

Study of Challenges for Higher Educational Institutions during COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 is a recently discovered strain of coronavirus family that have never seen in human beings before. Due to its contagious nature or human to human transfer ability, it is officially declared as the worldwide pandemic by World Health Organization. During this pandemic time, it is necessary to shut down all the human activities to contain the spread and educational institutions are no exception. In this article, I will highlight some of the key challenges that are being faced by higher educational institutions while containment of the spread of this virus without disrupting the studies of its students.

Keywords: COVID-19, contagious, online teaching, Higher Education

Introduction

A pandemic is a disease that is prevalent worldwide and affecting millions of people. COVID-19 is the recently declared pandemic by World Health Organisation due to its worldwide presence and deadly effects. COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus family that has never seen in the human being before. Its other close relatives are SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) where former originated from Guangdong China and latter originated from Saudi Arabia and transmitted to human beings from infected camels and bats and claimed thousands of lives in the past decade. Now this novel coronavirus which was originated in the Wuhan province of China took its center stage first in

China itself then Europe and USA. Like its relative coronavirus, it is also a contagious i.e. it is transmitted from human to human thereby causing sharp rising of infected cases within few months. In case of COVID-19, the transmission rate and number of death are exponentially high and due to its worldwide presence, it affected almost all the countries in the world.

Since this virus is contagious, and no vaccine is discovered until now for its treatment, the only way to contain its spread is through social distancing. Social distancing can only be enforced by limiting the human activities and impart awareness among the masses to keep a reasonable distance from each other. To

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enforce these kind of social distancing norms, higher educational institutions have also play an import role by limiting the presence of its stau and students in the premises while continuing the smooth functioning of the institute. In the early days of the crisis, concerns in the world focused primarily on the disruption that the pandemic would bring to student flows from China and its economic impact on their higher education systems. Euorts to prevent the spread of the virus ranged from extending or postponing academic terms to banning incoming students. Now all the countries are trying to stop the conventional teaching methods in all of their higher educational institutions and switching to online learning and teaching mythologies.

Given the new rules on social distancing, traditional face-to-face teaching is impossible. Higher Educational Institutions are looking to fulfil teaching obligations to students by various methods of remote teaching. Although switching to modern online learning methods is a good choice in this crisis, this does however create teething problems in terms of getting used to technology, loss of face to face contact and in certain disciplines the ability to access essential facilities such as laboratories.

In the next section I highlight some of the key challenges that are the concerns for management, stau and students during the pandemic situation.



Figure 1. In the pandemic, the best way to continue working is through online working

2 Challenges

While almost all the higher educational institutions are taking measures to maintain social dis- tancing protocols without hampering the studies of their students, it is

still a problematic to make sudden and unplanned managements to adopt online teaching and learning methods. I found some of the key issues at three levels in the working environment of an educational institution

while implementing the social distancing norms

2.1 Challenge at Management Level:

During this COVID-19 pandemic, management and governing bodies of the higher education institutions are facing a shortage of administrative staff and other essential services at their premises. Running the institutions with limited availability of the staff is one key challenge as it is very difficult to delegate the responsibilities of one person to other without requisite expertise and at the same time follow the strict social distancing norms. As there is no public transport available during lockdown, arranging transportation facilities for staff and material is very challenging. Institution management has to continuously interact with government authorities for arrangement of passes and other authorizations to transport essential material to and from the institution.

Apart from using limited human resources, institution management has to provide the staff with secure and reliable online resources for their smooth working while being at home. It includes web applications for online lectures and Virtual Private Networks (VPN) access to the institution's intranet services and allocating time slots to do their institutional activities.

Another key challenge the institution management will have to face is the creation of post-pandemic plan that includes conducting examinations, making new session plan for registration and admissions. Since the pandemic has hit right before exam and assessments season, and there is little student appetite for the cancellation or postponement of final exams; especially given that there is no clarity on how long the present circumstances will continue. Institutions have taken a

mixture of approaches so far, with many of them yet to release full details of their plans. Some institutions have cancelled all non-final year examinations, with the option for final year students to either sit final examinations remotely or take an unclassified degree. Other institutions are looking to provide grades via a moderation process carried out by faculties.

2.2 Challenges at staff level:

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all higher education institutions (90 percent) in a recent survey used some form of emergency distance education to complete the Spring 2020 term. And 56 percent of faculty who moved courses online were using teaching methods they had never used before. That's according to "Digital Learning Pulse Survey: Immediate Priorities," a study conducted by Bay View Analytics (formerly known as the Babson Survey Research Group), which surveyed 826 higher education faculty and administrators across 641 institutions within the United States. Even experienced online instructors reported navigating unfamiliar territory: Fifty-one percent of those respondents said they were using new teaching methods in their courses.

To conform to the social distancing rules and make minimal physical interaction between teachers and students, all the institutions have opted for online teaching methods. Going online is not as easy task as it is very difficult for the teachers to arrange lectures online and make them available to every student. Since all the students are away from the actual physical presence, it becomes very hard for the lecturers to give attention to every student attending the online class and maintain the full attendance. Another drawback of going online is the varying internet speed and intermittent disruptions of the network which might

hamper the online delivery of lectures. In India, most of the telecom companies set the data limited to 1-4 GB per day which is not sufficient to deliver video lectures throughout the day. Further more any online web application can support maximum upto 50-60 users at a time and it becomes bottleneck if the number of students attending the online lecture is more. If the pandemic persists for several months or may be years and lockdown remains in place for months, it is very difficult to conduct examination.

2.3 Challenges at student level:

As Institution Management and staff is facing the challenges during the pandemic, students are also no exceptions. Students come from different parts of the world are facing problems due to their local constraints and limited accessibility to online resources. In some remote areas where internet is either not available or having limited access, attending online lectures for the students of the higher institutions is very problematic. They also face the same limited internet data use and regular disruption of internet as faced by institution Management and staff. Another major problem students especially from engineering courses face is that they can not perform practicals during the pandemic and not able to appear in practical examinations due to inaccessibility to their respective equipment, tools and machines.

Students have largely vacated their student accommodation for their family homes, although government guidance has restricted this in cases where the only way to go home is by public transport. The authorities have now made clear in letters to universities and students that the Government's advice is that students remaining at Institution hostel should now stay where they are and not

attempt to travel. This means that students living in student halls or private rented accommodation should remain there and stay indoors whilst current restrictions are in place. Evictions of students have been paused on the same principles as evictions in the private rented sector. However, some students contractually committed to paying for university accommodation they will now not be using over the summer term, so there have been demands from student unions to cancel the contracts and save students the rent payments – if accepted, these demands are likely to cause financial issues for institutions. The situation is even more difficult for students tied into paying for private sector accommodation, where even if the university is sympathetic it may not have much sway – although, Labour are lobbying Government to ensure that adequate protections are put in place to protect students having to pay rent for empty accommodation, and that there is parity of treatment for students in university accommodation and those renting from private landlords.

3 Remedies:

In this section I suggest some of the remedies to address the issues in all the above mentioned levels. It is evident that during post pandemic time, institution may incur heavy financial losses due to delayed in the process of new registration, old re-registration and other financial activities. To cope with the financial emergency, management has to devise a plan to cut the financial liabilities by applying some loans or grants from the public financial institutions for their smooth working. Since the working of the educational institutions can not be stopped as it risks the careers of lots of the students studying there,

government bodies and financial institutions would not have any issue of giving loans or other financial helps to the institutions. Secondly, management has to work proactively and support all its stau members by not laying them ou or not deducting their salaries in order to boost their morale and a sense of social as well as financial security. It is responsibility of the management to make sure the online working environment should be productive and constructive. Management has to encourage maximum participation from stau and students level so that the convincing results could be seen in the post-pandemic era. For constructive interaction of faculty and the students, Management should provide a online Learning Management Systems (LMS) where one to one activity can be encouraged. The conventional teaching given by the "sage on the stage" diuers from the style of teaching and learning expected in a passive, asynchronous and online environment where the instructor acts as the "guide on the side." As this online teaching methodology becomes more adaptive, faculty members feel content with it and are also eager to do more in their online lectures so that they can create high quality educational experience for their students. To realize these goals, the first thing they can do is to post their syllabus on the LMS provided by the Management, then ask the students to skim through it before attending online lectures. Faculty members should also motivate the students to write down the questions and submit to LMS aher the online lecture. Lecturers should also organize some answering sessions before processing to next topics, thereby creating a constructive online learning environment. At least once in a week, prepare a questionnaire of the issues which students faced during lecture hours and seek active participation from the students in

solving these issues. This ensures that session of the class focuses more on student involvement rather than lectures. Presentation sessions may be organised for the students with problems and ask them to work together through an online platforms such as Zoom or Google Hangout , and get several students report their solutions post to the class. Few important questions can be directly asked to the students and encourage them to find the solutions online within few minutes and the best solutions can be posted back to the class. This makes it possible to draw maximum attention of the students towards the online lectures and makes them proactive rather than doing something else online. A collaborative work environment could be setup during the class where students should be encouraged to work in teams. Sporadic online competitions may be organized within the teams and a collabo-rative evaluation may be conducted. However faculty members will have to make sure that each and every students should contribute in the team's work plan. This way we can create this online learning experience more productive and constructive for the career and well being of the students.

4 Conclusion

Switching from face-to-face learning to online was the only alternative to contain the spread of the virus. A lot of work has to be done in order to implement it euectively in an innocuous way. This is first time aher world war 2, we are facing such an emergency situation in which nobody has any previous experience of handling this type of crisis. The challenges faced by higher educational institutions are more complicated as adapting everything online or virtual is not the

optimistic approach. Moreover, losing admissions from abroad or from within the country due to suspension of transport facility is one such factor that higher education institutions especially private institutions have to confront with. This may lead to salary cuts or in worst cases laying off the faculty members partially or fully. These kind of harsh but painful decision taken at the managerial level might affect the social security of the institution staff and may lead to further demoralize their working spirit and would have adverse effects on their mental health as well. The challenges mentioned in this paper should be addressed in a meaningful way at each level and a productive work environment could be created so that each and every institutional resources including human resources can be utilized to their full potential to fulfill the institutional as well as their personal goals.

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