

# RISK MANAGEMENT AMIDST COVID-19 BY PAKISTANI UNIVERSITIES: A STUDY OF UNIVERSITY OF THE PUNJAB

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## ABSTRACT

*The rapid growth of the COVID-19 pandemic has induced universities to strive for developing solutions to detect and control the spread of this virus. Many public and private sector universities across the globe are trying to play their part in managing this risk, be it a developed or developing country. The present study attempts to shed light on the level of responsiveness and management among universities towards the pandemic risks. This research focuses on the case of the largest state university, University of the Punjab, situated in Pakistan. The measures taken by a state-owned university reflects that academic institutions may differ in terms of the rapidity in the response taken during such pandemics. Such responses vary in terms of the role of universities in accelerating activities such as enhancing virus testing facilities, setting up telemedicine helplines, creating awareness among the public through mass communication; and, ensuring smooth running of academic activities by switching from physical classrooms to virtual classrooms. The study also identifies the challenges universities are facing, such as the financial risk of closure of the physical campus and academic staff training to enable them to conduct online academic sessions. Lastly, the article provides few recommendations that universities should follow such as, realizing the sense of social responsibility; collaborative research by pooling research-based resources among the universities nationwide and creating an effective information technology system to conduct virtual academic sessions. Finally, the study also provides future directions to study the leadership styles of various leaders of different countries and organizations in terms of their responsiveness to tackle the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; State-owned Universities; Risk Management; Social Responsibility; Online Education.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the detection of the novel Coronavirus in December 2019 and its outbreak in the city of Wuhan, China, its spread is phenomenal (Wang et al., 2020). Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) reports around 4.9 million individuals in approximately 114 countries globally affected by the virus, with a death toll of about 323,412 infected (WHO, 2020). Since then, all nations, no matter economically sound or not, are severely stricken with millions of individuals becoming unemployed. Healthcare professionals and paramedic staff are in vulnerable conditions due to a lack of supplies of disinfectants, masks, surgical gowns, and equipment needed to deal with the highly contagious disease of COVID-19 (Luo et al., 2020).

In times of such a global emergency, the government organizations in all countries are struggling hard to respond quickly and striving hard to flatten the curve by creating awareness among the citizens, e.g., practicing social distancing and preventing overcrowding of citizens.

Unfortunately, the situation is more intense among developing countries that are already facing economic crunch for decades, such as Pakistan.

Up till now, in Pakistan, the corona affected cases are still on the rise with a total of above 48,000 affected patients, and the number of deaths reported is around 1000 (Worldometers, 2020). At the regional level, Punjab, being the largest province of Pakistan, has the highest reported patients. The Ministry of National Health and Coordination, Islamabad, reports the highest around 18,000 reported cases in Punjab only (GEONews, 2020). Apart from the government organizations, other stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations and academic universities have joined hands to develop a rapid response mechanism to facilitate the state to fight this pandemic. Perhaps the most visible response can be observed among the various universities in the world.

The present study provides evidence by highlighting the case of one of the largest and oldest state-owned universities of Pakistan situated in the province of Punjab, Pakistan. Since the lockdown in the mid of March 2020, the University of the Punjab (henceforth, PU) has become very responsive.

### **THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION**

There is a dearth of literature on risk management to tackle pandemics in higher education. Similarly, a gap exists as to how academia in China is dealing with the pandemic in terms of responsiveness as compared to the rest of the universities in the world (Hang, 2018). Higher educational institutions possess research facilities and cater to a large chunk of the young population. So there is a need to evaluate the global situation from a higher education institution perspective

Moreover, such a young population can accomplish more through diverse cognitive and motivational skills. However, though being aware of the diverse cultures and behaviours across contexts, still most employees/institutions have no urge to adapt their behaviours to cope up with the emerging situations (Nguyen-Van et al., 2020).

Therefore, this study adds to the literature by sharing insights from the largest and most responsive higher education institution amidst the Covid-19 crisis. This paper contributes theoretically by laying down the basis for understanding and implying certain risk management activities that may aid in control the adverse effects of the pandemic.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the past couple of months, a number of decisions by universities across the borders are taken. Such decisions include employing various strategies to ensure social distancing. For example, shifting towards online teaching and working from home by university staff, postponing March/April graduation ceremonies, canceling in-person open days, and changing examination arrangements (NPR, 2020).

Across Pakistan, universities are putting in efforts to fight this pandemic. International students and staff- and at times, anyone with even rare symptoms are being encouraged to keep themselves self-quarantined for two weeks to prevent any unfortunate circumstance. Campus health centers are seeking confirmations from the suspected Corona virus-infected students who require testing. Last but not least, professors are being requested time and again to urge their students to stay home if they feel sick, without requiring a note from a physician.

Recently, several universities are responding by creating research groups to invent vaccines, and rapid laboratory tests to help the world to get rid of this epidemic soon. Interestingly, the universities in Pakistan have also responded to this emergency responsibly

(Khosravi et al., 2014). Although public sector universities in Pakistan are facing financial constraints, still the faculty, researchers, and scientists are trying to leave no stone unturned to serve the community. Moreover, under the guidelines of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, the universities are performing their academic activities in terms of community services, cutting-edge research, and educational & professional training.

University of the Punjab (P.U), established in 1882, is the oldest and largest University in the subcontinent. The University caters to over 75000 local as well as international students at the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels. During the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, like many other universities in Pakistan, PU also decided to shut down all its departments, colleges, and institutes. Moreover, the top management decided to take several steps to combat the ongoing pandemic as well as support local government in facilitating the ones suffering or in need of medical assistance (PU, 2020a). Several findings in this paper share insight of how Pakistani universities are playing their role in managing various direct as well as indirect risks amidst Covid-19.

## RESULTS

### Reaching Out to Become a Volunteer for Creating Awareness

At the beginning of the pandemic outbreak, the Vice-Chancellor reached out to more than 40,000 full-time campus students, thousands of students studying at affiliated colleges of the University, and the alumni to urge them to play an active role for creating awareness among their extended circles about this epidemic. For this, the alumni and faculty joined hands to raise funds that were donated to the Prime Ministers Corona Fund. Moreover, the alumni arranged Humanitarian Food Supplies Packages for the underprivileged families who were mostly daily wagers.

### Setting up a Telemedicine Centre at the University

The telemedicine centre at PU receives hundreds of calls and provides advice to the patients over a phone call. The aim is not only to guide the public about preventive measures but also to teach them not to panic in case someone catches a routine cold/fever. Those who have health concerns but are reluctant to visit hospitals fearing to contract the virus also utilize this service.

### Setting up a Diagnostic Bio-Safety Level 3 (BSL 3) Laboratory

PU, with its limited resources, has set up a Biosafety Level 3 (BSL-3) laboratory at their Centre for Applied Molecular Biology (CAMB) to test samples of suspected Patients of COVID-19. With this lab facility, PU is likely to conduct more than 300 tests of coronavirus suspects per day. The BSL-3 will not only provide training to the laboratory personnel for handling pathogenic and potentially lethal agents under the supervision of scientists competent in managing infectious agents. Besides this, the laboratory shall conduct all the tests in a bio-contaminated environment utilizing appropriate engineering controls.

One of the faculty members and scientists at PU, Dr. Muhammad Idrees developed a domestic COVID-19 diagnostic kit. This kit is being utilized in the laboratory for testing the samples of suspected patients that are referred by the government of Punjab (PU, 2020a). Dr. Muhammad Idrees Khan said that the total cost per COVID-19 diagnostic test would be around Rs 800/ (approximately USD\$1.20), which is ten times cheaper than what the commercial

laboratories are charging that amounts to around Rs. 8000/ (approximately USD\$ 500). The laboratory is in the process of purchasing raw material needed to prepare the kits will be able to produce COVID-19 diagnostic kits on a mass scale. Currently, the lab test samples are on real-time Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR). However, soon it will be shifted to automation to enhance the capacity of conducting tests per day.

### **The Preparation of Low-Cost Sanitizers**

With a sudden rise in the demand for sanitizers, the availability has become another issue in Lahore, which is one of the millennium cities of Pakistan. The Centre of Earth and Environmental Studies at PU was able to prepare a formula for low-cost sanitizers that are readily available for the public as well as employees living off/on campus.

### **Setting up a Mental Health Helpline**

Self-isolation and social distancing have led to many mental illnesses such as anxiety, fear, and depression globally. Besides this globally, there is a rise in domestic violence, with a 20% increase in countries like France and Australia (DailyTimes, 2020).

Realizing the importance of psychological illnesses during the pandemic, the Department of Applied Psychology has set up a helpline for counselling. Moreover, the University is collaborating with the University of Health Sciences (UHS) to help manage the psychological wellbeing of individuals amid the outbreak of the coronavirus. Interestingly, a virtual conference was arranged by the institute to develop a consensus on “Designing Protocol for Volunteers of COVID-19 Mental Health Helpline in the wake of the Corona Virus.”

### **Arrangement of Virtual Co-curricular Activities, Competitions, and Online Courses**

The Academic Staff Association (ASA) at PU has been hosting a variety of online co-curricular competitions to engage on-campus residents' children at their homes in healthy activities to ease their mental stress and keep them mentally fit. These activities include online competitions of essay writing, English and Urdu language debating, national songs, poetry, singing, and many more. Besides this, the College of Art and Design is offering free online courses of calligraphy, paintings, and many more categories in fine arts (PU, 2020b). Moreover, the Department of Sports at PU has been involved in organizing online gaming competitions for children, adults, and senior citizens. The College of Information Technology (PUCIT) is offering free-of-cost online information technology courses for all citizens. Such courses will help people learn technical skills through which they can generate income for themselves.

### **Social Responsibility**

The Government of Pakistan (GOP) has created a Prime Ministers Corona Relief Fund for the provision of financial assistance to underprivileged public and protection equipment to frontline doctors fighting the pandemic. The university faculty realizing its social responsibility, has raised funds worth three million rupees (Pakistani currency) from their salaries to donate in the Corona fund.

### **Offering Dormitories to Convert into Quarantines**

The University has also offered the government to turn its hostels into quarantines as the need arises.

### **A Transition from Physical to Virtual Classrooms**

The announcement of lockdown and the closure of all academic institutions have proven helpful to the epidemic control. However, the biggest challenge the universities, including Punjab University, is to cope with the unexpected circumstances of delaying its academic activities. Although this University is following traditional practices of physical classroom teaching with minimal use of virtual platforms; however, now the University has been quick to respond in preventing delays in the academic progress by implementing online classes. The University organized training workshops to introduce the different ways the instructors can offer online lectures. So far, the University has been able to continue its online classes with above 80% attendance successfully across all departments.

### **AN OVERVIEW OF MEASURES TAKEN BY OTHER UNIVERSITIES IN PAKISTAN**

At the national level, only two institutions, i.e., National Institute of Health (NIH) in the capital city Islamabad and the other Dow Medical University, Karachi in the province Sindh, have been able to diagnose Corona through PCR testing facilities. Similarly, the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) in Islamabad has prepared testing kits for Corona Virus and has developed ventilators in collaboration with the Pakistan Engineering Council (PEC). Besides this, in Punjab, the University of Health Sciences has developed study groups to initiate rigorous research on the detection and prevention of the novel virus. So far, in the region of Punjab, only the University of the Punjab, Lahore, has been able to set up a laboratory for testing through PCR. PU has been very responsive in taking comprehensive measures to cater to the risks involved during this pandemic (NIH, 2020).

### **CHALLENGES**

The prevailing fight against the Coronavirus pandemic has induced the universities around the globe are striving to provide support and achieve milestones in fighting the battle against COVID-19. Of course, the future is uncertain as to when the situation normalizes; however, whenever this ends, this outbreak will create a new outlook with new challenges. This situation may require universities to address new ways of risk management.

### **Research on COVID-19 at a Primitive Stage**

The scientific research on the novel virus is still budding at the University. Due to a lack of financial and technical resources, PU may not be able to identify the source and reasons for the spread. It remains to be seen whether the current research on a range of possible vaccines for COVID-19 will be successful.

### **The Downside Risk of the Closure of Campuses Amidst the Pandemic**

The discontinuation in the university academic activities that houses above 40,000 students annually may lead to a severe financial crisis. If such closure continues further for a few more months, it will lead to an adverse economic impact. The cost of staff working in

different departments, dormitories, and other fixed costs will make it difficult to survive in the long run.

### **Issues in the Effectiveness of Online Teaching**

A minor percentage of the academic faculty of the University who are prone to teaching live on-campus classes are familiar to teach in virtual classrooms. This limitation has become a challenge for instructors to learn innovative teaching methods to ensure effective outcomes. This lack of training may lead to a severe backlash from the students who may doubt the quality of teaching across various disciplines. The biggest challenge lies in the fact that PU caters to a majority of the students who live in remote rural areas where they are facing connectivity issues while using the Internet. The scarce resources have raised doubts in bringing changes in the existing examination protocols that PU was following in the past. So a challenge remains as to how the complete transformation needs to be switched to an online examination system. Besides this, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan requires the University to instruct the instructors to provide recorded lectures to the students, thus creating a challenge to maintain copyrights of their lectures.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Even though scientists and academia are trying hard to identify means to prevent its spread, but still the battle is ongoing. It is uncertain that when this COVID-19 epidemic shall end. Universities in Pakistan are battling to identify cures to the virus through research; however, due to lack of resources, the biggest challenge is sustaining efforts to find solutions. So in light of the above discussion, we would like to propose the following suggestions.

### **Need for Active Collaboration by the Universities Nationwide**

There is a dire need for a collaborative (Parker et al., 2020) research group across the nation to conduct thorough studies on the novel virus. Perhaps the shortage of financial resources on research can be overcome by pooling research-related funds available with each University into a single endowment fund. This can provide positive outcomes in the short run. Notably, each University has a pool of young scientists who are pursuing their doctoral degree programs. Such young brains can be given incentives. This will not only assist them to witness the cutting edge research on dealing with such viruses but will provide them with awareness as to how they can become catalysts in coping with such pandemics in the future.

### **Creating Awareness for Social Responsibility**

Apart from the health disciplines, the faculty and students relating to other subjects (such as education, business, or information technology) can create a sense of social responsibility through exercising professional integrity. Each discipline should realize its role in creating awareness among the general public for the prevention of the spread of such viruses. Pakistan being an Islamic country, so it actively follows the religious activities of the congregation in the holy mosques. However, due to the need for social distancing, the disciplines like Islamic studies and social work can join hands with the government to create awareness among the religious believers by teaching the importance of social distancing in religious gatherings. The Holy month of Ramadan will start in which Muslims offer prayers by

gathering in huge numbers in the mosques. So during these days, the universities can play a significant role in creating awareness among the believers through their students and faculty.

### **Creating Awareness against Disinformation relating to COVID-19**

Various public/private sector universities have mass communication departments. Most of them also have personalized radio and television channels not only to train and provide exposure to their students but also to communicate to the mass public. Such channels can air different educational/awareness programs that cover topics such as precautionary measures, appeasing emotional pressures on the public due to self-isolation, and addressing the disinformation that is spread in the social media.

### **The Implementation of Innovative Ways for Virtual Teaching**

Last but not least, given the different characteristics of the courses taught in different disciplines, the universities must learn to be adaptive in learning creative and flexible ways of instruction. However, due to such an emergency, the universities were not ready to transform themselves into technology-assisted teaching methodology. So the foremost responsibility is on the higher education commission to facilitate the universities to transform themselves by providing technical and financial support. Besides this, new curricula are to be developed relating to disciplines such as sports management and physical education until the time a solution to curtail this pandemic is not developed.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The present study provides an opportunity for future researchers to assess the responsiveness of higher education institutions globally. Moreover, the rapid response also depends upon the leaders who are leading different countries and organizations. So it will be interesting to evaluate the various leadership styles of different heads of states of organizations that may help to assess its impact on the effectiveness of dealing with uncertainty (Davis, 2014).

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