

ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19 IN HIGHER EDUCATION SPACE: THE NEW NORMAL

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ABSTRACT

India is facing exceptional difficult times due to the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic like the whole world. All higher education institutions in India are shut due to national lockdown, so the research and teaching-learning activities have been badly disturbed. In this context, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has asked the universities and colleges to carry on the educational process making active use of technology and other available possibilities. In Jammu and Kashmir too, most of the universities and colleges have started taking online classes despite of having limited access to internet since the lockdown began. So, it was thought worthwhile to know the experiences of students in higher education space about online learning. The study employed the online administration of a questionnaire on 300 students selected through snowball sampling and focus group discussion on 30 students to extract the experiences of students about online learning. The results show that majority of the students agreed to the statement their teachers are conducting online classes. Teachers are doing their best efforts to make use of technology to continue the teaching-learning process. But they reported that certain problems also emerged in the process of online learning. There are issues of network connectivity, poor bandwidth, lack of availability of advanced technological gadgets and poor ICT skills among others. The students who belong to far-flung/remote areas faced problems in getting connected to their teachers on regular basis or they had to move to the upper parts of hills to have better connectivity.

Keywords: COVID-19, Higher Education, Students' Experience, Online Learning, New Normal

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of March 2020, state governments in India began closing down schools, colleges and universities for the time being as a measure to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). On 24th March, 2020, Mr. Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India declared national level lockdown for three weeks which has been extended four times with the extension of two weeks each time. It's more than five months and there is no predictability when normalcy will be restored. This is a critical time for the education sector as far as examinations, admissions, entrance tests and competitive examinations are concerned, among others, are all detained during this period. When the lockdown was declared a significant portion of the syllabus was left to be covered. So, institutions of higher education started relying on technology and online classes were started. The organization of teaching and learning, assessment methodologies have been affected by these closures. Only a few of private educational institutions could implement online teaching methods (Chaudhary, 2020). Their low-income private or government counterparts are completely closed for not having access to e-learning facilities (Chaudhary, 2020). The students not only missed the learning opportunities but some of them do not even have access to healthy food and are subject to economic and social trauma during this time.

It is important to note that the Indian higher education system is one of the most diverse and the largest higher education systems with more fifty thousand higher education institutions. It had started reviewing the delivery and instructional methods in higher education by integrating classroom learning with online modes much before the COVID-19. Government of India through its various agencies has started various initiatives like SWAYAM, Swayam Prabha, e-PG Pathshala etc for online education. It has been made compulsory to complete one MOOC during students' post-graduate programme. But, the question remains still to be answered that how much prepared our students especially residing in rural areas and students belonging to low socio-economic status, are to pursue their education through online mode only,.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has also taken the cognizance of the prevailing situation asked for combined accountability of all the stakeholders to bring about multiple key issues relating to academic activities in the education institutions. The circular dated 29th April, 2020 by the UGC mentioned that the schedule of end-semester examinations has also got upset. While it is critical to follow measures taken by the Government to contain the spread of COVID-19, it is also important to continue the educational process making active use of technology and other available possibilities. We must be hopeful that we can reinvent effort again and engage the students in effective and constructive ways. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has been engaged with this issue and proposing measures to face the challenge of safeguarding the wellbeing of the academic fraternity in general and students in particular. Challenged with important issues of examinations and academic calendar, UGC constituted an Expert Committee to contemplate on these issues and make suggestions to address

them. In the present circumstances, the main concerns are ensuring the fitness and security of the students, faculty and staff and also to endure academic activities; conducting the examinations and declaring the results; facilitating the students to get admission in new courses, placement drives, research and training etc., and plotting a plan for the next academic session.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

With the spread of COVID-19 across the world, by the month of March, 2020, 61 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and South America have closed their schools and colleges. Most of universities have enforced restricted closures (UNESCO, 2020a). The coronavirus (COVID-19) has raised a few fundamental questions for higher education, with a prominent one being: has the outbreak made online teaching the “new normal” a lot faster than otherwise would have happened or the students and teachers are still struggling with the technology and network problem especially in union territory of Jammu and Kashmir where internet connectivity after scrapping Article 370 was restored after seven months but with 2 G speed only? So it was thought worthwhile to know about the online learning experiences of students studying in higher education institutions of union territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is status of online teaching in higher education as perceived by the students?
2. Which types of gadgets are being used by the students for online learning?
3. Which platform is perceived as the best for attending online classes as per their experience?
4. What are the experiences of the students about online learning?
5. Are the students comfortable in the new normal?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Method

This research adopted mixed method research.

Sample

A sample of 300 students studying in twenty different higher education institutions has been taken through snowball sampling for getting responses on the questionnaire. However, 30 students participated in focus group discussion (3 sessions with 10 students each session).

Tool

Self-prepared questionnaire has been used for conducting the survey, while similar questions have been asked to elicit the responses in depth and to validate the results obtained through survey. This questionnaire was designed to obtain information about students' experiences of online learning.

Data Collection Procedure

The data have been collected by conducting an online survey through *google forms* and focus group discussion has been conducted through *google meet* during second and third week of May, 2020 so as to obey the principles of social distancing in lockdown and not to go outside our homes to stay safe during the spread of COVID-19.

Data Analysis

Percentages analysis has been carried out on the obtained data.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1. What is status of online teaching in higher education as perceived by the students?

As per the responses of 300 students, 240 (80%) students said that their teachers take online classes in the lockdown, 43 (14.3 %) students said that their teachers sometimes take online classes in the lockdown and 17 (5.3%) students said that their teachers do not take online classes in the lockdown.

Research Question 2. Which types of gadgets are being used by the students for online learning?

The responses of the students have been tabulated as under (table 1):

Table 1: Types of Gadgets Used by Students for Online Learning

Gadget	N (%)
Mobile Phone	288 (96)
Laptop	24 (8)
Desktop	4 (1.3)
IPad	3 (1)
Others	2 (0.7)

It is clear from the table 1 that 288 (96%) use their mobile phones for online learning, 24 (8%) students use laptop, 4 (1.3%) students use desktop, 3 (1%) students use IPad and 2 (0.7%) use other type of gadgets for online learning.

Research Question 3. Which platform is perceived as the best for attending online classes as per their experience?

The responses of the students regarding the best platform for online classes have been given in table 2:

Table 2: Best Platform Perceived by the Students for Attending Online Classes

Platform	N (%)
Zoom	123 (41.0)
Google meet	97 (32.3)
Cisco Webex	70 (23.3)
Go to Webinar	8 (2.7)
Microsoft Teams	2(0.7)
Other	0 (0.0)

Table 2 is indicative of the fact that Zoom platform (41%) has been perceived as the best platform followed by Google meet (32.3%), Cisco Webex (23.3%), Go to Webinar (2.7%) and Microsoft Teams (0.7%). No other platform has been used by the students in higher education institutions in Jammu and Kashmir.

Research Question 4. What are the experiences of the students about online learning?

The responses of the students regarding their experiences about online learning have been tabulated as under (table 3):

Table 3: Experiences of the Students about Online Learning

Premise	SD No.(%)	D No.(%)	N No.(%)	A No.(%)	SA No.(%)
I am able to study effectively from the home	17 (5.7)	58 (19.3)	110 (36.7)	108 (36.0)	7 (2.3)
Learning alone makes it difficult to get explanation of some concepts	4 (1.3)	19 (6.3)	64 (21.3)	174 (58.0)	39 (13.0)
Our teachers gave us orientation on the use of e-learning Platforms	9 (3.0)	31 (10.3)	63 (21.0)	170 (56.7)	27 (9.0)
Our teachers put their best efforts to make our concepts clearer	13 (4.3)	17 (5.7)	42 (14.0)	159 (53.0)	69 (23.0)
There is internet access in my house to enable me learn on my phone or laptop	21 (7.0)	54 (18)	80 (26.7)	131 (43.7)	14 (4.7)
The online system of learning is very stress causing	14 (4.7)	36 (12.0)	62 (20.7)	137 (45.7)	51 (17.0)
The online learning is better than face to face learning	68 (22.7)	163 (54.3)	30 (10.0)	33 (11.0)	6 (2.0)
Due to online learning many students face problems in pursuing their education comfortably	7 (2.3)	11 (3.7)	35 (11.7)	173 (57.7)	74 (24.7)
Due to the fear of Coronavirus, I cannot concentrate on my studies during online classes	16 (5.3)	73 (24.3)	61 (20.3)	113 (37.7)	37 (12.3)
There is disturbance at home while I attend online classes	14 (4.7)	90 (30.0)	59 (19.7)	100 (33.3)	37 (12.3)
I have better ICT skills to be able to access different online learning platforms	15 (5.0)	74 (24.7)	112 (37.3)	91 (30.3)	8 (2.7)
My parents/guardians help me in my online learning	21 (7.0)	66 (22.0)	79 (26.3)	111 (37.0)	23 (7.7)
There is good internet connectivity at my home	91 (30.3)	89 (29.7)	60 (20.0)	54 (18.0)	6 (2.0)
There is proper time –table for the conduct of classes	30 (10.0)	51 (17.0)	68 (22.7)	121 (40.3)	30 (10.0)
My teachers strongly adhere to the time –table	21 (7.0)	35 (11.7)	76 (25.3)	132 (44.0)	36 (12.0)
Teachers are available 24X7 for us during lock down	25 (8.3)	27 (9.0)	66 (22.0)	134 (44.7)	48 (16.0)
Teachers are doing better in online mode in comparison to the face-to-face system	31 (10.3)	90 (30.0)	108 (36.0)	63 (21.0)	8 (2.7)
I am aware of online learning platforms launched by the Government of India	12 (4.0)	27 (9.0)	67 (22.3)	173 (57.7)	21 (7.0)
I do not have adequate learning resources in the house to aid my learning	11 (3.7)	46 (15.3)	74 (24.7)	140 (46.7)	29 (9.7)
I want my education to be done through online mode even after normalcy restored (no lock down)	62 (20.7)	146 (48.7)	41 (13.7)	42 (14.0)	9 (3.0)
I want that our end semester examination should also be done through online platform	78 (26.0)	106 (35.3)	46 (15.3)	60 (20.0)	10 (3.3)
Virtual contact cannot fulfil the learning needs of students as real contact with teachers can	6 (2.0)	18 (6.0)	53 (17.7)	160 (53.3)	63 (21.0)

SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree; No.(%): Number of Students (Percentage of Students)

Table 3 shows that 25% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement ‘I am able to study effectively from the home’, 36.3% students remain neutral and 38.3% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

7.6% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'Learning alone makes it difficult to get explanation of some concepts', 21.3% students remain neutral and 71.0% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

13.3% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'Our teachers gave us orientation on the use of e-learning platforms', 21.0% students remain neutral and 65.7% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

10.0% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'Our teachers put their best efforts to make our concepts clearer', 14.0% students remain neutral and 76.0% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

25.0% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'There is internet access in my house to enable me learn on my phone or laptop', 26.7% students remain neutral and 48.3% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

16.7% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'The online system of learning is very stress causing', 20.7% students remain neutral and 62.7% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

77.0% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'The online learning is better than face to face learning', 10.0% students remain neutral and 12.0% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

6.0% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'Due to online learning many students face problems in pursuing their education comfortably', 11.7% students remain neutral and 82.3% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

29.7% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'Due to the fear of Coronavirus, I cannot concentrate on my studies during online classes', 20.3% students remain neutral and 50.0% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

34.7% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'There is disturbance at home while I attend online classes', 19.7% students remain neutral and 45.6% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

29.7% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'I have better ICT skills to be able to access different online learning platforms', 37.3% students remain neutral and 33.0% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

29.0% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'My parents/guardians help me in my online learning', 26.3% students remain neutral and 44.7% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

60.0% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'There is good internet connectivity at my home', 20.0% students remain neutral and 20.0% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

27.0% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'There is proper time-table for the conduct of classes', 22.7% students remain neutral and 50.3% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

18.7% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'My teachers strongly adhere to the time-table', 25.3% students remain neutral and 56.0% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

17.3% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'Teachers are available 24X7 for us during lock down', 22.0% students remain neutral and 60.7% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

40.3% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'Teachers are doing better in online mode in comparison to the face-to-face system', 36.0% students remain neutral and 23.7% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

13.0% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'I am aware of online learning platforms launched by the Government of India', 22.3% students remain neutral and 64.7% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

19.0% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'I do not have adequate learning resources in the house to aid my learning', 24.7% students remain neutral and 56.3% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

69.3% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'I want my education to be done through online mode even after normalcy restored (no lock down)', 13.7% students remain neutral and 17.0% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

61.3% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'I want that our end semester examination should also be done through online platform', 15.3% students remain neutral and 23.4% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

8.0% students disagreed/ strongly disagreed with the statement 'Virtual contact cannot fulfil the learning needs of students as real contact with teachers can', 17.7% students remain neutral and 74.3% students agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement.

Research Question 5. Are students are comfortable in the new normal?

Interesting revelations come out of the focus group discussion. Some of the students who had to come from distant places to attend their institutions of higher education seem to be comfortable as their saving of the travel time, travel discomfort and bus fair. Married students who have small kids at home were able to attend their kids in a better way. But as far as the quality of online teaching and learning is concerned they still like to attend their traditional face-to-face mode of teaching as they were facing low band width (2G) issue. Students shared that they had to go to hill top for every class at the designated time or sometimes to the roof of neighbour's houses. Students also reported Zoom fatigue as a major obstacle in learning. Almost all the students could attend their classes only through their mobile phones. Average increased screen time also strained their eyes. One student wanted that everything online should be stopped immediately as he is struggling more with technological discomfort than academic enrichment. Students wanted incorporation of technology in their teaching and learning in blended form as they are not comfortable in the 'new normal' (everything online).

CONCLUSION

It is very heartening that despite of limited access to internet access in Jammu and Kashmir, eighty percent students agreed that their teachers take online classes regularly. Ninety six percent students use mobile phones for attending online class. Zoom platform has been rated as the best platform by the students as far as their online classes are concerned. Though students (38.3%) were able to study effectively from home still a large majority (71.0%) of students reported that learning alone makes it difficult to get explanation of some concepts. Irrespective of the fact that teachers oriented the students about the use of e-learning platforms (65.7%) and made best efforts for teaching online (76.0%), students perceived face-to-face mode of learning as the better option (77.0%) as the online system of learning is very stress causing (62.7%) and many students face problems in pursuing their education comfortably (82.3%). Only 20.0% students have good internet connectivity at their homes 56.3% students do not have adequate learning resources in the house to aid their learning. The students (74.3%) in higher education in Jammu and Kashmir perceived that virtual contact cannot fulfil the learning needs of students as real contact with teachers can.

The results from the focus group discussion sessions also supported the findings from the administration of questionnaire. Previously conducted study by Guest, Rohde, Selvanathan and Soesanto (2018) reported that students are generally less satisfied with courses that have been converted online. Nilson and Goodson (2017) reported unreliable technology as one of the obstacles to quality online teaching. No doubt that students are not quite happy with switching into a totally online learning environment due to various reasons as said earlier in this paper, still in this time of crunch, an efficient educational practice is needed for the capacity-building of young minds so that certain skills leading to their employability, efficiency, health, and well-being can be developed in the times to come, and the overall progress of India can be ensured. As important stakeholders we are looking forward towards normalcy and reopening of higher education institutions with all reasonable

measures taken to protect students, staff, teachers and their families. UNESCO (2020b) also emphasised that educational institutions are to be reopened by looking into the context of health response and continuous adaptation is necessary in order to meet each student's learning, health and safety needs.

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