[**Fall semester uncertainties**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1639084/fall-semester-uncertainties)

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WE are in the middle of another spike in Covid positivity rates (fourth wave) and we are also coming close to the beginning of another academic year for universities. Schools have already started their academic year, with certain restrictions; universities are likely to be in session by end August or early September.

Education has been, equally or more than other sectors, very severely impacted by Covid over the last year and a half. Schools and universities have been closed for extended periods and education has had to move to online and other non-face-to-face platforms where possible. This has definitely impacted the quality of education. It has also made education access an issue for the millions who have not had access to these online and other platforms.

A lot of people thought and had hoped that with vaccines becoming available, the coming academic year will be less problematic and some of the more optimistic ones amongst us had even hoped we could return to the old ‘normal’. The way the academic year is shaping up, things are going to be more complicated.

Vaccines are definitely bringing the incidence of the disease down. They are also reducing the severity of the disease in people who get the virus even after being vaccinated. No vaccine has shown any widespread or serious side effects. So, it is a safe and inexpensive way of reducing the probability of falling sick. But it does not eliminate the disease. Though it is unclear at the moment, vaccinated individuals may continue to be carriers as well. This raises a number of issues.

It is unlikely that universities can go back to full, face-to-face teaching soon.

With a population of 200-plus million people, Pakistan still has only 33m or so people who have received at least one dose of the vaccine. The number is still very small even if we only consider the eligible (above 18) population. We will not be able to open sectors or reduce the incidence of the infection just through vaccination at present.

SOP compliance has been poor in general in the country. It has been better in periods when there are lockdowns and crackdowns but as soon as we move towards reopening, SOP compliance also goes down.

We are also getting new variants of the virus. So far existing vaccines have been reasonably effective against the new variants as well, though sometimes with less effectiveness. But the possibility of more vaccine-resistant new variants remains. This underscores the need to keep SOP compliance levels high, irrespective of vaccination numbers, in the medium to long run.

So, we are going to continue to struggle in the education sector. A lot of faculty, staff and students at the university level have been vaccinated. This does not mean that we can fully open universities in the fall and go back to full face-to-face teaching.

SOPs have to be maintained. This means we cannot fill lecture halls and classes the way we used to. If physical distancing needs to be maintained, we might be able to fill rooms to 50 per cent of their capacity. We will also have to restrict classes to well-ventilated rooms. How do we then offer face-to-face classes to all? The same will be true of hostel facilities (we cannot have too many people in the dorms) and other facilities on campus (dining, sports, library, laboratories, etc). So, the ability of universities to serve students under SOPs will be limited.

Rooms will need to be reserved in hostels for quarantine and isolation, in case students become symptomatic. Rapid testing facilities will need to be present. All of these will raise costs and/or reduce the numbers of those who can be on campus.

There will be a certain number of faculty, staff and students who, due to their co-morbidities or due to people with co-morbidities living in their families/households or having young children in their homes, might not be able to or want to have face-to-face interactions. Universities will have to make arrangements for them. It might mean that some percentage of courses will need to remain online or be in hybrid format. This also raises costs and/or time pressures.

If a student or faculty member falls ill — and some will despite vaccination and even with reasonable SOP compliance — they will be isolated for a few weeks. So what will happen to their classes in the meanwhile? Again, online options will have to remain.

There are likely to be subsequent waves as well. We do not know how many and for how long. It might be a few years before Covid subsides and we have ‘herd’ immunity or better medicines to manage the infection. When there is a wave, the government response is likely to be the same: shutting down activities and closing off areas to break the transmission chain. So education provision, a service that relies heavily on face-to-face interaction, is likely to continue to face periodic shutdowns. We have to be prepared for that too.

Everyone is tired of Covid-19 and wants to go back to ‘normal’ life. Faculty, students and staff are no exception. Everyone wants face-to-face education and normalcy. But it is unlikely that that particular ‘normal’ will return for some time. What we have is the possibility of management, post vaccination, of some face-to-face interaction with strict compliance with SOPs. Even then we will continue to have disruptions, closures and so on. Individuals will continue to fall sick; we will need to manage that too.

As we prepare for the fall semester, all of the above makes the situation that much more unpredictable. Still, life must go on. Classes will happen, learning will go on. But it will take a lot of management to ensure we can do it optimally, given the constraints. The universities will need to have flexible and quick decision-making abilities and they will have to prepare well. We only have a month to go.

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