[Dr Arshad Ahmad](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-arshad-ahmad)

January 30, 2021

**Education disrupted**

When the pandemic struck, back in March 2020, and shutdowns were imposed, many schools and universities had to shift to online teaching to complete their ongoing semesters. Others had to delay or close due to the ground realities and constraints that became insurmountable. Many universities around the world are still mostly offering online courses. This will continue as long as the threat of Covid-19 remains significant.

The pandemic has disrupted education on a large scale with long-term side-effects. There have been learning losses and significant delays in semester completion and/or examinations. There are accounts of widespread economic and psychological distress. Compound that with the financial pressure on universities, the pandemic has exposed weaknesses and amplified system-wide bottlenecks to access, to quality, and to equity in the education system. In these extraordinary circumstances, finding innovative solutions will vary from one context to another, but one thing is clear – we must change our mindsets about how to address these issues. These issues were always there, but the pandemic could be turned on its head and seen as an opportunity to think more radically to address these issues.

Take for example widespread issues concerning the lack of devices (computers), internet infrastructure and the stability of internet access. Just as chalk and a blackboard were considered essential for formal instruction, today, we cannot participate in a digitised world without a digital infrastructure. Investing in a digital highway for education is likely to generate more economic and social prosperity in Pakistan than the conventional first order brick and mortar investments in the educational sector.

Equally important, if not more so, are issues associated with variations in the home environments of our students. Most students do not have a room to themselves, or quiet spaces to work. Many are also responsible for family chores, especially if they are women who are expected to carry higher burdens of care. In some families, male children are given priority to use household devices such as laptop computers leaving females to attend online classes on small mobile phones or to complete course work late at night. In these cases, their education might be impacted more than males when online learning happens. To ensure equity, fairness and an equal opportunity to benefit from online classes, we have to address or compensate for these circumstances.

Most universities had not prioritized online learning, which had instructors scrambling to figure out how to continue to teach last March. They tried to replicate their teaching roles and the existing curriculum on online platforms only to learn that major adjustments were required. Now, with almost a year of experience, many instructors have adapted their teaching materials as well as their instructional approaches and have learned firsthand how online platforms are beginning to serve their goals for teaching and for students’ learning.

For example, platforms such as Zoom and other Learning Management Systems facilitate increased student interaction, peer learning, small group teamwork, and contributions from those who were shy to express themselves in the classroom. New platforms are being designed to better support formative assessments that help instructors to provide valuable, frequent feedback for student learning and development. In addition, teaching materials now include more use of audio and visual material to complement text-based explanations. Similarly, asynchronous classes provide flexibility to learn anytime anywhere. These innovations are still in early phases and we can be sure that a lot more innovation will happen over the next year or so.

The reality is that the pandemic is still with us. It might be a long time before it subsides and recedes into the background. But even when that happens, many of the changes that have come and are underway, the timeless questions about access, quality and equity that have been raised, are going to stay with us. It is human nature to develop routines and create stability which might explain why so many educators yearn for things to revert back to what they were before COVID-19. How many times have we heard “let’s wait and see” or “this will pass, and we will go back to normal soon enough”? The hard truth is the change that was forced upon us is also opening windows of opportunity. The best experts cannot predict certainty nor easy solutions that will take us back to where we were, but the lessons from the pandemic are becoming clear.

One of these lessons is that change will continue. Another is that no amount of singular expertise can solve the cascading challenges we face. We must therefore think harder and work collectively to resolve educational issues.

Can universities extend their reach, by focusing on delivering quality courses and online programmes to students who couldn’t access them before? Could this be done at a lower cost to both the provider and the user? Where is the tradeoff, for a student, between a local in-person university that may compromise on quality, and an online degree opportunity with a tier one university? How can we make the perceptions and realities of online ‘better’ for students and for faculty? And in what circumstances is it better than face-to-face learning?

The pandemic has caused serious disruptions to education and has been a mirror to prompt us to raise important questions for the education sector. For several universities these questions are existential in nature. This means that post-pandemic, the role for universities will undoubtedly change. Our mindsets will determine whether today’s disruptions present a threat or an opportunity to find innovative solutions to address the major educational issues that have been highlighted by this pandemic. We hope universities see opportunity and take bold steps to confront issues of access, quality and equity in university education.

Dr Arshad Ahmad is Vice Chancellor, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS)