

IMPACT OF COVID ON EDUCATION SECTOR IN INDIA

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ABSTARCT

There is a famous quote- “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a long time”- epitomizing the importance of education. The entire history of mankind has seen tales of pandemic and the misery that it had brought along, but the only silver lining in those tales was the emergence of humans standing on their feet, fighting and braving the odds and difficulties to rise like the phoenix bird that rose from the ashes. It was the power of determination, knowledge and the guidance of the educated leaders that humans fought, survived and emerged more resilient after these tales of miseries. The Indian society has the same will power, openness, tolerance; and the urge to learn, to recover and emerge strong from this pandemic. The present short communication summarizes the experiences in India during the pandemic with specific reference to education sector.

INTRODUCTION

Looking at the downside of Covid-19, offer letters are being revoked, even in premium institutes like IITs and IIMs. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy’s estimates on unemployment shot up from 8.4% in mid-March’20 to 23 % in early April’20 and the urban unemployment rate to 30.9%. Depression, emotional breakdowns, panic attacks, anxiety, suicidal tendencies were on the rise. Also tension, fear, stress, ambiguity and uncertainty about future- all these took a toll on their mental well-being. Besides, ignorance, lack of awareness, societal stigma, taboos and prejudices regarding mental health disorders many times prevent them from seeking out professional help- which deteriorate the scenario in the long run. In a country like India, where the government tries to ensure higher retention rate in the primary schools with schemes like mid-day meals and free rationing in return, this online education took a toll on the livelihood of such families as well who depend largely on these resources. Where a substantial percentage of population lives below poverty line in India, for them during this lockdown period without any earnings providing school/college fees is simply a nightmare. This has increased the no of school/college drop-outs.

Even in many middle class families, many parents have lost their jobs or got pay cuts- so it is really difficult for those students as well to pay fees and continue education. When schools and colleges were re-opened, they have to operate with reduced classroom strength, to ensure social distancing. It meant the scope for classroom education was curtailed and e-learning had to fill up the gap. It is expected with blended learning (both online & offline modes) as potential solutions for schools and colleges, e-learning will continue to dominate

this sector in the future. India has been predominantly following the classroom model of education, right from the ancient times when the “*gurukul system*” of education was practiced where the students would go to the home of their guru and learn from them. India was slowly adapting to the online mode of teaching as was seen in the foreign countries.

The pandemic brought about the necessity to shift from the classroom model to the online model. Digitization of education was already on the way before the pandemic, but the crisis has accelerated the transformation. Using the crisis as an opportunity, some schools and colleges have already found a way to move forward by harnessing the power of digital technology. But we need to address some challenges.

The main obstacle is the DIGITAL DIVIDE due to the non-availability of high-speed internet in rural and remote areas. The second issue is the financial backwardness of the students. A large section of the society still cannot afford to buy good quality smart phone or laptop which is a prerequisite for the online educational system. Lack of human touch in online education, teacher supervision and most importantly lack of opportunities for first hand learning in complex subjects such as science in laboratories- are the major problems. Sometimes long explanations of a concept in an online class, leave learners passive and ultimately distracted. Sourcing ready-to-use digital content and compatible digital tools for online classes are problematic. Students adapting to has been a tough challenge. In rural areas, online medium is often belittled; there are also social barriers such as girls are expected to do household chores instead of attending online classes whereas boys are often expected to work on the family farmlands. Screen times of students have increased significantly.

Unconventional methods of examination and evaluation like self-evaluation, peer assessment, class participation, open book exams etc. caused stress. Switching to the online mode and getting accustomed to it are huge challenges for teachers also. They are being pressurized to get acquainted in a short time with many hard and soft skills. Interruptions like load-shedding, technical issues, network connectivity issues, even problems like no separate study room lead to ongoing chaos in the background.

On the positive side, Covid-10 brought in some welcome changes. The online classes provided opportunities to reach out to students even in the remotest parts of the country. Virtual classrooms have already become a popular reality. The online classes have a well-planned sequence of activities for ‘active engagement’. Rich texts, images, online quizzes, audio/video podcasts, presentations, surveys, investigatory projects, gamification of education, reports with illustrations and graphics- all these bring fun, excitement, online peer-collaboration, involvement and challenges. It also allows learners to learn at their own pace, revisiting the recorded lessons as many times as they wish before moving on to the next stage. Students can take multiple online free or paid courses at the same time depending on their convenience. This way they can upgrade their skills and nurture their interests at the comfort of home. Awareness that classes are open to public and parental scrutiny has made the teachers conscious of delivering their best in online classes.

Platforms like Kahoot, Hot Potato, edpuzzle, slido, menti, mettl, padlet and Google Meet are used extensively by schools and colleges for interactive sessions with students and also for evaluation purposes. Lenovo’s SmarterEd is a new endeavour to bridge the country’s massive student-teacher gap with smarter technology. The platform was created in collaboration with eVidyaloka, an NGO that connects volunteer teachers with students. Zoom Video Communications Inc. and Cisco Systems Inc. are among tech companies offering deals to attract institutions looking to offer online lessons.

DIKSHA the national platform for grades 1 to 12 provides access to a large number of curriculum linked e-content through several cases and solutions such as QR coded Energized Textbooks (ETBs), courses for teachers, quizzes and others. Swayam Prabha DTH channels are meant to support and reach those who do not have access to the internet.

Education technology companies like Byju, Udacity, Udemy, Simplilearn, Imarticus, ClearIAS, StudyIQ, Coursera, Upgrad etc to provide online education ranging from school and college students to working professionals. Byju has shown tremendous signs of progress by becoming valued as a decacorn and increasing its valuation to 10.5 billion USD.

Many prominent foreign universities have already gone online with their lectures while claiming to go lenient with their assessment. The pandemic has resulted in visa and travel restrictions in many countries which prevents international students from relocating to some countries for their studies. Most students are demanding an extension in visas, however, this is not in the control of universities. Many students who received a letter of acceptance from international universities rejected the offer letters with a broken heart. IHE (Internationalization of Higher Education) Research Team at Manipal, found that seven out of ten students have already dropped the ideas of going abroad for studies. Many institutions had to pivot to online-only established platforms and refund money to students who have decided to discontinue. The American Council on Education, which represents 1700 universities and education-related associations estimates that enrollment for the next academic year will drop by 15 percent, including a projected decline of 25 percent for international students, resulting in a revenue loss for institutions of \$23 billion.

Online Education Market in India was expected to be valued at INR 360 Billion by 2024, but this pandemic has increased this demand. According to survey, conducted by the learning company Pearson, 82% Indians felt that the pandemic has permanently changed the way people work; 80% said new jobs and skill needs will arise as a result of the pandemic; and 77% said the pandemic has made them rethink their career path.

We can conclude that India's education sector is ready for the transformation to go digital. The basic infrastructure needs to be taken care to ensure that education reaches out to every student in every corner of India and helps them in their overall growth and development. We must find positive aspects in this pandemic and follow the motto - "Every cloud has a silver lining". The education sector is one of the few sectors where the demand from the side of the students and supply from colleges, online educational platforms have remained constant with minor exceptions.

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