[**Reopening under Covid**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1652105/reopening-under-covid)

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THE new directive from the National Command and Operation Centre allows educational institutions to open up fully, though keeping notified SOPs in place. This raises interesting and complex issues for educational institutions.

How do we deal with all enrolled students coming to classes while maintaining SOPs on social distancing? At our university, we had moved to 50 per cent use of classroom capacity to ensure SOP compliance. How do we fit in 100pc of the enrolled students? We cannot double the number of courses and/ or sections. We cannot make all classes very small. We have a given architecture for the classrooms; we cannot make them bigger or smaller now. How do we accommodate 100pc of the students if SOPs are to be effectively observed?

This is not just an issue for classrooms. It is also a challenge for most other spaces. Our gymnasium was designed for a certain number of those on-campus. If we impose space restrictions, how do we cater to all students, faculty and staff? Our cafeterias were also designed in a certain way and assumed a certain population density. Now, with distancing, how do we cater to all the breakfast-, lunch- and dinner-hungry people? We have opened new cafeterias and restaurants in other buildings, we have turned open spaces into seating areas as indoor dining, with distancing, seats fewer people. But there are limits to what can be done in this manner.

We have set up open-air classrooms too. But given the weather in Lahore and the cost that dengue and the smog exact, how much academic activity can be transferred to open spaces? Limited numbers in limited time slots. We have created a more general seating capacity in open spaces too, but again, there is a limit to how much of that is possible and that limit is definitely less than the requirement when distancing and other SOPs are in place.

It will be a challenge to deal with all students returning to classrooms and maintaining SOPs.

The library is an issue too. When there are classes, students need to study in the library as well. And they need access to resources too. How do we manage that? Not every book or article or other piece of writing has been digitised and is available online. And students need spaces to sit and study. If the library cannot provide that, where are they supposed to go?

Universities and schools need to invest in ventilation systems, windows that can open and in other system-level changes as well. Where is the money for all this going to come from?

The cost of carrying out some of the changes mentioned has been substantial already. How much more can universities and schools do? Especially when most educational institutions are already under financial stress. There are universities that are having trouble making their payrolls and paying their pension liabilities. How much can they spend on accommodation? Even those that have more resources must observe stringent limits. But if these accommodations are not made, we compromise either on the health of students, faculty and staff or the quality of education and educational experience.

The issue of hostel space is even more complex. Single occupancy is not possible as it raises hostel costs to unaffordable levels for most students and their parents. But double and triple occupancy means compromises on distancing and SOP observance. How do we square that circle?

The biggest challenge, though, arises from the fact that we do not know how long these changes need to last. For how many years will we keep getting waves and new variants? Are the SOPs the new normal? Are they for the medium to long term? If they are, we have to think of education delivery very differently. We have to think of online and hybrid systems becoming permanent and we will have to do the requisite investments in tools, methods and so on. If the new normal is masks, with distancing and with lower attendance per room, we have to think of redesigning our spaces, buildings, classrooms, cafeterias, libraries, offices and gymnasia. If everything needs to change, the cost of making these changes would be prohibitive.

If the ‘new normal’ is only for a while, we still have to find better ways of coping for these few years than what we have currently. Asking half the students to stay home or not allowing some students into hostels and so on are not solutions. These are coping mechanisms that have worked so far but if we persist with them, we risk compromising learning processes for our students.

Many institutions will be at a loss as to how to even think about some of the issues mentioned above. We are in unprecedented and uncharted territory; since we do not have maps, we have to muddle through. And this is what schools and universities have been doing for the last almost 18 months now. We have made many mistakes on the way and we have learnt from some of them too. We know how to teach online much better than when we started in March 2020. We have adapted content, teaching tools, teaching material, and even assessments quite well. We have started work on learning losses too. But, for other issues, especially related to opening up institutions in the time of SOPs and in the midst of the threat of more Covid waves, we have to think through a lot of things. It would be good for the government through the Higher Education Commission as well as education departments to provide some support to educational institutions to work on these issues so we can find the best solutions, given our resources, and be able to implement them.

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