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Online learning and its challenges amid covid-19 in India

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Abstract: Since the Covid-19 pandemic started, online learning has emerged as an alternative to in-class education. More and more Universities are developing online-based courses. However, in comparison to developed countries, the situation of online learning in developing countries like India is less than satisfactory. It has appeared that educational institutes are not yet prepared for online-based education. Furthermore, poor electric connections, unstable internet, and a lack of access to appropriate devices for online education make online education extremely difficult for Indian students. This paper will look at the issues and challenges that Indian students are facing with online education.

Introduction

With the rate at which technology has advanced over the last 20-30 years, it was inevitable that a new educational revolution would occur sooner or later. However, nobody would have predicted that this shift would be so abrupt. Although some universities had begun offering online courses prior to the pandemic, such institutions and courses were extremely limited. It was the sudden spread of the Covid-19 pandemic that has forced the whole world to shift from physical Learning to E-learning. However, it is evident that the world was unprepared for this abrupt transition, and not just developing countries, but even developed ones, are confronted with new challenges. But in countries like India, the state of E-learning is an issue of concern, and it has proven to be a herculean task.

When the pandemic started India was among the first countries which imposed a complete lockdown. School, college, Markets, business everything came to a standstill. In such a situation online learning was the only option left. But the online learning experience was a very troublesome experience for the students; they encountered a variety of issues ranging from electricity, internet, devices, learning environment, and so on. In this paper, I'd like to address some of the most pressing issues surrounding online learning in India.

Methodology

As there is not sufficient data available on the current state of online learning in India, a Google Form containing 8 questions have been developed to understand respondents' experiences and perceptions of university and college students of online learning during the pandemic. The survey questionnaire has been conducted targeting 100 students from different universities in India. The main purpose of this questionnaire was to understand the issues and challenges of online learning in Higher education in India.

The Covid-19 Lockdown in India

The first Nationwide Covid-lockdown was announced in India at 8 p.m. on March 24, 2020. The lockdown forced the immediate closure of intercity and interstate

transportation, offices, factories, schools, universities, and other social and public institutions of all kinds. There was a state of panic all over India. People rushed to markets to stock the necessary items; there were huge lines outside supermarkets and grocery stores to purchase food items, sanitisers, medicines, rations, and other necessities. The entire country came to a halt on March 25th.

When Covid Lockdown began, all educational institutions came to a halt. The initial lockdown lasted 21 days, but as Covid cases spread quickly, the lockdown was extended. The unlock phase began on June 1st, 2020, and things gradually began to return to their previous state. However, It is education which hasn't returned to normal, even after 2 years of the first Covid lockdown. Due to the pandemic and lockdowns in 2020, 1.5 million schools were closed, affecting 247 million children enrolled in elementary and secondary schools in India (UNICEF, 2021)

The State of Online Education During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The biggest challenge the student faced amid the pandemic was online learning. Though online learning was there even before the pandemic it was mostly limited to online educational platforms, so the complete shift to online learning was almost a new experience for most of the students. When asked about their experience with online education, most students responded that they are not happy with the online learning experience; among them, 27.7% said the experience was poor while 31.7% of students said the experience with online learning was below average. The responses show that the students are not satisfied with the online learning experience.

Online Learning and Stress

Prior research has shown that online learning is comparatively more stressful than in-class learning. (Goswami M, Thanvi J, Padhi S 2021). When asked about it most of the students responded that online learning is very stressful (extremely stressful-27.7%, very stressful-31.7%). There are several common reasons for this, such as long screen time, lack of motivation and other related factors which make online learning stressful. However, due to a lack of technological preparedness and socioeconomic disparity, online learning becomes more stressful in developing countries such as India.

The Attitude of University and Teachers towards Students

When asked “How helpful your University/college has been in offering you the resources to learn from home?” Most students said the university is not helpful enough (not at all helpful-27.7%, slightly helpful -26.7%). This shows that universities have failed to provide adequate resources and facilities to students, demonstrating that universities are not yet prepared for the online mode of education. On the other hand when it is asked “how helpful have your teachers been during online classes?” The majority of students agreed that teachers are very helpful (extremely helpful 32.7%, 22.8%moderately helpful). This demonstrates

that teachers have the ability and desire to teach online classes, but a lack of preparedness on the university side makes online learning difficult in India.

Technical Issues during Online Classes

When asked “do you face any technical issues during online classes” most of the students replied they often face technical issues(frequently 26.7%, very often 19.8%, sometimes 48.5%) during online classes.

The most important requirement for online learning is a reliable electricity connection, yet statistics from the ministry of rural development shows that 20% of Indian families only have access to electricity for less than 8 hours per day, which means these households receive electricity for only 1/3rd of a day. In addition, only 47% of Indian homes have access to more than 12 hours of electricity a day. The situation is worse in the rural area. (Missionaryodaya 2018)

Along with electricity, a stable internet connection and a proper computer device are necessary for online learning. However, only 47% Indian population has internet access. When it comes to online learning devices, India Lockdown Learning report shows that 79% of students use a smartphone for online learning (Vidyasaarathi 2020). Mobile phones cannot be regarded as an effective tool for online learning since their screens are more hazardous to the eyes than computer screens. But students from middle and lower-economic class families have no other option other than relying on smartphones for online learning. Students are under more stress due to the long smartphone study sessions.

Economic Background and the Digital Divide

On the question of whether economic background also affects online learning experience? The overwhelming majority of 77.2% of students answered “yes” economic background affects the online learning experience.

This shows the lack of access to necessary technology needed for online learning is causing a digital divide. While Students belonging to well-to-do families have everything they need for online learning, students from the middle and lower economic classes are struggling to access online education.

The Environment at Home for Online Learning

Aside from electricity and devices, a good learning environment is essential for online classes. To this around half of the students replied that the environment at home is not suitable for online education(Not at all suitable-24.8%, not suitable enough-18.8%, moderately suitable- 30%, good environment for classes-13.9% best environment for classes-11.9%). A suitable study environment is also something of a luxury, especially for students from low-income families. These students typically share rooms with other family members and do not have a dedicated study space or a separate room at home. Focusing when taking lessons from home is particularly challenging if there are small children in the household.

Overall State of Online Education in India

How do you feel overall about the condition of online education in India? To this question, the majority of students feel the overall situation of online learning in India is poor(poor 59.4%, fair 23.8%, Good 11%).

Conclusion

Following the footstep of developed countries, India is also trying to rely more and more on online education. However, the situation of online learning differs greatly between developed and developing countries. For nations like Japan, where electricity and internet connections are available around-the-clock even in remote places, these factors are not a barrier to online education. Therefore, while addressing online learning and its difficulties in these countries, these things are taken for granted. In India, however, the availability of electricity and the internet is the most important consideration.

At present, good online education facilities are only available to a small portion of the Indian population. Power shortage, poor or non-existent internet connectivity and the inability to afford the necessary devices are all major issues that need to be addressed first. If these issues are not addressed, online education will further widen the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. In short, in order to improve the state of online learning in India, equal e-learning opportunities should be made available to all.

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