**Higher Education Commission s guidelines for 2 nd wave of Covid 19**

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December 2, 2020

The author is working as Dy. Director at Higher Education Commission The second wave of Covid-19 has compelled most countries to take appropriate measures for protecting their citizens from this pandemic. The Government of Pakistan has also taken suitable steps for prevention. As per Government guidelines, the Higher Education Commission has consulted Vice-Chancellors of public and private sector Universities through video conference. Midterms, admissions, and face-to-face classes were in progress at these Institutions and once again all stakeholders were required to take preventive measures for protecting their students, faculty, and staff from the second wave of Covid-19.

During March 2020, as per government policy, the Universities were supported to establish an online mode for teaching and learning. Detailed guidelines for online readiness were developed and the Quality Assurance Agency was given the task to assess the readiness of institutions, faculty members’, students’, and the technological aspect. Most of the institutions were able to score high as they already have facilities given through subscription of Pakistan Education Research Network (PERN) which includes high bandwidth internet, video conference, VPN, etc. There were connectivity issues shared by the students of remote areas of the country.

The current guidelines have considered such disconnection and access issues of students who belong to far-flung areas and the Vice Chancellors are authorized to decide accordingly on case to case basis for the provision of hostel and internet facility to them. The senior or post-graduate students may also be allowed to stay on campus if they are in small groups and are strictly bound to follow Government SOPs for Covid-19. There is a possibility of assigning homework to the students during this period which is effective from November 26, 2020. This reminds many of the correspondence-based study method wherein the institution will forward reading material along with assignments to the students with a certain deadline. The students will resubmit these assignments through courier or postal service. The assignments will be assessed and results shall be submitted to the examination department.

Training must be provided to the faculty members for conducting online classes, responding to the student queries, engaging the students in virtual mode, assessing their reflections in response to different assignments on LMS, and meeting the course requirement through virtual means

It is expected that Universities will make a Learning Management System (LMS) an active platform for teachers and students who may share reading material, assignments, quizzes, and course topics. Students will have the liberty to use LMS as per their accessibility and availability.

Time-bound quizzes will help to resolve the assessment of student’s learning. Recording short video clips of definitions of new topics are also expected to be made part of the LMS. The role of the faculty members in this entire process of virtual learning is important as he may respond to the queries of students within 12 or 24 hours for effective learning.

The guidelines authorize the Vice Chancellors to allow essential staff who is required to operationalize technical, financial, transport, and other services of the University. The faculty members may also be called for preparing and delivering online lectures from the Campus, there is a need to develop some rotation mechanism for these activities. As far as students are concerned for on-campus presence, it says 30 percent of total strength with all required safeguards for the prevention of Covid-19, and the same is applicable for students in the hostel. The discretion given by the government and HEC needs to be exercised with all protective measures in place and a judicious manner.

The public sector Universities are given Rs. 10 million for arranging support services for online mode teaching and learning. Although, many IT-based services are already provided through PERN and are in use at most of the public sector Universities. The National Academy of Higher Education (NAHE) has also shared its good practices for online mode of teaching wherein online readiness guidelines as well as good practices of different Universities are placed for ready
reference.

The second wave of Covid-19 is again reminding us to develop alternate strategies techniques for teaching and learning. The institutional readiness as per HEC guidelines should be on priority and training must be provided to the faculty members for conducting online classes, responding to the student queries, engaging the students in virtual mode, assessing their reflections
in response to different assignments on LMS, and meeting the course requirement through virtual means. The institutions of the same category may conduct regular interaction on weekly basis to assess how to improve teaching and learning practices.

The systematic interaction among peers will also help them to develop a complete understanding of various tools and techniques for online learning. The tasks of reviewing good practices and current working of world-class institutions listed at NAHE webpages may be carried out during coming months and different departments of the Universities ie. ORIC, IT, QEC, etc may lead these virtual discussions. In this regard, HEC has also constituted a committee to support and guide the Universities in developing teaching and learning strategies. The regular meeting of the committee will yield better results in terms of the right approach to deal with this pandemic.