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Challenges in Higher Education: Students' Perspective

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Abstract

Education is the only reliable & active tool for developing a responsible and productive citizen. In this regard, higher education is of utmost importance. We need higher educated and skilled people who can drive our country forward. For this, it is important to understand the challenges hindering the success of higher education. This COVID-19 pandemic situation has given us a new way to look at the teaching-learning process virtually. But it has also created a lot of challenging situations in the field of education. This qualitative research had been conducted by the researcher in the same line with a purpose to understand the basic challenges faced by students in pursuing higher education. For this research total, 25 students were selected purposively. An online survey was conducted to collect relevant data for the study. Then, thematic analysis was done and the data was interpreted to obtain the findings. Results were discussed with reference to challenges faced by students in pursuing higher education before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Key Words:Challenges in Higher Education, COVID-19 Pandemic.

Introduction

India's Higher Education system is the largest in the world in terms of the number of institutions (Sharanabasappa and Kadamudimatha, 2017). Education is the only reliable & active tool for developing a responsible and productive citizen. It's not just about becoming literate but it is also about developing appropriate competencies to best survive with full respect and dignity. For this to achieve, higher education is of utmost importance. We need higher educated people. It needs to be realized that if India can provide skilled people to the outside world, then why can't we transform our country from a developing nation into a developed nation (Singh, p16).

With the pandemic spread of COVID-19, In India, all academic activities were suspended after the announcement of the University Grants Commission (UGC) on March 19, 2020 to postpone examinations in all universities. School, colleges, libraries, etc. were shut down, and the whole country passed through different stages of locked down. Both the students and the teachers were under the pressure to shift traditional offline teaching-learning

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process to online mode (Gopinathan& Ramachandran, 2020).It was really very difficult for teachers as well as for students and parents; especially for students of professional courses those having research work /practical / teaching practices/ field work/ internships, etc. in their curriculum. Having appropriate gadget and uninterrupted internet connectivity is crucial for everyone. Later on, gradually the unlock process has been started, but education is still running either online or in blended mode.

The rationale of the Study

Every aspect has its positive and negative sides. The same is with COVID-19 Pandemic. Classrooms have abruptly shifted from physical to digital classrooms. Though it has great positive effect in sense of developing technological competencies among all including teachers and students but lots of problems also arises due to it. So, it is very important to understand those challenges. Since, the education has fully shifted from teacher centred to student centred. Hence, the researcher felt to conduct this research, to understand the challenges faced by learners so that reasonable solution can be found to resolve those challenges.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research design tries to establish the answers to the whys and hows of any phenomenon in questions in their natural settings. Qualitative research is subjective and its findings are not intended to get generalised to the whole population. It aims to get a better understanding through first-hand experience, truthful reporting, and quotations of actual conversations. Opposite to the quantitative research, here the findings are gathered in written format. This research study was conducted with the purpose to understand the basic challenges faced by students in pursuing higher education. Through this research the researcher tried to establish the answer to research question i.e., what are the basic challenges faced by students in pursuing higher education. For this the researcher purposively tried approaching a number of students, almost 40, belonging to different courses including integrated B.Sc.B.Ed., M. Ed., and M.A. Education in various related institutes of Pune city only. Though students were requested to participate in this research, but they were given full freedom to withdraw their participation at any point in time. Therefore, only 25 (12 Male & 13 Female) students voluntarily participated in this study. An online survey using google form was conducted. Open-ended questionnaire including questions based on challenges faced by students in pursuing higher education related to admission, curriculum transaction, examination, etc. were asked. Then obtained qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis (see table 1). The data was transcribed and highlighted using colour codes. Similarities and differences were searched for the identification of initial themes that were predominant. Then again, they were reviewed and renamed and interpreted to get research findings. later on, the report was written.

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Table 1: Plan of Data Analysis

Themes	Subthemes	<u>Indicators</u>	Colour Codes
1. Challenges before COVID- 19 Pandemic	Admission process	Very slow & lengthy process, very late, postpone the work for days, exact information not available, money problem.	Yellow
	Lodging & boarding	Delay in hostel allotment, Unavailability of more rooms, Unavailability hygienic food and drinking water.	Bright Green
	Curriculum transaction	Somelecturers almost busy with administrative works, gossiping instead of solving the problems.	Red
	Research activities	Hardly get instructions for it, costly.	Pink
	Examination process	Lack of communication and time management, need to write too much in less time, late result declaration.	Blue
	Financial issues	Money problem in paying fee, research for students is costly.	Grey
2. Challenges during COVID- 19 Pandemic	Admission process	Unable to get complete information about all the courses & syllabus on websites, proper problem-solving system was not available, needs to wait long to get contacts, delay in getting certain documents.	Yellow
	Lodging & boarding	Hostels were shut down, finding a flat was really a tough, accommodation is costing almost 15 times more,unavailability of hygienic food and drinking water.	Bright Green
	Curriculum transaction	Classroom learning ceased, internet connectivity issue, online classes less effective, less interactive, unavailability of teachers, technologically less skilled teachers, irregular classes, limited exposure and guidance for some subjects,lack of online learning resources in regional languages, inaccessible library, inaccessibility of college resource server from home.	Red
	Research activities	Ineffective research guidance, difficult to convey your thoughts, inability to discuss things, not able to take guidance often,	Pink

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		couldn't go outside to collect data	
	Examination process	Not enough study material for exam preparation, online process- handling and connectivity issues, delayed submissions, not familiar with the new exam paper pattern,	Blue
	Financial issues	along with course fee mobile recharge is an additional expense, quite expensive situation, books are costly to purchase, accommodation is costing almost 15 times more	Grey
	Internet connectivity	internet infrastructure in our country is not really comprehensive enough, Network issue, power cut	Green
	Health issues	using screen (online) for longer duration, Problem in eyes, mental instability, depression, headache, health risk, contagious diseases, unavailability of hygienic meal, health care facilities	Turquoise

Analysis and Interpretation of the Study

Theme I: Challenges before COVID- 19 Pandemic

Many of the participants reported that before COVID- 19 pandemic, the very first challenge was to get admitted in higher education courses because of the uncertainty of time of declaration and availability of clear and exact information regarding **admission** procedures. Some of the students were concerned about financial constraints in paying fee. Participants also reported non-cooperation of non-teaching staff during offline admission procedures.

“...Admission process was very slow and lengthy process. It was declared very late, slow & exact information not made available...non-teaching staff, because of their laziness, do not finish the work soon. They mostly postpone the work for days.”

“...I had money problem and did not get exact information about entrance examination & courses...”

“...Before the pandemic the institute office/admin department was very easily accessible in case of any queries...”

Participants also mentioned problems related to **lodging and boarding**. Institutes either do not have hostel facilities or they use to deny due to having limited seats. Along with these, availability of hygienic meal was also of great concern.

“...Initially the authority was denying to give hostel facility but somehow managed to get room at the hostel...Delay in hostel allotment...Unavailability of more rooms and hygienic food and drinking water was a difficult situation...”

“...Even before COVID, I was not able to get hostel in previous college because of a smaller number of vacant seats...”

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Regarding challenges in **curriculumtransaction**, participants reported that lectures were good but lecturers were found almost busy with administrative works. Many a times faculties discuss more about a problem, instead of solving those.

“...Before this pandemic, everything was almost good, books were available in the library for study purposes, we were having lectures in classrooms, but many a times the lecturers almost busy with administrative works instead of teaching... some teachers, gossip without solving the problem in front of the students...”

Participants also reported challenges in conducting **research**, apart of their curriculum. Participants pointed out that there is lack of proper instructions about research procedures. Also, they found it expensive due to not having any financial support from their institute.

“...As I am completely new to the procedure, I don't know most of the research processes and I hardly get instructions for it... Doing research for students is costly and the university do not provide funds.”

Regarding **examination**, participants reported lack of communication and time management in examination system and delay in result declarations.

“...Earlier it was offline so that was pretty smooth as we had to go physically to give the exam... There was lack of communication and time management in examination system... offline college examinations were good, but we need to write too much in less time... Late result declaration.”

Students were also found worried about **financial** issues for taking admissions and conducting research work.

“...we face lot of money problem in paying fee... Government should minimize the fees of higher education.”

“... Doing research for students is costly and the university do not provide funds.”

Theme II : Challenges during COVID-19 Pandemic

After spread of COVID-19, participants reported that though there was late declaration of **admission procedures**, and many times it was difficult to get responses on time, but online admission process was smooth.

“...During COVID-19, admission process was quite smooth process as it is Online... online system created some problems such as... sometimes I won't get answers for the messages I send... unable to get proper and complete information about all the courses and syllabus on websites...”

“The proper problem-solving system was not available... All helpline members sound very exhausted...”

“...during COVID-19, for the admission we had to wait to get the contact details or even wait till the contact was done either online or via phone call. Also, there were issues faced by us in getting certain documents for admittance which the college was supposed to give but due to covid it was delayed...”

They also reported difficulties in finding appropriate **lodging & boarding** outside the institute. It also arises other difficulties related with health care & safety issues, as well as rooms on rent were comparatively more expensive than those in hostels.

“...During spread of COVID-19 the hostels are shut down... definitely it was so sudden and random and obviously created huge chaos among students. Availability of hygienic meal, health care facilities, finding a flat was really a tough challenge... It took us

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almost 15 days to find at least a better place for living. Despite not being familiar with the city we (foreign students) had to search and find accommodation by ourselves which we really found difficult.”

“...Since the hostels are closed due to COVID-19, the accommodation outside the institute is costing almost 15 times more... we are not even allowed to stay in the institution guesthouse temporarily...”

Regarding **curriculum transaction**, participants reported that online teaching is not as effective and interactive as classroom teaching. Students do not get much or appropriate opportunity to ask or communicate freely. Also, there is lack of technical skills among teachers required for online teaching. They said that they were not getting frequent classes. Along with that it was also found that institutes are finding it difficult to arrange guest lecturers or faculties for many optional papers available in curriculum. So, if students opt those subjects in their interest, they have to study by themselves. But due to this pandemic situation, as they left their institutions in a hurry, they could not keep enough study material with them and the library is also not accessible. Basically, it is challenging to get enough learning material in their own regional language (Marathi) through online modes.

“...online teaching according to me less effective than classroom teaching. The kind of atmosphere we get in a classroom is hardly replaceable. Some people feel shy... can ask their questions after the end of lecture to the teacher personally, but in online class that can't be done...cannot communicate freely...During teaching-learning process students are facing technical problems, not getting the concepts easily.”

“...lack of understanding, network problem, student interest are some barriers in teaching-learning process...we don't have frequent classes for many subjects and also not getting any teacher for the optional subjects. So, we are more dependent on self-study. It seems unreasonable.”

“...There was a gap between the teachers and students as we didn't visit the college personally thus no proper rapport was maintained...Due to online teaching learning process, there was lack of interaction with the teachers and students.”

“...In my opinion, we don't get enough exposure and guidance for some subjects because of COVID online classes. So, our knowledge and understanding are just being limited to the extent what we have studied by our own, and sources what we referred. As a future educator, we need to acquire comprehensive knowledge and skills set for best teaching learning experience. So, I think it would avail with better planning and implementation.”

“...the classroom learning ceased and of course it also affected the teaching learning process and since then everyone is switching towards virtual classroom as well as remote learning...As the lockdown was unexpectedly set, student's left whatever study material available at the hostel only, and they came up to their home with barehanded.”

“...During COVID-19, we do not have accessibility to lot of resources, especially library...We are Marathi medium student and we don't have books in Marathi. In college/institute we have accessibility to lot of resources especially in library where we can find those rare books, are otherwise not available online or are costly to purchase...Inaccessibility of college resource server from home is a big challenge.”

“...Availability of learning resources was a major challenge that I faced as there was very limited scope due to online mode.”

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Participants also revealed constraints in conducting their **research** work. They found difficulties in getting effective guidance from experts over a call and also in collecting data.

“...Pursuing research is a total problem. We can't get effective guidance from other mentors who are expert in that area over a call...We can't discuss the things frequently with our batchmates or seniors regarding academic activities, importantly research process on phonecall...”

“...It is very difficult to convey your thoughts to your advisory committee or chairperson for research study on phone call or through online meeting...”

“...during corona couldn't go outside to collect data...schools and colleges are physically closed...can't reach to the students to get data...”

“...Because of COVID there are some limitations. Everything was online from taking guidance to presenting the proposal. I am not able to take guidance often for understanding of the new concepts in research work and resolving the problems or doubts...”

“...We had to rely on online resources to perform research work...”

Regarding **examination**, participants were very much concerned about lack of enough study material, and newer pattern of examination. Also, the power cut and technical glitches were great challenge in front of students.

“...Getting study material for exam preparation is a big challenge. We don't have enough resources like books to appear in exam...online process- handling and connectivity issues, delayed submissions...also we are not sure or familiar with the new exam paper pattern.”

“... there was power cut during examination in our area...Online exam were in MCQ format which were good, but important aspects of the subjects can be in subjective type of question...”

“...Examination in online mode had a lot of technical difficulty like internet issues, login errors, etc which made us really tensed at the exam paper submission moment.”

During COVID-19 pandemic, as institutional hostels are closed; students faced lots of **financial** constrain to buy study materials, internet connections as well as accommodation.

“In online education, along with course fee mobile recharge is an additional expense...not affordable for everyone as it is quite expensive situation...”

“...libraries are inaccessible...books are costly to purchase.”

“...Since university hostels are closed due to COVID-19, the accommodation is costing almost 15 times more...”

To get connected with others regarding any academic or non-academic matters, like for admission, attending classes, consultation, research studies, examination, or anything else, having uninterrupted **internet connectivity** was found as a great challenge.

“...We don't have strong mobile network especially in remote villages...”

“...In online education internet connectivity issue is one of the major problems in teaching-learning process...”

“...Sometimes internet connectivity issues as there as the internet infrastructure in our country is not really comprehensive enough...”

“...the power cut and internet connectivity issues remain as a problem during examinations...”

Participants were also found concerned about **health issues** because of longer usage of screen in teaching- learning processes.

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“...using screen (online) for longer duration may arise a lots of health issues such as problem in eyes, mental instability, depression, headache...”

“...We are putting health risk before economic risk...You can't prioritise one over the other... COVID-19 is spreading along with other previously known contagious diseases too.”

“...unavailability of hygienic meal, health care facilities were really a tough challenge in front of us...”

Result and Discussion

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the institutional offices were physically accessible but the admission process was very slow & lengthy and affected by the non-cooperation of administrative office staff. While during the COVID-19 pandemic institutional offices closed offline and become inaccessible. Education system suddenly shifted to a digital era. Online education is helpful for promoting online research, connecting the practitioners to the global community and getting huge and authentic resource of knowledge (Paudel, 2021). But without proper online guidelines and problem-solving system, situation became challenging. Students also face problems in getting responses on time. Moreover, it affected admission and leads to less enrolment in higher education, and indirectly affected on gross enrolment rate (GER) of higher education.

Even Before COVID-19, students were facing problems due to delayed or unavailability of hostel accommodations, and unhygienic meals at their institutes. During COVID-19, the situation became more difficult as hostels get closed and they were forced to live somewhere outside on rent which increases their expenses as well as created health and safety issues. There was no surety about when the hostels will reopen. Everyone cannot have home near educational institutes. Especially, it is a very difficult situation for foreign students. This has adversely affected the enrolment rate of foreign students.

Earlier, the offline curriculum transaction process was almost good but yes, faculties were found busier in admin work than in teaching. But during COVID-19, as everything shifted to online mode, students mostly suffer from internet connectivity issues. Students found online classes less effective (Tari, & Amonkar, 2021) and less interactive, and also a lack of online teaching skills among teachers (Pokhrel, & Chhetri, 2021). So, they needed to be more dependent on self-study. Even lots of study material available online through various repositories like e-GyanKosh, Gyandarshan, Gyandhara, Swayam, Shodhganga, e-Adhyayan, e-Pathya, National Digital Library of India (NDLI), etc. (Tari, & Amonkar, 2021; Petrie,

2020 cited in Pokhrel, & Chhetri, 2021; Jena 2020) but are not available in the Marathi language. But they found a lack of learning resources in online mode (Pokhrel, & Chhetri, 2021) especially in regional languages, and also the library was inaccessible. The quality of education gets compromised mainly due to inefficient teaching support or the non-competency of teachers to teach effectively in the classroom (Pokhrel, & Chhetri, 2021; Chahal 2015). As it seems blended learning would be an important part of education in the future ((Paudel, 2021)), institutes must have better equipped with broadband internet connectivity / Wi-Fi. Also, the libraries should be made accessible online, at least for their students and faculty. Study materials in regional languages must be developed on priority. At the same time, teachers must be encouraged and provided with training opportunities to enhance their online teaching skills. This would facilitate in making their online classes more interactive and creative. In order to make online classes more and more interactive and

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enjoyable, multiple educational media like Edmodo, Telegram, Microsoft team etc., and different software related to games & quizzes, C-map, etc. can be used along with regular google meets, zoom meetings, usage of PPTs & pdfs. Thus, students and teachers both need to be efficient in technological usage.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, they faced problems in getting guidance and proper instructions related to research on time and also some financial burden in completing their research. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students found it difficult to get effective guidance in online mode. Though they learned to create online tools for data collection that reduces their financial burden, it became difficult to convince people to become a participant, during data collection. It is also very difficult to conduct an in-depth study through a telephonic interview or online mode. Data may have outliers which may reduce the authenticity and quality of their research work.

Before COVID-19, students were facing problems in examinations due to a lack of communication and time management in the examination system and delayed result declaration (Jena, 2020). While during COVID-19 they suffered from the unavailability of study material, unawareness about the newer examination patterns, technical glitches, power cuts, etc. Having proper internet connectivity has become a basic need in the new normal of the digital era and so it is the foremost constrain of students during COVID 19 Pandemic. Technical glitches, inefficient teaching, lack of study material inappropriate language, etc. may lead to the poor performance of the learner as well as may compromise the examination system too (Pokhrel, & Chhetri, 2021).

Earlier students were finding financial constraints mainly in paying fees and conducting research works. While, during COVID-19 financial constraints (Jena, 2020; Chahal, 2015) have increased more because of the mandatory situation to get proper internet connections, and for some to live in rooms on rent instead of hostels. It could be a major problem for students belonging to low socioeconomic status. Along with this due to online classes during COVID-19, screen time has increased to a great extent. This may raise many health issues such as problems in the eyesight, stress, mental instability, depression, etc.(Pokhrel, & Chhetri, 2021).

Conclusion

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, when educational institutions were running offline, the basic challenges found in higher education were mainly related to mismanaged slow, lengthy, and delayed admission procedures; high fees (Chahal, 2015); limited & delayed hostel accommodations; lecturers found busier with administrative works, lack of communication and time management in the examination system delayed result declarations, etc. While during the COVID-19 pandemic, when classes suddenly shifted to online mode. Uninterrupted internet connectivity was found as the most important concern throughout the teaching-learning process (Pokhrel, & Chhetri, 2021; Tari, & Amonkar, 2021; Jena, 2020). Along with that, financial burden (Jena, 2020) with respect to fee, internet connection and paying extra for rooms on rent; unavailability of proper guidelines regarding admission procedures and course curriculum; unavailability of hostels & hygienic meal; inaccessible libraries, lack of online learning resources, irregular classes, technical glitches, technologically less skilled teachers (Pokhrel, & Chhetri, 2021); more dependency on self-study; ineffective research guidance & inability to go outside for research data collections;

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power cut and interrupted internet connectivity during examinations; etc., were the most important challenges before students during COVID-19.

The present researcher has found the above-mentioned challenges which have the potential to adversely affect the quality of higher education. But if things get implemented properly as per government rules, we would definitely overcome these challenges. This pandemic situation has given us a new way to look at the teaching-learning process virtually. ICT policy should be clear and courses should be developed accordingly (Paudel, 2021). Such as Savitribai Phule Pune University has set up its own e-content development studios, uses Microsoft Team along with other online platforms for classes, gave training and full technical support to use MOODLE as an online examination platform, etc. Similarly, to run higher education smoothly, all the stakeholders need to take a lot of effort.

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