



Online Learning Challenges During Pandemic Covid-19 at Higher Education in Pakistan.

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Abstract: *The main purpose of the study designed to analyze the challenges of online learning during the Covid -19 pandemic at the Higher education level in Pakistan. Using a simple random sampling technique, a sample of five hundred and fifty (550) Higher-level students were selected from the target population. The survey method was used for the purpose of data collection. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a t-test for the gender-wise comparison of overall learning challenges of implementation of online learning using the SPSS. The results of the study included the need for face to face interaction, flipped classroom learning modalities, giving concise lectures with a shorter time period and increasing teacher-student interaction can be applied. Faculty needs training and students orientation in using online learning tools. Also provides technical experts in Universities. Creates an opportunity for students to use different technologies. Government should also develop national e-learning development centres in different cities of Pakistan.*

Key Words: Online Learning, COVID-19, Higher Education.

Introduction

The online education system has transformed and transfigured our societal, intellectual, emotive and intuitive attitudes by broadening our horizons and creating new experiences and opening new panoramas of knowledge. ([Hoi, Sahoo, Lu and Zhao, 2021](#)) defined online learning as a family of machine learning methods, where an individual tries to attempt some conjecturing assignment by learning from a succession of teaching techniques and learning activities. Online learning is a type of education culture in which students achieve their academic qualifications by learning from home using their laptops, computers, phones,

tablets and other such electronic devices ([Ullah, Ashraf, Ashraf & Ahmed, 2021](#)).

The COVID-19 epidemic firstly materialized in Wuhan, China in the form of a patient with pneumonia with a mysterious aetiology, later spreading across China and afterwards the entire world was taken into the menacing grasp of the Covid-19 virus (Sahin et al., 2019). Those who had only heard about the disastrous tales of Spanish flu now faced the daunting reality at a much larger scale in the form of Coronavirus. And till now the horrors of Covid-19 being faced by the world population have yet to pass, after a few days when finally life seems to be getting back to

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normal a new variant of the virus is discovered. Travel today is not on the basis of passports and visas rather on Covid-19 vaccinations and booster doses. The scenes that

we saw in movies or read in books have now become our reality, as the world has become a very unpredictable place with this microscopic organism literally shaking the foundation of the entire world.

The World Health Organization (WHO) formally announced on 30th January 2020, SARS-CoV-2 is a worldwide and widespread health plight of global apprehensiveness. On 11th March 2020, it was declared a pandemic by WHO. In Pakistan, The Federal Health Ministry confirmed the first two cases of Covid-19 in the cities of Islamabad and Karachi on 26th February 2020 (Geo News, 2020).

The advent of COVID-19 in the frontiers of Pakistan and all around the world not only unsettled the economic conditions of all nations but also had a negative impact on the social life of the more than three billion people by confining them to their homes by the complete or partial lockdown. As of 12 December 2021, 1.29M affected cases with 28,823 deaths have been reported (COVID-19 Stats, 2021).

COVID-19 has put Pakistan in great peril as our healthcare system was already flimsy and overburdened. The implementation of a complete or partial shutdown of academic institutions worldwide resulted in the sudden shift from regular classrooms toward online academics as described by (Saqlain and Mumtaz, 2020). In response to this vicious pandemic, the education sector of the Pakistani government made the exigent decision to close all educational institutions nationwide on March, 13th 2020 to hinder the fast-spreading disease (Ali, 2020). A study conducted by (Habes et al., 2021) employing a cross-sectional design consisting of a sample of 344 respondents indicated a strong significant relationship between students' positive perceptions towards E-learning during Covid-19. The research findings of the study also implied that the usage of the online education system throughout these unpredictable times has not only accentuated the importance of

internet-based learning but has also exhibited a greater dependence on new media technology.

Many countries including Pakistan, where technological understanding is still not understood by the masses and the lower classes, created a great number of challenges and hurdles for the educational institutions as well as the education sector. Forcing this sudden shift, this new process of online classes was not acknowledged or accepted as easily. Nambiar, (2020) depicted the major barricades to acceptance of online learning as the unfamiliarity with such channels.

Access to telecommunications and new technological innovations might be limited and unaffordable for the general population in countries that are still struggling to develop and progress on a larger scale. (Ramani 2015) depicts that the demand for economical electronic devices still persists for 80% of students in such countries as well as the demand for internet services and computers in rural areas. Pakistani educational institutions are trying their level best to cope with this new situation, with both teachers and students giving their all to make the best of the situation.

The need of the hour in such critical times was for all Education Institutions to make the necessary shift towards E-learning and that is what was done. With strict directions to all the educational institutions at all levels: primary, secondary and tertiary to work from home and deliver online lectures. During the harsh period of Covid-19, the Higher education institutions were obligated to take online classes that shed light on not only the technical issues all stakeholders were forced to face but also the didactic, infrastructure-based, curriculum-based as well as health-related issues. Even though individuals have a basic familiarity with the online education system yet their apprehensions have far surpassed its pros (Tabassum, Akram & Moazzam, 2021). Change is never wholeheartedly accepted, it always takes its due time.

This pandemic as well the safety measures including lockdown and quarantine are causing numerous psychological issues the main being stress and anxiety in young individuals with their academic careers at stake as well as the

uncertainty of the future ([Baloch et al., 2021](#)). Mental health is also known as an individual's psychological health is the state of well-being in which individuals realize their own ability to cope with normal life stressors and productively work to contribute to their own community (WHO, 2005). The importance of which is finally being realized in a country like Pakistan with the coming generation refusing to compromise on any facet of their lives where many of their elders did.

The educational system of Pakistan is facing issues as it is. ([Baloch et al., 2021](#)) conducted a browser-based, cross-sectional survey with a sample of 1134 Pakistani university students exploring stress and anxiety resulting from coronavirus and lockdown initiative actions and social distancing to confine and hinder the proliferation of the pandemic. The study concluded, SARS-Cov-2 did have a negative effect on the respondents' psychological well-being. (Salman et al., 2020) further adds that there should be keen attention to the psychological health of individuals during such epidemics.

A qualitative study exploring the socio-economic, fitness, and academic aftermaths due to online learning among young academicians through Google forms concludes that E-learning challenges include detrimental and unsuitable surroundings for learning, unequal distribution of electronic gadgets, deficient resources, internet speed and electricity issues are negatively affecting students academic achievement as was reported by the 1,263 respondents from different institutes of Lahore, Pakistan ([Noor, Ali & Husnine, 2020](#)).

Furthermore, ([Kapasia et al., 2020](#)) commence the period of the lockdown, more or less than 70% of pupils took part in online education with the majority of individuals using their phones while the rural learners faced colossal problems for their education during this pandemic. Similarly, ([Mumtaz and Saqulain, 2020](#)) bring to a close; lockdown has become the cause of various symbolic disfigurements inside the educational universe all the while having a disparate obstruction in learning with remarkable turmoil in the

examinations and evaluation systems in economically developing nations such as Pakistan.

Statement of the Problem:

The present study was designed to analyze the challenges of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic at the Higher education level in Pakistan.

Objectives:

The main objectives of the study are stated below:

1. To analyze the challenges of implementing online learning for students at the Higher-level.
2. To find out the effect of online learning facilities on male and female students.
3. To propose some suggestions and recommendations for the implementation of online learning during Covid-19.

Delimitations of Study:

The following delimitations for the study were made in consideration

- The study was delimited to one public and one semi-government universities in Multan City.
- The study was delimited to the University of Education Lahore, Multan Campus and Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.

Methodology

The research design used for the study was descriptive in nature. Using quantitative methodology for the purpose of data collection a survey was conducted amongst Higher-level students. The tool formed for data collection was a questionnaire with a five-point rating scale.

Population

The population consisted of the Higher-level students of Multan city including two

universities, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan and University of Education, Multan campus.

Sample

A simple random sampling technique was used and a sample of five hundred and fifty (550) Higher-level students were selected, out of which 297 were males and 253 students were females. Out of five hundred and fifty (550) Higher-level students, three hundred and fifty (350) respondents were from BZU, Multan and two hundred (200) respondents were from UOE, Multan campus.

Tool and Data Collection

For data collection survey design was used. A questionnaire with a five-point rating scale was developed for the collection of relevant data from Higher-level students.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of both descriptive and inferential statistics. For descriptive statistics, mean, median, mode and standard deviation were used. Whereas for inferential statistics a t-test was used. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used for data analysis

Results

Table 1. Statement and Mean wise analysis of the overall challenges of implementing Online learning for students at the Higher-level.

Statements	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
I prefer online leaning over traditional classroom learning.	152	278	96	12	12	2.0	2.0	2.0	.86
I think online learning course is a better path for the future of our education system	144	285	97	16	8	2.0	2.0	2.0	.82
There are sufficient electronic devices for my online classes .	129	276	121	14	10	2.1	2.0	2.0	.84
I have a high speed internet available for online classes.	22	70	32	264	162	3.8	4.0	4.00	1.09
The software being used for my online classes is satisfactory .	26	67	43	252	162	3.8	4.0	4.00	1.12
My university offers helpful online resources such as audio/video lectures to learn from home during the lockdown.	25	54	51	254	166	3.9	4.0	4.00	1.08
You have access to electronic devices laptops and tablets	30	43	50	293	134	3.9	4.0	4.00	1.05
Sufficient hardware and software technology is available for online classes by my university	26	68	43	247	166	3.8	4.0	4.00	1.12
The budget/spending allocated by my university for the promotion and usage of online learning is adequate	34	52	100	227	137	3.7	4.0	4.00	1.12
My Studies are being negatively affected due to the lockdown	244	195	63	14	34	1.9	2.0	1.0	1.09
I faced many academic difficulties during this lockdown period.	210	233	63	16	28	1.9	2.0	2.0	1.03

I have basic computer skills for my online classes.	29	103	35	241	142	3.7	4.0	4.00	1.19
I have basic browsing and internet surfing skills to give and prepare online assignments and presentations.	39	48	31	295	137	3.8	4.0	4.00	1.12
I have the ability to use online video and audio communications	33	62	37	269	149	3.8	4.0	4.00	1.13
I am satisfied with the teaching techniques and strategies being used by my teachers.	21	90	61	262	116	3.7	4.0	4.00	1.09
I can easily understand the teaching material provided to me online.	37	91	61	265	96	3.5	4.0	4.00	1.15
Without face to face interaction I easily zone out (that is lose focus) during lectures.	23	70	86	224	147	3.7	4.0	4.00	1.11
I find it difficult to learn online.	36	171	51	180	112	3.3	4.0	4.00	1.27
I have no difficulty accessing and using online learning tools	152	287	89	16	6	1.9	2.0	2.0	.81
I can easily understand the teaching material provided to me online.	151	247	130	14	8	2.1	2.0	2.0	.86
I need face to face interaction for learning and to gain an understanding of the topic being covered.	203	218	95	12	22	1.9	2.0	2.0	.99
I took preventive behaviours (e.g. wearing a mask) and did not go out impulsively for recreation to prevent the spread of covid-19 disease.	198	119	95	124	14	1.9	2.0	2.0	.96
The family budget has tightened due to this lockdown.	152	125	243	14	16	2.1	2.0	2.0	.94
I become easily annoyed or irate after this life-change	94	181	143	118	14	2.2	2.0	2.0	.86
My sleep cycle is disturbed due to the stress of lockdown and covid-19 disease	141	134	143	120	2	2.1	2.0	2.0	.82
My daily life has been impacted due to the shortage of supplies	123	147	154	116	10	2.2	2.0	2.00	.82
My course work has been interrupted due to life-change.	140	247	123	24	16	2.1	2.0	2.00	.95
Total						119.7	116.50	9.00	75.7

Table 1 shows the Statement and Mean wise analysis of the overall challenges of implementing online learning for students at the Higher-level. The mean of the overall challenges of implementing online learning for students at the Higher-level is 119.7 while the

median and mode are 116.5 and 9.0 respectively. And the standard deviation of the overall challenges of implementing online learning for students at the Higher-level is 75.7 respectively.

Table 2. Gender-wise comparison of overall learning challenges of implementation of online learning.

	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.	Df
Overall learning challenges of implementation of online learning.	Male	88.4545	12.58023	.605	548
	Female	89.1383	12.68766		

N=550 (Male=297 and Female=253), p<0.001

Table 2 shows the mean value of overall online learning challenges of implementation of online learning in females 389.14 is greater than males which are 88.4545 which shows

females face slightly greater challenges than males regarding online learning. The result shows a statistically significant difference between male and female students.

Discussion

The rationale of the present study was to analyze the challenges of implementing online learning for students at the Higher-level and to propose some suggestions and recommendations for the successful implementation of online learning during lockdowns and future such scenarios. The study was descriptive in nature and a quantitative methodology was used for the purpose of data collection. A survey using a questionnaire as a tool for data collection was conducted among two universities in Multan city, Pakistan. As a new tool, e-learning is a holistic approach that involves collaboration, selection, and collection of electronic tools to enable an effective and valuable online learning experience. Without recognizing the environmental challenges and encouraging the best ways to solve them, such success would not be possible nor attainable. The respondents did not consider any of the factors to be significant problems, which is a positive trend in a developing country like Pakistan. However, there still are problems with technology and internet access that caused hindrance to the successful implementation of this new endeavour. The majority of the students did not prefer online learning over regular classes and

even though they have access to tablets and mobile phones they still feel that there are not sufficient devices available for their online classes. Even though students agree that their universities are providing them with online video and audio lectures and other resources they still feel that face to face interaction is needed and that their studies are being impacted negatively due to covid-19 lockdown. The covid-19 pandemic lockdown is also having an impact on the student’s sleep cycle and causing stress due to the sudden uncertainty of life. Students also do not have basic computer and internet search skills. It is hard for them to search for the content online or download the data online. They also find it difficult to make assignments online.

In e-learning, the lack of stable, virus-free computers appeared to be a major problem. The increase in computer use, on the contrary, suggests consumers are unconcerned about losing their work due to viruses. It's likely due to the lack of personal computers in developing countries. As a consequence, the only location where students can use systems is in university laboratories. As a result, institutions must provide adequate computers to students, as well as a reasonable working atmosphere and

full-time technical support with uninterrupted operation. There is a lack of ICT infrastructure in Pakistani universities. The administration should maintain the ICT infrastructure so that students can learn effectively online.

Conclusion

Respondents preferred face-to-face classroom learning over online classes and most of the respondents disagreed with the thought that online learning courses are a better path for the future of our education system. Even though respondents have access to electronic devices such as tablets and phones there are still not sufficient devices for their online class usage. Respondents were satisfied with the online resources such as audio/video lectures provided to them by their teachers during the lockdown, Respondents were also satisfied with their internet connections and the software being used to conduct their online classes including zoom and google meet. Respondents feel that they faced many academic difficulties and their studies had met a negative impact during this lockdown period. Even though respondents had the basic searching skills and the ability to use the e-learning technologies they found difficulty in learning online. And even though respondents were satisfied with the teaching techniques being used, respondents agreed that without the face to face interaction they easily zoned out during class thus losing their focus. Respondents felt that their course work has been interrupted due to a life change. Apart from the ICT challenges respondents also had an increase in stress during this lockdown as they took the preventive covid-19 measures. Respondents agreed that they felt more irritated, their sleep cycles were disturbed and they also saw a tightening in their family budget during this lockdown. In regards to the gender comparison, it was concluded females face slightly greater challenges than males regarding online learning.

Recommendations

Generally, online learning is an imperative course of action for handling institutions of Higher education's information and educational needs, presenting some challenges. The discussion of how to resolve these challenges necessitates the creation of guidelines that apply to both teachers and students. The conversion from the conventional teaching environment to an online one is one of these rules. Teachers and students must embrace the change away from conventional classroom practices and toward eLearning. By providing a secure online environment that promotes collaboration and provides opportunities for students to learn how to use various technologies, the digital divide can be bridged and a shared culture developed. The following are some potential methods for coping with these issues:

- Disciplinary actions are taken to set some protocols for online interface, counselling and guidance of students regarding online learning
- There should be an increase in formative assessment through various online applications to get ongoing feedback.
- Training workshops for teachers should be conducted to provide them with a better understanding and the necessary skill to conduct online classes.
- The budget should be allocated for the acquisition of necessary software packages.
- Providing technical experts in universities.
- Blended learning strategies incorporate face-to-face experiences, self-paced learning, and online interactions in a balanced way. This will assist students in eventually becoming accustomed to new learning methods.
- Creation of a secure online environment facilitating mutual aid and providing

- opportunities for students towards the usage of advanced technologies.
- Development of suitable, meticulous and authentic coursework consisting of both educational and societal facets to sustain the e-learning environments.
 - Development of e-learning advancement centres.
 - To encourage and sustain e-learning programs, all stakeholders involved must align their endeavours to resolve the current crises.

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