



**Center for Global & Strategic Studies
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COVID-19 and the problem faced by the Higher Education System in Pakistan

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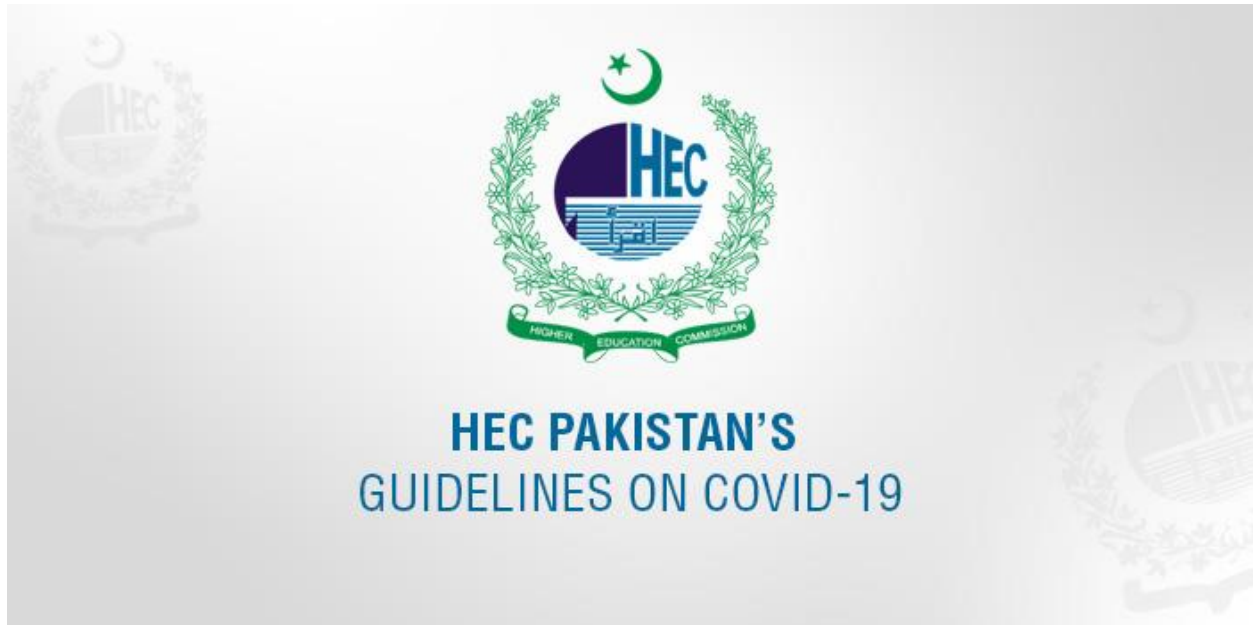


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The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is an issue of international concern that has inflicted disastrous impacts on lives and institutions across the globe. From global disruption in production to a new era of work and study from home, the virus has caused severe socioeconomic chaos resulting in the postponement and cancellation of sports religious, political, and cultural activities in many countries. The education sector



is the worst affected and is still under the influence of negativity radiated by the novel Corona Virus resulting in the closure of educational institutions (schools, colleges, and universities) in almost 193 countries. Unfortunately, the current coronavirus pandemic has almost halted the educational flow all over the world.



The situation of the education sector in Pakistan is the same as the country has enforced this global practice of shutting the doors of schools and universities in line with the social distancing recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO). Pakistan has forced its educational institutions to be close to curtail the epidemic, authorities in Pakistan instructed all the universities to organize online teaching and learning classes. Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC) asked universities to “engage faculty and quickly develop online courses and disseminate those to the students because of the coronavirus situation in the country” . The letter states: “Coronavirus pandemic



has endangered us all and online education is the solution for the safety of the faculty and the students.”

Challenges Faced by Universities during COVID-19

University closures in Pakistan have been witnessed in the past as well due to problems. However, the universities have never shifted their medium of instruction from traditional classroom learning to



E-learning which necessitates online teaching classes to be the key medium of instruction. A sudden shift to digital learning amid the coronavirus crisis has posed some challenges to the system. Having approximately 1.8 million students enrolled in the higher education sector Pakistan produces about 445,000 university graduates and 80,000 computer science graduates per year. The recent developments have caused many difficulties to students from canceling the classes and exams to emptying dorms to lowering the quality of research, Universities in Pakistan are facing increased uncertainty.

Hurdles in Remote Learning

Although universities often function as small cities and they have their civic infrastructure and above all, they are normally believed to be providing relatively much



higher support to their professionals and students but universities in Pakistan do not seem to comply with this global practice. During these times, many universities in Pakistan stand out to be ill-prepared and do not possess the necessary equipment and requirements for online learning or remote classes as their campuses close and their students return home.

No or Poor Internet Connectivity

Some university students in Pakistan came from remote areas that do not have access to the internet and proper facilities to continue with their online learning process which causes them to



suffer a lot. Some students face issues like higher costs of internet accessibility and connectivity and some don't even have access to the internet altogether. Many students reported significant disruption in the form of slower data speed while taking their classes online. Approximately 36.8% of Pakistan's population has access to the internet, transferring higher education online has limited the number of students who can participate. In its annual report, the Economist Intelligence Unit has placed Pakistan at 76th out of 100 countries in terms of availability, affordability, and ability of people to use the internet.

Many Pakistani university students have expressed their concerns regarding online learning classes and rejected this system of education due to no or poor internet



connectivity and lack of effectiveness of the online education system. According to the students, the online system of education has flopped and due to persistent internet issues, it is nearly impossible to complete their tasks and attend lectures and quizzes. They believe that instead of shifting to the online education system, the universities must consider this time as a semester break because their grades and practical learning are affecting adversely.

Limited Resources

While educational institutions are devoid of the students, the cost of institutional development is elevating. It has two-pronged implications as on one hand the students are reluctant to pay their fees owing to the fact that their learning is almost at a halt and on the other hand universities are under immense pressure to manage faculty and staff with weak or almost no prospects for new investments both in the form of new students enrolment and net tuition revenue and also in the form of financial aid or donations from any other source.

Another important factor that surfaced during the time of Corona Virus and has a direct impact on students is that due to lockdown and work from home policy, many students from remote areas or from a nominal financial background who are working as daily wagers have lost their jobs and also there are no new opportunities for them to do part-time jobs to support their studies. Due to all these many students are at risk of dropping their semester as their finances are drying up.



Electricity shortage in Pakistan is another major hurdle in developing a conducive online virtual learning environment. Many remote areas and even urbanized cities in Pakistan face the problem of load shedding throughout the year. In this situation when electricity is not available students are unable to learn because due to electricity issues, they are compelled to miss their classes sometimes.

Degrading Quality and Effectiveness of Education and Research

The quality of studies has also fallen too much lower standards as students trained in traditional classroom settings find it difficult to learn through a computer screen. University provides a suitable platform for the students hailing from different departments to conduct practical research for instance students from natural and mathematical sciences need lab testing and data analysis software like Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) that can be only available to them in universities. Lack of provision of such facilities that are particular to university campuses has reduced the quality as well as quantity of the research output. Access to libraries and print material is one of the important aspects of the university environment as students conduct research consult libraries. Furthermore, Pakistani Universities have also provided their students with access to digital libraries and credible data sources that are not accessible from home. Closed university campuses have caused students to suffer while searching for data both in print and electronic forms. Thus, impacting the quality of the research.



University is a multipurpose platform that apart from teaching you about your subject area provides you with necessary practical learning which is very important for the students for their professional growth. COVID-19 has caused many students to let go of their practical learning which in return is impacting their professional growth.

Lack of Technical Training

Computer and technological illiteracy are prudent factors that cannot be overlooked. Many students from remote areas do not have practical learning of how to use computers and software like Microsoft Office and other important software used in lab testing in natural sciences and other fields of education in Pakistan along with virtual apps like Whatsapp, Zoom and Google Meeting (in case if they have the electronic equipment with them). Apart from students many senior teachers having a traditional way of teaching and who are not acquainted with modern technologies face difficulties while using such apps. The development of a reliable online teaching platform is relatively slow and many times face unexpected hurdles including connectivity and privacy concerns surrounding online communication tools like Zoom thus making it difficult to transform instructional methods from the classroom setting to the virtual one.

Social distancing and lack of motivation

Virtual classes are unable to generate an aura of effective communication and learning, hence causing a lack of attention and interest at both teacher's and student's end.



Many students express their lack of motivation while studying from home and complain that they do not feel motivated while taking classes because many of their classmates do not take classes at first place and those who do take classes does not seem interested in learning which ultimately effects the overall learning experience and does not provide satisfactory results. Teachers also find it very difficult to teach to a blank computer screen because to ensure the quality of the session they have to make everyone switch their videos off so that the class does not face any disruption. They believe that it's very demotivating to not to get any response from the students while teaching them because teaching is two-way communication in which you deliver something and then get a response from your students but in case of online teaching classes they are unable to get the response which they are used to get in traditional classroom settings.

Way Forward

There is no doubt that formidable issues like COVID-19 create many challenges for the developing states like Pakistan, however, it also provides opportunities for the states to come up with multi-pronged and holistic actions involving a wide range of actors at all levels. Educational institutes particularly universities are in need to react skillfully and strategically and make this pandemic a chance to learn new things.

- The foremost action is that the universities must provide technical training to both students and teachers so that they must learn how to use new technologies and apps such as Zoom which has become prudent in the present scenario.



Although Pakistan has come along so far despite lacking basic requirements pertinent to virtual learning but we must train our teachers and student to prepare them and equip them for alike problems in the future.

- It is pertinent to mention that, the scope and teaching and operational style of every university in Pakistan are different therefore, developing a one-size-fits-all approach is not applicable. There is a need to understand that in times of crisis “good” now is better than “perfect” later and temporary measures to address difficulties in teaching and learning process are much more effective than waiting for a policy response from the central leadership.
- The principle of equity is imperative for universities while adopting measures to deal with the problems of online learning because many students in Pakistan does not have the required devices and connectivity to complete their online coursework. Pakistan must modernize its means of education and must provide easy access to technology, particularly the internet in most far off places so that students from these remote areas can also be streamlined with the rest of the students from urban populations to maintain an atmosphere of equality and quality learning for all.
- There is a need to evaluate the potential disruptions and threats to online learning programs and suitable measures should be taken to deal with them.
- Project-based learning and collaborative training can be feasible options in this regard. As an increasing number of employers demand educational programs that closely meet the requirements of the modern global industry, the higher



education sector in Pakistan especially universities should facilitate their graduating students by arranging mentoring sessions.

- Universities must arrange online skills development programs along with the traditional coursework to ease the pressure of employment uncertainty on the students and must also create new avenues for their professional growth and development, for instance, paid internships.
- Efforts are also required on the part of university students. They must get themselves enrolled in internationally acclaimed courses that are available free or at a nominal cost. It will help them to develop their skills and will boost their educational expertise per international standards.
- Pakistan must strive to develop a platform like MIT Open Course Ware (MIT OCW) – an initiative by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to publish all of its educational materials online which is free of cost and is available to anyone, anywhere. Universities in Pakistan must extend their assistance in this regard.
- Although HEC has developed an extended version of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) at the University of Karachi which is aimed at providing similar services to the student it is not known to the majority of the students and is often un-accessible. Therefore, there is a need to direct students to such platforms so that they can get benefits out of them.
- Pakistan must induce the culture of online learning with greater accessibility for a large number of students to ensure the success of virtual learning in situations like the pandemic or even in conflict. For that, Pakistan must digitize its system



of education. The educational institutions in Pakistan can partner themselves with digital networks to provide a medium for digital education.