

ONLINE EDUCATION DURING COVID -19: CHALLENGES FACED BY HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The whole world is facing an unprecedented situation due to COVID-19 which has created disruption in every sector. Unplanned closure of the educational institutions has compelled the educators and learners to shift from physical classroom to virtual classroom thus bringing a change in the paradigm of education. It has also created many challenges for the learners especially in higher education and to keep pace with the academic pursuits amidst all this is a great concern. The present research study emphasized on the various challenges (academic as well as psychological) which the students of higher education are facing during this changing scenario. This study falls under the domain of descriptive research conducted on a sample of 200 students studying in higher education and the data was collected by using a self-developed questionnaire through Google forms. For analysis of data, percentage analysis has been used. The results revealed that 28.21% strongly agreed and 26.94% agreed that they are facing academic challenges while 30.94% of students strongly agreed and 28.56% agreed that they are dealing with some kind of psychological challenges during this COVID-19 situation.

Keywords: COVID-19, challenges, online education, physical and psychological health

INTRODUCTION

Novel coronavirus has emerged as a pandemic worldwide and the whole world is facing a different kind of scenario viz. socially, economically and, psychologically due to the outbreak of this deadly virus i.e. COVID-19 (Lee, 2020). This virus has not only changed the vision and thought process of a common man but all the nations are contributing collectively to fight against it. The number of casualties is increasing all over the world and it will continue to increase until there is no availability of the medication and vaccination to deal with this virus. At the global level to break the chain reaction of this virus, WHO and the government of various nations are creating awareness among the masses through various media as well as have opted policy of lockdown. This complete or partial lockdown has short term as well as long term effects on each and every sector at the global level (Brown, 2020). With the passage of time, all the sectors are trying hard to put back on track with certain restrictions but one sector which despite taking help from all kind of digital measures is still lacking behind and that is education (Prokopowicz, 2020). Experts over the globe have the viewpoint that due to Covid-19 universities will remain close for a longer period (Aucejo, French, Araya & Zafar, 2020).

Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2020, suggested that government should rebuild the education system as COVID- 19 is a big setback for the school and higher education (UNESCO,2020). All the stakeholders of education i.e. students, teachers, parents, management, etc. are facing many challenges in this period that are not only affecting their efficiency to work but also creating worries regarding the uncertainty of the future (UNESCO,2020). SCHEV conducted a survey on the challenges of COVID-19 for students which revealed that 80 % of students are concerned with their academics and 34 % of students are facing technological challenges and 76 % of students are concerned with their mental health. (Allison,2020; Johnson,2020). A report published in Indian Express depicted that around 9.3% students from IITs in India are unable to download any kind of study material provided by their institution through online mode and 10% students are not equipped to have access to online class through Zoom, Google meet or Webex, etc. (Mitra,2020). The report further emphasized that students are unable to understand the concepts through online mode because of the communication gap between the teacher and student and missing out of any live session further creates the problem for them as they don't find any other way to clarify their academic queries (Mitra,2020). In the developed countries 89% of college students are not

facing any kind of internet and technological problems (Osborne, 2020). Moreover, students are facing stress and anxiety due to social isolation, the burden of academic work, etc. Many higher education students who are about to complete their graduation or post-graduation programs are having mental stress at conscious as well as unconscious level due to their pending work in the form of dissertations, projects and assignments (The Guardian, 2020).

Majority of the students also believed that they are experiencing a new kind of moving learning experience. According to a survey 60% of students agreed that COVID-19 has increased virtual or collaborative learning (Merinoni, Land & Jensen, 2020). Besides these challenges: distractions and time management, self-motivation, and uncertainty of the future are some issues to which college students have to deal with (Friedman, 2020). In many countries providing basic amenities and emotional distress is also a concern (Fairfax, 2020). In country like India internet connectivity is the major challenge and moreover online education only cater the need of some theoretical disciplines but the technical subjects which are highly practical based and need use of laboratory are suffering the most. Students who want to pursue their higher education in foreign countries are in stress that this pandemic might influence their future goals and there is fear of losing one year and the researcher who are pursuing their Ph.D. in any discipline also suffering from the same fear and going through the same kind of anxiety, although the higher education ministry has allowed them extensions but still break in the continuity of the research work has ruined their work habits. Moreover, there are some pedagogical/learning concerns like online exams and tests, development of psychomotor skills, testing of academic integrity and personal distresses also which are hindering the effectiveness of learning during this unprecedented situation (Grajek, 2020). Psychological impact of social isolation is serving as a critical distractor causing mental stress, anxiety, and loneliness (CNN, 2020; Chen, 2020).

In most of the countries now lock down has lifted up and particularly in India ministry of higher education has permitted to reopen the universities and colleges so that technical and practical subjects can be taught in offline mode. But despite of all relaxations students are not turning up and physical presence of the students in the classroom is negligible because of again surge in covid-19 cases particularly in Punjab; this condition is different in various regions of the country. It doesn't mean that students from all over the world are affecting or facing the same challenges in the same proportion there are some characteristics which differentiate their level of suffering, they are affecting disproportionately. Students belonging to low socioeconomic status and those who belong to rural areas may have inadequate facilities for learning like lack of smartphones, violent home environment, private and special space for learning, etc. (McCormic, 2020). The postgraduate students are realizing their dependence on others to achieve their professional goals. Students are feeling lonely and as a result unable to focus on their education and facing a high level of anxiety. In the present scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study has been taken up to assess the challenges faced by the students of higher education institutions due to online education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the present study is to get the answers of the following research questions:

Q. What are the psychological challenges faced by students of higher education institutions?

Q. What are the educational challenges faced by students of higher education institutions?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research design was employed to conduct the present study. A sample of 200 higher education students of different colleges (Government, self-financed, government-aided) affiliated to Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, and having different streams (Science, Social science, and information technology) was taken through purposive sampling technique who have had an experience of online learning. A self-constructed questionnaire in the form of five point likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly disagree) was developed on the basis of the psychological as well as academic challenges faced by higher education students. At the initial stage, a total of 25 statements were framed which were later on reduced to 16 after having interviews and interaction with students on the digital platform. Responses of the students were recorded through Google form developed by the investigator. For analysis of data percentage analysis has been used.

INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

Statement wise percentage responses of the students are given in the tabular form. Interpretation and discussion of the data collected are presented as follows:

Table 1: Responses of the Students Regarding Academic Challenges

S.no	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	I think I have to replan my goals keeping in view the changing situation.	21%	29%	29%	15%	06%
2.	I am facing problem of internet connectivity for online learning	34%	22%	22.5%	13.5%	08%
3.	I don't have knowledge of handling various applications and tools used for online learning	16.5%	20.5%	26.5%	20%	16.5%
4.	I believe that COVID- 19 will definitely effect employment opportunities	48.5%	24%	12%	7.5%	8%
5.	I am in dilemma to choose alternative future plans	23%	28%	30	12.5	6.5
6.	I believe that COVID-19 has limited the educational opportunities	32%	30.5%	21%	11%	5.5%
7.	I believe that this crisis has given importance to a new kind of moving learning experience to all of us.	30.5%	34.5%	23.5%	4.5%	7%
8.	I have got into the habit of piling up my work as there is no check on me.	25%	27%	29.5%	13%	5.5%

Table 2: Responses of the Students Regarding Psychological Challenges

S.No	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.	I am in stress regarding uncertainty of future	30%	31.5%	21.5%	10.5%	6.5%
2.	I am feeling emotionally unstable.	20%	18.5%	32%	17%	12.5%
3.	Social isolation has affected my interpersonal relationships	19.5%	25%	24.5%	19%	12%
4.	Increases in screen time have affected my physical and mental health	41%	23.5%	24.5%	6%	5%
5.	I feel that I need some self-motivation	36.5%	35%	18%	5.5%	5%
6.	I need to develop time management skills to improve mental health.	39.5%	39%	15.5%	4%	2%
7.	I am unable to concentrate on academics which is increasing my anxiety level.	34.5%	26%	19.5%	14.5%	5.5%
8.	I am feeling lonely even though the digital tools are offering ways to connect.	26.5	30%	24%	11%	8.5%

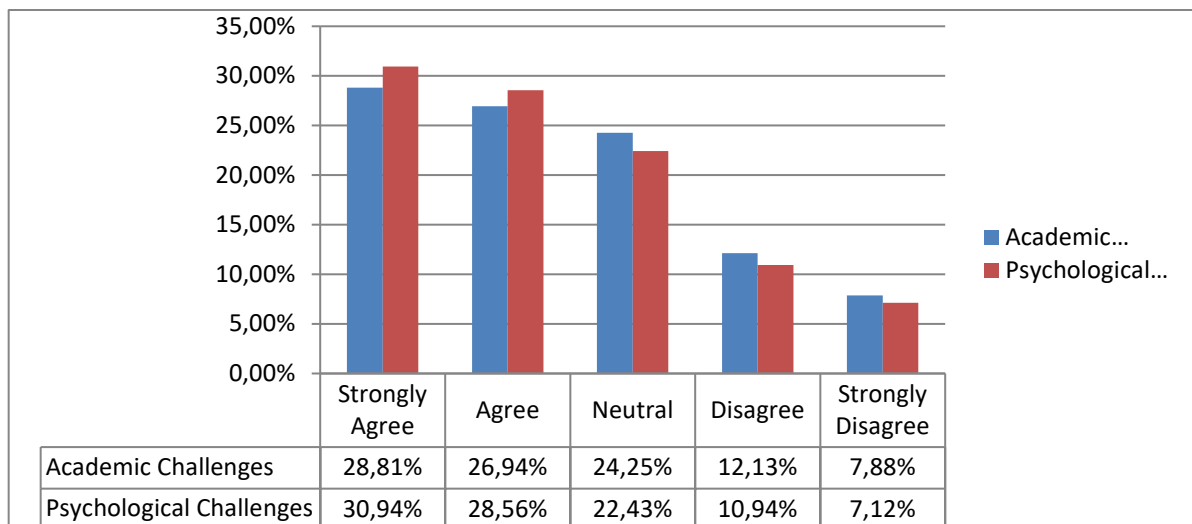


Fig.1 Showing Percentage of Academic and Psychological Challenges Faced by Higher Education Students

DISCUSSION

From the Table 1 and Fig. 1 it is observed that 48.5 % of students strongly agreed and 24% agreed that in the present scenario as well as in immediate future employment opportunities will definitely suffer and there will be a dearth of employment opportunities. In India most of the recruitment process in every sector has now got postponed due to this pandemic. On campus placements for students has also been effected. Increase in unemployment is also expected (Jena, 2020). 34% of students strongly agreed and 22.5% agreed that they are facing internet connectivity problems, despite of the fact that the major population of respondents belonged to urban areas. COVID-19 has disclosed the digital inequalities in India. A report published in Business Today, 2020 stated that, “With more than 630 million subscribers, the country is home to the world's second-largest internet user base. But connectivity is a challenge as mobile data is the main source of internet.” 32% of students strongly agreed and 30% of students agreed that this critical situation has limited their educational opportunity as many students are usually interested in studying abroad and due to the prohibition of international migration they have to choose some academic alternatives. An educational survey was done by education.com on the impact of COVID -19 pandemic on the future plans of students who want to study in a foreign nation and the results revealed that the students who were postponing their academic plans or choosing other alternatives, amongst them 59% of students choose the alternatives which will provide them financial benefits and 41% agreed that they will be stick to their already decided educational plans (Pang,2020). 30.5% of students strongly agreed and 34.5% agreed that this crisis has given importance to new kinds of moving learning experiences as they came to know about various new technological applications and digital platforms for learning. Only 16% of students agreed that they don't know how to handle the new learning platforms. 25% of students strongly agreed and 27% agreed that they have developed the habit of pilling up of their work as there is no check and strict supervision of the teacher on them. According to survey approximately one fourth of the sample students has started devoting more time to their academics borne in mind the present situation, while another one quarter has started taking their academics more leisurely and has decreased their study time (Aucejo, French, Araya & Jafar,2020). 23% of students are in dilemma regarding the choice of alternative future plans, they are confused rather in tension regarding the uncertainty of the future, and 21% of students strongly agreed that they have to replan their future goals. 16.5% of students strongly agreed and 20.5% agreed that they don't have knowledge of handling various applications and tools related to education because of lack of exposure to these in their earlier education.

As far as psychological challenges (Table 2 and fig.1) are concerned, it can be observed that in 30.94% of students strongly agreed and 28.56 % of students agreed that they are facing various psychological challenges. Further elaboration represented that 41% of students strongly agreed and 23.5% agreed that due to online education their screen time has increased and such an increase has affected their mental as well as physical health. Research conducted by Rogers Behavioural Health (2020) suggests that, “Increased screen time may be related to a decrease in both sleep quality and sleep duration. Insufficient sleep, either in quality or duration, has been associated with worsening of various mental health conditions like depression, anxiety and isolation”. 39.5% of students strongly agreed and 39% agreed that they due to lockdown and closure of educational institutions their routine of study has totally disturbed and there is a need to develop time management skills so that they can improve their mental health. 36.5% strongly agreed and 35% of students agreed that social isolation has undoubtedly affected their lifestyle and there are many factors like fear of this pandemic, financial crisis etc. which are creating depressing environment so they need self-motivation in this crisis time. Loneliness occurred due to isolation and seclusion

has developed sense of dejection, depression and even impose substantial lunacy to those who faces such situation during COVID-19 (Brooks, Webster, Smith, Woodland, Wessely, Greenberg & Rubin., 2020). 34.5% of students strongly agreed and 26% agreed that they are unable to concentrate on their academics which had increased their anxiety level. Due to restrictions on social and educational life not only students but everyone is feeling anxiety resulting into lack of concentration, increase in laziness and over occupancy of mind with negative thoughts. 20% of students strongly agreed and 18.5% agreed that they feel emotionally weak as they are not getting enough personal space and a proper outlet to express and share their feelings and fears with their friends and spending more time with media which further contributing in their mental and emotional disturbance. 30% of students strongly agreed that they are in stress regarding the uncertainty of the future while 21.5% of students are neutral in this case. Lockdown and further closure of the educational institutions for a longer period of time has created confusion in the mind of the students regarding their future educational and professional goals. 26.5% of students strongly agreed and 30% of students agreed that they feel lonely even though the digital platforms are offering so many ways to connect. Personal touch has somewhere lost due to this pandemic and students are not able to coping up with stress and storms. Only 19.5% of students strongly agree that social isolation has affected their interpersonal relationships, it means social isolation has not adversely affected the interpersonal relationships of the students. They still have faith in their friends and social circle.

FINDINGS

Due to COVID-19, educational institutions are facing many challenges and moreover, realized the need to upgrade the infrastructure and technological knowledge to meet the requirements of virtual classroom (Jena, 2020). In the present study, the top three educational challenges faced by students were limited employment, educational opportunities and internet connectivity issues. In the present survey study although 61% of respondents were belonging to the urban areas and 33.5% of the sciences and 17% of information technology stream still they were facing internet connectivity and technology handling problems. As far as psychological challenges were concerned, when students are getting education through online mode, their screen time has increased and they believe that this increase in screen time has influenced their mental as well as physical health. Another great challenge is that they need to develop self-motivation and time management skills.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Educational Challenges: Prompt actions should be taken to optimise learning experiences at higher education. A multi-spiked policy is necessary in the education sector to manage the present critical situation. Need to develop a positive attitude among students through proper guidance and counselling so that they become able to choose alternative educational and occupational plans. It is required to make amendments in the methodology of teaching at higher level of education keeping in view the requirements of e-learning and virtual classroom. Teachers should adopt four C's approach i.e. concern, communication, consideration and consistency. Concern should be for learning and content, communication with students, consideration for being flexible and consistency in follow up. Such innovative approaches can help in engaging the students and also they will feel concerned. Students as well as teachers should be trained properly to handle the electronic gadgets, so that they don't feel uncomfortable while operating them for online learning. Internet connectivity issues should be taken into consideration and governments should urge various telecommunication companies to improve their network services in rural as well as urban areas. Mobile-based learning models should be given priority. For effective online learning, training should be given to the students in open educational-digital learning resources and Learning management system through webinars and special training sessions. Measures should be taken at the university level to improve the mental health of students and also policies should be framed in such a way that can alleviate the effect of this critical period on research work, projects, jobs, and career of the students.

Psychological Challenges: Recent studies have shown that during period of Covid-19 students at each level (schools and colleges) are facing psychological distress and immediate measures should be taken to reduce their distress. Parents and the teachers have to take some extra efforts for the well-being of the students. They have to indulge them in self-soothing activities so that they can get rid of the excessive screen time. There is need to perform such activities which can help to manage stress and improve resilience. Until the universities and colleges reopen students need to have targeted psychological intervention through various digital media, parents, teachers, and friends. The digital platforms which are used for online learning should be used for human interactions and discussion rather than just for academic purpose. So they can get an opportunity to let out their emotions. This may help in reducing the feeling of social alienation. University counsellors and psychologist should administer scales like behavioural and emotional screening systems on the students to monitor the change in the behaviour of students. Students should be encouraged to do light exercises at home and also to eat healthy diet to boost their immune system. Social fear related to Covid-19 need to be properly addressed. Students have to limit their media as scrolling and watching different channels and sites leads to more anxiousness. They should watch such videos and text which provide them comfort and social support. They should find new ways of expressing kindness,

patience and compassion. Need to address psychosocial challenges of the students before teaching. A fruitful interaction should be there between teachers, parents, universities or college authorities and students so that possible solutions for any kind of psychological and social problems can be sought. In the views of Mustafa (2020), "Create communities to ensure regular human interactions, enable social caring measures, and address possible psychosocial challenges that students may face when they are isolated." Universities should take initiatives like yoga and meditation sessions, online cultural and academic competitions (fine arts, debate, declamation, photography, etc.) to dig out the talent of the students and it will ultimately provide some sort of self-motivation to students and help to break the monotony of online learning and lessen the nervousness, anxiety and mental pressure of the students.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has immensely affected the education system in India. All the human and non-human resources related to education have suffered a lot in both positive and negative way. Positive impact of this pandemic in the field of education is that educational institutions have moved towards the blended mode and are using various digital platforms to provide education and to communicate with students. But on the other hand, such new modes have created so many challenges for the students. To address the challenges faced by students of higher education, an unprecedented level of communication and personalized outreach is required. Students should take this epidemic situation in a right manner because if their psychological pressure will increase their self-regulations will fail while the dynamics of the pandemic and its impacts continue to evolve, colleges and universities need to employ various approaches and strategies that can reduce the effects of this pandemic on higher education, and hopefully, soon the education sector will be back on track with the fruitful efforts of all the stakeholders.

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