Guest Editorial

Online Education in Pakistan: Past, Present and Future

Musarrat Riaz[1], Masood Jawaid[2]

[1]Baqai Institute of Diabetology & Endocrinology, Baqai Medical University, Karachi, Pakistan

[2]Associate Editor, Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences

Correspondence to

Dr. Masood Jawaid

E-mail: *masood4477@gmail.com*

The online teaching and learning present a wide range of concepts in existing literature. These terms portray different meanings but most of the time, they are used interchangeably, for example, distance education, online teaching, remote teaching and so on.[1] In the year 2020-21, the lockdown resulting from COVID-19 outbreak affected individuals and nations globally. It not only harmed the economy but also led to the total shut down of all educational activities resulting in a significant gap in learning and understanding among students worldwide. Institutions, teachers, educators and students all had to respond suddenly to an unexpected and enforced transition to remote teaching and learning. The institutions were faced with a challenge to promptly create learning environments to ensure smooth running of all educational activities. Although this endeavor was not full of hurdles, but at the same time, it provided opportunities that can be now be quoted as "blessing in disguise".

As online education was rare in Pakistan before COVID-19, Higher Education Commission instructed all educational institutions to introduce distance learning approaches conveniently applicable during the pandemic.[2] Since then, a number of educational institutions have started online education and e-classes using various applications like Zoom, Google Classroom, Edmodo, Skype etc, inspite of restoration of on-campus activities.

Now let us explore some of the challenges that both teachers and students had to face during online classes. The most important one being the low internet speed and frequent disruptions due to electric power failure. Lack of formal training of teachers in online education resulted in adversely affecting the students' understanding of concepts and communication with their teachers. Poor online teaching infrastructure, teachers' incompetencies in the use of digital instructional formats accompanied by the non-serious attitude of students all resulted in a painful and helpless compromise on the quality of online education.[3] Overall, the challenges posed by transition from conventional education system to online academics included faculty training, digital infrastructure, bandwidth and licensed software applications.

It turned out that a large number of hastily designed online programs and courses that started during the pandemic were nothing more than simple remote learning via live Zoom classes without consideration of principles of remote teaching. However, if the online programs had been designed with proper instructional strategies, it would remarkably have prepared students, even in the midst of a crisis.

The time has come to answer the question whether online learning system, as a learning modality, is equally effective as face to face learning? This should be addressed in light of recent events. One may justify and appreciate the wide variety of spectrum of quality of online learning programs, ranging from the mediocre to the world class, but on second thought, the same spectrum also applies to face-to-face learning, due to the current diversity in pedagogical methods. For now, we need to focus on how to develop strong online programs and how we can make them work better for students. Only via online learning can students from remote areas of Pakistan encounter the same high-quality learning experience as someone sitting at a university campus of a developed city. This is the proof of the strength and significance of online education.

To achieve remarkable outcomes of online teaching and learning, it is important to learn more about its potential uses. To maximize the productivity of online education, we need to go beyond the emergency online practices and develop quality online teaching and learning that result from careful instructional design and planning, even in the times when we don't really need effective online systems to operate. To achieve this, few time-tested principles include making the content of e-learning more interactive so that participants can interact with teachers and able to apply new knowledge. Similarly, use of pedagogical tools and technologies (e.g., gamification, the use of case stories, animated clips, videos, podcasts, voice boards, virtual worlds,) in online education can help in engaging students for better outcomes. Staff in schools, colleges and universities need to be trained to maintain the infrastructure for smooth running of online teaching, in case of another abrupt outbreak of a pandemic.

While most of the institutions across the country are still struggling with online systems, great initiatives have been taken by few organizations, providing quality online education related to various disciplines which are comparable and compatible to international standards.[4] Through virtual blackboards, online live classes, and

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Learning Management Systems, animated videos, augmented reality, and gamification, these online courses have brought innovations that will change the way distant education programs are executed in Pakistan. More such initiatives are needed at national level with multiple stake holders.

For online teaching to survive in the current uncertain situations, it is obligatory to make some crucial decisions at all levels, including individual, institutional and governmental. To remain compatible and keep pace with the ongoing advancement in the field of education, new technologies need to be implemented and endorsed. Teachers should adopt new methods of teaching by enhancing soft teaching techniques for online learning to facilitate students. Educational institutions should provide digital libraries to their students and faculty. Government should enable teachers and students with free internet service to ensure smooth uninterrupted learning environment. We, as facilitators and health professionals, still have a long way to go to pave the way for ongoing and coming generations, so that they may achieve what we can only dream of and desire for in the present times.

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