

Chapter 27


Education in Emergencies, Inequities, and the Digital Divide: Strategies for Supporting Teachers and Students in Higher Education in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic upended the daily life of every individual throughout the world and has had an impact on every sphere of life. However, its impact on education, especially higher education, is profound. This chapter is based on a recent study, which explored teaching and learning in higher education in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 lockdown. The chapter focuses on how switching from face-to-face to online distance teaching and learning within a short period of time has created educational inequality and the digital divide among teachers and students in higher education in Bangladesh. Based on the findings from the recent surveys (teachers' and students' perspectives), this chapter provides recommendations for the stakeholders to support teachers and students during the emergency remote teaching and learning. It also shows how different strategies could minimize educational inequality and the digital divide during the time of crisis and how the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown impacted on the transition and transformation of teaching and learning in Bangladesh.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6533-9.ch027

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on every aspect of human life, including education (Shohel et al., 2021; Dwidienawati et al., 2020; Bacher-Hicks et al., 2020; Raaper & Brown, 2020). This unexpected and unprecedented crisis has created a ‘new normal’ situation for every individual at micro, meso and macro levels. There is a shortfall in current pedagogical approaches to address the challenges of social distancing for teaching and learning activities. The global educational crisis highlights that there is a need to understand the effects and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to develop good practices for ongoing difficulties and future interruptions. Within this context, the main purpose of this chapter is:

- To evaluate the impact of the interruption to education;
- To explore the inequalities this has created and exacerbated;
- To explore the implications of the digital divide due to lockdown;
- To examine the switch to online teaching and learning while identifying the strengths and weaknesses of higher education policy and practice; and
- To provide evidence of emerging pedagogies in supporting teachers and students.

The chapter is also a pathway to explore higher education in Bangladesh under the ‘new normal’ by presenting lessons learned and experience gained through the time of crisis to better envision the emerging pedagogies for the future of higher education in Bangladesh. The objective of this chapter is to bring to light the struggles teachers and students faced in moving to online education in a prompt manner due to the global public health crisis. This unprecedented sudden switching has revealed inequities in the educational system. The specific effects on educational inclusion and exclusion for students are due to the digital divides, including access and attainment of educational outcomes.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

In 2018, Bangladesh graduated from the least developed country to middle-income status on an interim basis and is expected to achieve this status permanently in 2024 if it succeeds in fulfilling the criteria on which the status of the United Nations Development Policy Committee is focused (IISD, 2018). According to the United Nations, inequality in many countries around the world continues to exist to a greater degree, and there are still significant gaps in access to health, education, sanitation, jobs and other services and resources. Sadly, one such country is Bangladesh (Khan, 2018).

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), the Gini-Measurement of Inequality was 0.458 in 2010, which increased to 0.482 in 2016. Measurement of the Gini coefficient varies from 0 to 1 where figures closer to 1 suggest greater inequality. The increase in the Gini coefficient in Bangladesh over the years suggests that the condition of inequality is deteriorating over the years (Uddin, 2020).

In the context of developing countries, especially Bangladesh, rural areas have particularly struggled to advance. Higher education opportunities are virtually non-existent in rural areas. Even in the few rural schools, the standard and quality of education is generally not up to the mark, with poor infrastructure, inadequate educational resources, a shortage of skilled teachers and administrators, ICT equipment and

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