IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HIGHER EDUCATION-CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

*Dr. Indu Jain, *Dr. Anju Sachdeva,
*Ms. Meenu Gupta

The impact of COVID-19 can be seen in every sphere of life. Especially when it comes to education; this is the biggest sector that has been adversely affected by this pandemic. Right from the big businesses to educational institutions this Pandemic has literally altered and devastated the traditional ways of carrying out these things. The educational sector has been fighting to survive the crises. The teaching learning and evaluation methodologies have been completely altered by this pandemic.The digitalization of education became a necessity in order to provide seamless education. This paper would be discussing the problems faced by the students in India who are pursuing higher education during this pandemic.This paper also tries to find out the positive & negative impact it had on the teaching and learning.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has forced many countries to enforce lockdowns that brought everything to a standstill including the teaching and learning process This pandemic has made the world to observe social distancing in the public space. COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China and then it gradually started spreading in other parts of the world. It was only in 2020 the WHO declared it as pandemic. It has claimed millions of lives across the world. According to the UNESCO report more than 90% of total student population in the world was affected due to the pandemic during the initial phase of its outbreak. It has caused a serious and very deep-rooted impact on the social, economic and also psychological life of people in different parts of the world. The guidelines that were issued by the WHO which were ratified by the most of the countries across the world compelled the governments to shut down the institutions of mass gatherings.

All the educational institutions in India had to be shut down Right from the primary schools to the universities. The regular classes were suspended citing threat to the lives of the learners and the teachers. It also affected the lives of the aspirants who were preparing for competitive & entrance exams.

It has raised multiple issues right from the health to the wealth also affecting the day to day functioning of the life due to its rampant spread across the world and India is definitely not an exception to it. The economy has suffered severe setback which can be reflected in different sectors. One of the major and devastating impact this pandemic brought in the global education is , it led to sudden shift of education from classroom teaching to the online mode of teaching and learning that has affected the teaching and learning process in Universities, colleges and schools and thus it has significantly disrupted the higher education sector in India. This shift in education has brought a great change in the pattern of learning with certain positive and negative impacts.

In the case of the country like India this online teaching has registered devastating impact on the lives of those students who are underprivileged and coming from very poor section of the society. In India it has also brought certain severe effects on the conventional learning process of face-to-face interaction even when some technical aids were introduced in the classrooms. However also it is important to note that there are still certain educational institutions in India which are not very well equipped to the modern technological facilities in the classroom. Thus, we can say that with the introduction of new method of learning through digital mode of learning, learning became very easy to the students as they can sit at home and get access but at the same time some students also had to face problem due to the poor internet connectivity which brings to the notice that even after India is adapting to online learning methods, still there lies an obstacle as entire population do not have access to internet and E-learning facility. Rural people are still deprived of technology. Therefore, it is important to understand that there is positive as well as negative effect on the Indian society. This paper intends to understand the issues that are associated with the higher education in India due to COVID-19.

Impact on Higher Education

Around the second week of March 2020, state government across the country began to shut down the schools, colleges due to COVID-19. As we all know that this was the crucial time for students as different University, college examination is usually held during this period and also different entrance test of various universities and competitive examination were to be held during this period. And since there found to be no immediate solution to prevent the outbreak of COVID 19, college, school and university closure had to be made compulsory to prevent the spread of virus. It has affected more than 285 million young learners in India. Students had to face severe problem as they were not aware of the future examination especially students who were in the final year and also those who were to answer entrance test. This closure of educational institutions disrupted the structure of learning, assessment and examination which made the Indian education system go through an irreversible teaching & learning crisis. And therefore, sudden shift was made from traditional face to face classroom method to the online mode of education. It just became like the yesterday's disruptors became today's survivor. Online method was considered as the threat but today it has come to rescue. However, there were several issues that also started coming up along with the introduction of online mode of teaching in higher educational institutions (HEIs)

One of the significant questions arises regarding online learning that whether it is effective?
However, answer is that it is effective for those who have right access to the technology. Internet plays very vital role for better learning and for higher education. However, in the country like India all students cannot be expected to have all the required facilities due to different socio-economic background which might cause discomfort and frustration to students which might give the student the feeling of segregation and thus create digital divide between the rich who can avail all the facilities and the poor who cannot afford to purchase the equipment's that are required for E-Learning. So, in India lot of people are not completely well equipped with all the facilities and many times they cannot get access to fast internet which is needed at the time of Teaching &learning process. Therefore, India is still facing this challenge of digital divide. Lack of student involvement during the online classes has increased absenteeism and poor performance. Unfortunately, student's passive role in the classroom became one of the significant reasons for ineffective online teaching and learning process.

Mobile applications or virtual meeting platforms like Zoom, Google meet became the virtual meeting hubs. Educational institutions directed teachers to engage classes through online mode using the virtual meeting platforms like Zoom & Google meet. The teachers who were not well versed with modern technology and mobile applications had to struggle a lot to engage online classes due to the sudden shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Some teachers were just conducting classes because they were asked to do so. A lot of students were just joining the classes to mark themselves present. They hardly paid attention towards what was being taught by the teacher as the factor like class control doesn't exist on these virtual platforms.

Many entrance tests, job recruitment too got cancelled which created a negative impact on the lives of the students. All these imply towards increase in unemployment in India. Thus, with the increase of unemployment situation, there were enough chances of diminishing interest for education due to the struggle for food. This growing issue has caused mental stress amongst the youngsters and youths who are the future of India. These were certain problems which affected the people in India who were severely affected due to the pandemic which created threat to the future of India.

Though COVID-19 created many negative impacts on education, at the same time it has brought new dimension to the teaching learning process in India. Though there are many drawbacks of online learning, it became survivor during the worst situation in the country. It enhanced the digital literacy. People started learning and using digital technology. Electronic media was used for sharing information worldwide. Students and teacher got good opportunities to   interact   with   different   people   around   the   globe   improving   the communication. Students preferred Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode of learning as it encourages self-learning. The HEIs also gave their positive response by adopting different strategies during this crisis situation. UGC, MHRD also have made available teaching and learning materials for students to motivate learning. Some of the digital initiatives have proved to be very effective during the COVID crisis.

Development and change are one of the inevitable parts of human life however during the pandemic people had to accept sudden change as it became necessary for the survival. It encouraged personalized learning which in long run will be beneficial for qualitative teaching and learning process. It also facilitates improvement in collaborative work. The purpose of education is to enable oneself to better the world in which they live. Technology today has become need of an hour. It is difficult to imagine colleges and university education without the use of digital resources which has provided different educational and academic information. However, it is also necessary to understand that it shouldn't reinforce structures of power and inequality. It should not create digital divide between rich and poor. As we cannot expect in country like India to have availability of all required resources due to different socio-economic conditions in India. Online mode of learning can be the best mode of teaching if it can be accessed by all the sections of the society however it can pose threat if certain section of society cannot avail this facility and thus exclusion. It is therefore important to take cognizance of online education and plan for interventions that will prioritize greater inclusivity, connectivity and equitability. It is important that colleges and University understands the experience and issues of the students and prepare according the further and design the study pattern in such a way that all students benefit.

Opportunities for student mobility and practical exposure through exchange programs, internships, participation in conferences, and more could likely be off the table for some time. Innovative new forms of collaboration and alternative paradigms are needed to drive learning, research and teaching. Sharing of knowledge between institutions globally through joint-teaching, virtual guest lectures, etc. could give students an enriched global perspective in these difficult times.
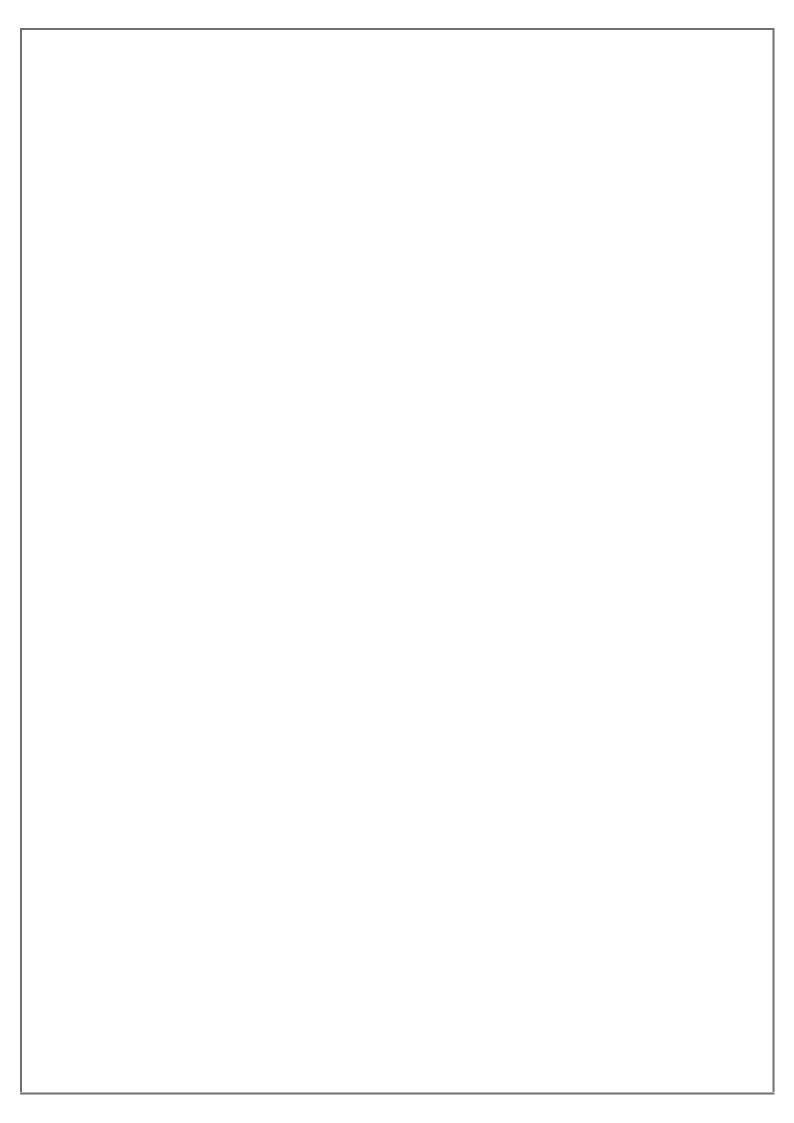
Lakhs of Indian students have increasingly chosen to pursue higher education abroad. As per reports, India is the second-largest source of international students in the world. This usual exodus is likely to transform—at least in the immediate few years—to an influx into Indian institutions, given travel restrictions and health risks.

This means that crores of rupees and resources spent in foreign education could potentially be retained in the country, as more students look towards options at home. While international institutions might bear the brunt of the change, it is a remarkable opportunity for India to enhance its capacities and offer quality education at par with global standards.

The economy has taken a severe hit, and its ripples can be felt in the education sector as well. While many students will chart alternative paths, the pandemic is also leaving others in limbo. As unemployment is predicted to increase and the financial capacity of Indian homes comes under stress, the country can expect a drop in enrolments and challenges with tuition fees. Public institutions too, may be under threat of reduced funding. On the flipside, the pandemic could also prompt reform in fee structures and creation of more cost-effective programs.

Beyond the top band of institutional excellence with private universities setting best practices, Indian academia has been in need of transformation, long before the onset of the pandemic. There is an opportunity to rethink the traditional education system now.

Digital learning is leading the charge as a mainstay, and many new trends are picking up momentum across the globe. Multidisciplinary and modular pedagogy that afford transferable skills and customized learning will succeed. Post-pandemic times could see a blend of e-learning and mainstream face-to-face teaching with a boost from traditional universities and the ed-tech sector.