**Excellence in times of a pandemic**

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The pandemic brought to the fore several challenges for educational institutes. One such looming challenge was to conduct regular classes on campus. With the government’s standard operating procedures (SOPs) and social distancing measures in effect, educational institutes had to resort to online education. The situation presented several limitations. First, schools and colleges, especially from the public sector, do not have continuous internet connectivity. Second, a modus operandi was to be formulated to connect faculty and students over the internet, primarily digital media.

Educational institutes needed a holistic strategy to connect faculty members with students. By following the already established class schedules and course outlines, the mode of delivering lectures was to be transferred from a physical classroom to an online class. Some faculty members used YouTube to upload their lectures, while others even used WhatsApp. At that time, uncertainty loomed across the educational institutes as the lockdown was implemented in Pakistan in March 2020. During such ambiguous times, the only tools available to connect were Zoom video calls and similar features on other platforms. Students—especially the millennials studying in primary and higher secondary classes—were already attuned to using these platforms. The senior faculty and those not acclimatised using such digital media tools had to take a refresher course to learn the basics from scratch.

[At least 54 dead after COVID hospital in Iraq catches fire](https://nation.com.pk/13-Jul-2021/at-least-54-dead-after-covid-hospital-in-iraq-catches-fire)

Another challenge for the faculty was to streamline students’ attendance and grade examinations when delivering online classes. Universities created and implemented an online mechanism for ease in marking attendance, sharing files for lectures, collecting assignments and conducting examinations. Strict SOPs were followed by the examination departments of universities, where they conducted final examinations under stringent regulations. It is not easy to monitor students when taking examinations at home or office, but the faculty members’ commitment and the students’ honesty made it possible.

During the pre-pandemic days, universities held regular programmes on campus, including guest lectures, seminars and other extracurricular activities organised by student societies. Seminars and guest speaker sessions were turned into webinars and online symposiums. These webinars have now become the norm. They do have their pros and cons. The moderator and speakers can participate from their home or office comforts, thereby reducing the costs incurred by the host to organise the webinar. The guests can join from anywhere worldwide, eliminating their travel, logistics, boarding and lodging expenses. Attendees can ask questions by becoming a part of the discussion or sharing it in the comments section. They can also watch the recording later at their convenience. The cons of such webinars are those of video and voice quality and uneven connectivity.

[UN sends 50 truckloads of humanitarian aid to Ethiopia’s Tigray](https://nation.com.pk/13-Jul-2021/un-sends-50-truckloads-of-humanitarian-aid-to-ethiopia-s-tigray)

At the Institute of Business Management (IoBM), we envisioned holding online classes by 2024. The plan was implemented on an ad-hoc basis in March 2020. Within a week, all courses were being conducted online. Our proactive approach also facilitated us in implementing an online classroom strategy. Over forty percent of our faculty were already using the Learning Management System (LMS) since spring 2020. They became the early adopters of the system who shared the insights on using the system with their colleagues.

Indeed, the pandemic brought upon us moments of reflection as we shifted our lifestyle, adopted new skills, and adjusted our thought processes with the needs of the time. Learning to use online connectivity platforms along with uploading and sharing of the course content were a challenge for many. With user-friendly, simplistic interfaces of such tools, the process and procedures were completed with ease. In some instances, universities implemented a digital strategy that they were planning to implement in five to ten years.