritual in online education. Further, long-time online teaching can have a negative impact on students’ mental and physical health”.(Wang et al.2020).

Recommendations and Conclusion

In early times, the attack of a dreadful epidemic resulted in extension of vacation by educational institutions, waiting for the crisis to recede and situation to return to status quo ante. Accordingly colleges and universities recommenced their work conventionally when the pandemic subsided. A few lost months of an academic calendar was not such a great deal for institutions of longstanding academic tradition to recoup (Aquil ,2020) . Let us follow this time tested approach in addressing present crisis as well. If this current pandemic continues to militate against traditional educational system and social distancing becomes a norm over an extended period of a more than a term, resorting to online lectures for short periods would certainly be a rational and reasonable move but it must be realised by the policy makers e-learning or online

learning can complement but not replace the direct teaching-learning process (“E-learning can complement ”, 2020). At the same time at present critical juncture to ensure meaningful function of higher education recommendations mentioned hereunder must be adhered to:

So far overall operation of an institution of higher learning is concerned Prof. Suranjan Das, Vice Chancellor of Jadavpur University , Kolkata pointed out teachers, are required to search for innovative methods to metamorphose their prevailing mode of teaching; the students will have to forgo the benefits of direct class teaching and become more inventive in search of knowledge; libraries are to gradually transform digital, compelling the students, scholars and teachers to be more technologically equipped ; traditional seminars conferences will rapidly cave in to webinars e-conferences, which are likely to create scope for larger participation at a much lower cost (“E-learning can complement ”, 2020).

In connection with teaching-learning process and the role of teacher Prof. Anuradha Lohia, Vice-Chancellor of Presidency University ,Kolkata opined each University or institution of higher learning must plan and develop its own teaching/learning segments that must be available to both distantly and also to tiny groups. for that matter Prof. Dhruvajyoti Chattopadhyay, Vice-Chancellor of Sister Nivedita University ,Kolkata elucidated integration of virtual practical classrooms, modelling and simulation based classroom, measurement based classes and remote practical classrooms is necessary including the upgraded matrix to support the students to become application oriented learners. Incorporation of all these practises into the courses can deliver meaningful interaction in the sphere of e-learning. In this connection Prof. Anuradha Lohia very appropriately added what can be considered the summum bonum – “Mentoring will be more important than ‘lecturing’. The more “remote” education becomes, the more central the mentor teacher becomes,” (“VCs’ round table on Higher...2020)

To implement the aforesaid recommendations effectively the Indian state is required to make massive investments to make the internet accessible to broader sections of the society and take appropriate measures which was duly emphasised in National Education Policy 2020 recently released by Government of India affirming “ a comprehensive set of recommendations for promoting online education consequent to the recent rise in epidemics and pandemics in order to ensure preparedness with alternative modes of quality education whenever and wherever traditional and in-person modes of education are not possible “ (New Education Policy 2020 Highlights....2020)

The logic of the aforesaid plan of action is in line with the famous welfare philosophy of the state as propounded by Diogenes long back ”The foundation of every state is the education of its youth."

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