Online Learning System in Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan:
Investigating Problems Faced by Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Novel COVID-19 caused turmoil in every domain of life around the globe. To halt the further spread of virus, preventive measures such as social and physical distancing have led to the temporal cessation of all education institutions in numerous countries. To minimize disruption of teaching and learning process during the pandemic, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan directed universities to transition to an online learning system. The research paper explores the problems faced by students in the current online education system introduced by various universities. A survey research method was employed, and the data were collected through convenience sampling. The link of the semi-structured questionnaire was shared with 550 students enrolled in public and private universities in Lahore, Pakistan. The study brought to light the diversified problems such as lack of internet facility, load shedding, financial issues, ear pain due to prolonged use of hand free/ Bluetooth, and unreliable results in assessments.

KEYWORDS

Assessment System, COVID-19, Education Institutions, Financial Issues, Higher Education Institutions, Internet Connectivity, Load Shedding, Online Learning Problems, Students, Support, Training, Weal Signals

1. INTRODUCTION

At recent times, this epidemic named 'COVID-19' has shifted the whole dynamics of the societal structures and Pakistan is no exception of it. Every individual has dual responsibilities that is to protect himself as well as re-emerge and reunite to start the jammed economy. The universities, colleges and schools are the places that bring thousands of people into contact, hence make them vulnerable for the viruses. Due to this, every single institution is compelled to take bold as well as tough decisions in compliance with the situation. All Pakistani educational institutions tend to move from bricks and mortar education to online education that led to some difficulties for teachers and students both.

However, these institutes have their own schedules and keeping them closed for longer period of time will make the situation worse. In this case, HEC has developed certain Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to sustain the system of education smoothly. These include giving awareness to the masses by using pictures and illustrations. Through flyers and posters all teachers and students

have been reminded to maintain hygiene and avoid close contact including face to face meetings (HEC,2020). In these hard times, the HEIs needed to conduct online classes that is the only possible solution to deal with ongoing situation. All the universities, colleges and schools have been given instructions to work from home and deliver online lectures.

The situation requires concrete steps to encounter the problem and this has led institutes running behind Learning Management Systems (LMSs) e.g. online white board, Fastmeetin, Moodle, Udemy to compensate the learning on campus. Currently, lectures are being delivered on above mentioned online learning apps and systems and students are obligated to submit designed work and to attempt quizzes on the recommended online system of their universities. As (Abdelraheem, 2012) advocates that Learning Management Systems are most applicable in transferring knowledge and handling huge piles of educational material. . The lessons can be completed in the comfort zone without any fear of being late at workplace and being fined upon it. Online learning systems are characterised by flexibility and ease. The response rate is quicker than face to face learning, yet some hazards are bothersome for sender and receiver (*teachers & students*).

At recent times, the role of technology is increasing in every walk of life. Its importance in education cannot be overlooked. In developed countries the concept of E-learning is not new as compared to underdeveloped countries where traditional classrooms are still of great significance. However, the requirement of E-learning has mounted during recent times (HEC COVID-19 Guidance, n.d.), where all educational institutions were forcefully closed amid the novel coronavirus outbreak. Later on, to sustain education and to disseminate the curriculum, government forced HEI towards online learning systems. Therefore, universities were constrained to conduct online classes that has highlighted not only technological issues but also pedagogical, infrastructural, content based as well as health related issues.

As Mayes (2011) states that previous researches have discussed issues covered under the categories of content delivery, teaching methods, assessments and grades criteria or classification of the students who either proposed or opposed online classes. During Covid-19, the universities were bound to conduct online classes that highlighted not only technological issues but also pedagogical, infrastructural, content based as well as health related issues. Though students are familiarized with online classes yet their reservations have outnumbered than its advantages. The present study unfolds the specific areas of E-learning that learners find vague and debatable proving hazards in their gaining knowledge. Numerous studies are available discussing issues of teachers and students' concern of online classes but this research will specifically discuss problems encountered by students during online education in Pakistani context during an outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 has been declared an epidemic by World Health Organization (WHO), that is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It is occurring over a wide geographic area and affecting an exceptionally high proportion of the population. It transmits rapidly similarly like a flu or cold by sneezing, cough, and close social interaction. A tiny speck has ceased the hustle and bustle of life and rapid increase of infected people has led the governments in state of war footings. According to HEC persistent lock down has caused food shortage, sealed the economic cycle, unemployment, and enhanced the poverty. The educational institutes are no exception of it. Due to pandemic, Higher Education commission had to take tough decisions according to which all educational institutes were bound to conduct online classes.

In recent times, the importance of E-learning in Pakistan has increased. Previously it was not as rigorously practised as it is now emphasized upon. The reason was limited budget and low rate of literacy faced by government of Pakistan to have effective web-based education system. According to Ndubisi (2004), only external factors such as technology awareness to the teachers and students, purchasing and installing the equipment and designing the course material are not the seal of successful

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