**Online distance learning**

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In Pakistan, less than 12 percent of eligible students in the 17-23 age bracket have access to higher education, which is among the lowest in the developing world.

It is a well-known fact that a country’s GDP per capita increases as the number of skilled graduates per capita increases. Pakistan could easily reach a per capita income of over $10,000 once we have the same enrollment ratios of ‘qualified and skilled’ graduates as for Turkey and Malaysia, where over 50 percent of the cohort have access to higher education.

We fall behind because we neither have the funding to start new brick-and-mortar universities with the supporting infrastructure, including libraries and laboratories, nor do we have qualified faculty to teach these students.

Online distance learning (ODL) can easily resolve this deficiency; however, in the past it has not gained wide recognition from various accreditation agencies and regulatory bodies because the quality of ODL was considered substandard. Only ODL programmes in certain well-known universities were accepted because quality was ensured at these institutions. For example, Georgia Tech almost a decade back was among the first universities offering a Masters in Computer Sciences through ODL at only $8000, which was almost a third of its regular face-to-face (F2F) tuition fees for out-of-state students and captured enrollment in thousands.

Likewise, ODL can certainly resolve Pakistan’s problem of lower accessibility without resorting to brick-and-mortar universities in every district, but only if we could ensure that the best faculty capable of ODL is available, resources and quality are not compromised, and international best practices are followed.

Covid-19 was a disruptive game-changer for ODL. The pandemic significantly changed the SOPs of learning in educational institutes worldwide. It forced all universities to deliver their programmes online, while faculty and staff worked virtually and remained in regular contact with students. Remote and Virtual have now become popular keywords in developed countries: remote and virtual courses, remote and virtual services, remote and virtual meetings, remote and virtual commencements, and remote and virtual campus tours. Students and faculties have become remote and virtual as well. As a result, virtual, remote and online education, training and meetings have become the global norm today and are expected to grow further in the foreseeable future.

Even those universities, programmes, regulatory and accreditation agencies that were reluctant in the past to accept ODL education as equal to F2F or in-person have succumbed to pressure and caved in. However, they have not compromised on their standards, which is comparable to F2F, and the learning outcomes and degrees are thus equated as equivalent by the accreditation and regulatory agencies like HEC.

The Covid-19 pandemic also revealed the digital divide in ODL between the haves and the have-nots. There were students living in remote or rural areas, with low bandwidth, or those who were economically deprived, or who did not have equal access to all opportunities, that could not receive the same level of learning as those in more developed areas or financially well off. Therefore, for ODL to become accessible to the population at large, it is important that the state provide resources to far off areas and the deprived so that this digital divide is reduced. With 5G around the corner, free broadband can be made available to eligible students who are enrolled in ODL.

There have been many important lessons learnt in the last one year which both the universities and the government must build on. For any university to start regular ODL, there must be a checklist developed by the HEC to follow which lays down the minimum requirements which must be followed, and strictly monitored by the Quality Assurance and the Accreditation agencies. Once the quality and accreditation issues are resolved, only then should universities be allowed to move forward cautiously under strict monitoring.

What are the lessons learnt on ODL for universities, faculty, students, accreditation agencies and the government over the last one year? Some of these are summarized below without going into specific details.

One, every university can, and eventually should offer certain ODL programmes. These can be offered at all levels from Associate to Doctoral Programs. Two, students must devote as much attention, time and sincere effort to ODL as they do to in-person learning. Three, faculty must develop newer and innovative methods of teaching assessment so that learning outcomes and quality are not compromised.

Four, innovative learning resources must be further developed to improve on online gains and make them sustainable. Various video-conferencing platforms like Zoom, Webex, Skype, Blue Jeans, Blackboard, Adobe Connect, Google Drive, Microsoft Teams, Google Workspace and others must be reassessed both by the developers and the universities together so that they become the new classroom. They must also be scaled for wider and deeper applications.

Five, means must be adopted for extra-curricular activities, like student clubs and tours, so that life experiences of a student attending ODL are not secondary to in-person. Lastly, and most importantly, regulatory agencies like the HEC and accreditation agencies like PEC must review and revise their standards without compromising on quality to ensure there is only one standard of recognition of programmes and universities rather than categorizing them separately as ODL and in-person. One can learn from the experience of the Commonwealth of Learning ODL policies.

What are the lessons for the post-pandemic world? It is essential that faculty, staff, accreditation and regulatory agencies must revert back to the drawing board, assess the lessons learnt globally to harness what worked best during the pandemic. And then build on strengths, adopt the best practices for access, faculty readiness, course design, affordability, retention and success of students, and use them to improve the quality of ODL for all future offerings.

The writer is a former chairperson of the HEC.