**Academic pandemic and the 2nd wave of Covid-19**

[Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/syed-hussain-shaheed-soherwordi/)

November 22, 2020

Apart from emerging with a structured response to the coronavirus pandemic, Pakistan is in dire need of coming up with a plan of action to overcome its academic pandemic. Having witnessed the first wave of the Coronavirus pandemic, we are now well-acquainted with the lockdown impediments and quarantine protocols. This is applicable in particular to the e-learning system of education. Prior to the pandemic, it was only accessible to a handful of universities across Pakistan. Even in those universities, it didn’t serve as a reliant means of acquiring education. During the pandemic and the imposed lockdown, an emergency situation arose whereby the setup of an online system of learning was the sine qua non of all academic institutions. Encompassing numerous contributing factors, such a framework has failed to a greater extent in a country with limited means. The organization of e-learning in Pakistan continues to be in shambles. This setup is not effective in a country that lags technologically and that too, on an exponential level. Substitution of traditional pedagogy in times of crisis and substantiation of it in general by emerging models of e-learning is indispensable for Pakistan, especially since COVID-19 struck in December 2019.

Now that the second wave of the pandemic has hit the country since late October 2020, the imposition of another lockdown seems imminent as per recommendations of the National Command and Operation Center (NCOC). The new quarantine will bring with itself the same requisites for wading through, and this will continue till the invention of a vaccine. In order to brave the challenges, it is crucial for Pakistani universities to establish effective structures for a relatively ‘smooth sail’ through the second wave. There are two preconditions for adaptation to the merging of traditional learning and e-learning as a paradigm shift, viz. restructuring on technical and human frontiers.

The human aspect aims to synchronize the psychological orientation of students and teachers to the shifting paradigm. The gap lies in the social, economic and cultural forces that shape the fabric of society as well as resist change. These limitations are experienced in simple interactions such as, the intricacy of handling smart technology, conduction and attendance of online classes, using appropriate mediums, having access etc. Conventional education centers on teachers’ ability to deposit knowledge with students considered as passive subjects. That is where the heart of the problem resides. If the roots of traditional perceptions of teaching-learning dynamics are unaltered, a system as complex as e-learning would serve to be dysfunctional in a country like Pakistan. Online classes can be successful in an interactive environment, where students thrive on debate and discourse. One plausible solution lies in appropriate usage of technology, convenient user-device interface and its general acceptability as human experience.

Having three systems of learning, viz. private/elite, public and the newly generalized online education, the society remains fragmented

The technical aspect includes institutional barriers and limitations. The ‘brain-drain’ phenomenon has afflicted Pakistan in areas where leaps are required to bridge the gap now. One of the hard-hit facets of development in Pakistan is technology. It is estimated that 9% of IT expertise is exported from a country with a total of 220 million population. Pakistan, thus, lags in technological development at an exponential rate. Remote learning among university students in the government sector has proven to be catastrophic due a weak IT structure. In terms of coordination, outreach, inclusivity as well as responsibility on part of the administration, it has been lagging. A student of the University of Peshawar elaborated on their personal experience and shared the dynamics of e-learning on the university’s part. The attempt, although credible, is not up to par and not inclusive of each and every student of the class(es). Due to the unavailable and inequitable distribution of internet and telecommunication services in remote areas of KP (such as that of former FATA), students are not able to avail the opportunity to attend lectures, submit coursework and communicate with their course instructors and/or classmates. Despite protests and reports on the deplorable state of the online classes, the HEC and/or higher authorities are unresponsive or slow in responding to the needs of the students and the teachers. The teachers themselves are unequipped and inexperienced to function with the dynamicity of this drastic evolution in the mode of education. Being one of the most significant drivers of e-learning, they require vocational training to be well-equipped to guide and mold the learning process.

A recent trend on twitter ignited the debate that students who can attain e-learning are unable to comprehend the happenings of an online class. This is especially prevalent amongst the students of public educational institutions. Those schools lack basic facilities and are designed to cater to the needs of the less-privileged section of the population that is either experiencing financial constraints or topographic, or both. Medium of instruction, weak internet and/or network signals, lack of computer skills, inefficient administration of classes, loss of face-to-face interaction (traditional learning method) etc. were prime motives backing the trend under the name, “#WeRejectOnlineEducation”. This unveiled the amplitude of the complications in online education particularly and the human development as a whole, in Pakistan. Having three systems of learning, viz. private/elite, public and the newly generalized online education, the society remains fragmented. Prior to the pandemic, the public-private schools divide was brushed under the rug easily being an evitable discourse. In the aftermath of a global pandemic, the academic pandemic on the domestic front seems to be a side-effect so severe that coming up with a pragmatic solution to it seems inevitable.

The aforementioned problems and causes are to be considered by any decision orpolicy-making body for education, while mapping a way forward for e-learning in Pakistan. Making this a norm by amalgamating it into the Pakistani education system, though requires massive effort and capacity for change, is not an impossibility in the foreseeable future. This mode of education is not just a passing cloud as the effects of the pandemic will be long-lasting and the New World Order shaped post-pandemic will have e-learning as a central feature of the education sector in any part of the world**.**

*(The Author is the Chairman of the Department of International Relations at the University of Peshawar. Shaheed@uop.edu.pk)*