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**The new abnormal**

Some universities around the globe had put in place strategic plans to capitalise on ICT and make a gradual shift to online education prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Back then, they had planned to capture the untapped remote markets by following the first-mover strategy. But now it has become a new fad thanks to the global pandemic and breakthrough innovations in IoT (Internet of things). This, however, is not a panacea that one can advise to anyone.

Does this paradigmatic shift bode well for education or otherwise in countries like Pakistan? This is a question that policymakers and academics need to ponder over from all aspects of learning. Over the last one and half years of rollercoaster learning (going online and off-line), one has seen education in Pakistan going downhill. Barring a few exceptions, most academic institutions had no IT infrastructure in place to tackle the mounting challenge of online admissions, teaching and examination. Nor were the faculty and staff trained to understand, let alone address, these new problems.

Most educational institutions took the easy path of doing nothing until it became an issue of survival for them to do something (that too was some sort of window dressing). Students, imprisoned at home, were advised to stay tuned to an online platform with no system for checking their identity, ensuring their active participation, and giving them the opportunity to make a smooth psychological transition. It was mostly a unilateral delivery of content that made students uninterested at best and resentful at worst.

The quality of voice happened to be so poor that most students would prefer surfing the net to deciphering distorted sounds. Besides this, students belonging to rural or far-off areas (GB, interior Sindh, parts of Balochistan, and the erstwhile Fata) had connectivity issues and many of them did not have the necessary gadgets (smart phones/computers) for online education. In some cases, students had to travel long distances to come to main cities for taking exams. The hassle and fatigue, in turn, proved taxing on their academic performance.

Despite every attempt by some institutions, cheating permeated even more in online examinations. With no physical supervision, one can turn to search engines for help to answer any conceptual/technical question. To avoid being caught by Turnitin, some over-smart students would turn in handwritten WORD/PDF documents/images besides doing translation/retranslation of stuff from online sources. Verbal exams met a similar fate, with no objective criteria to evaluate one’s knowledge of all key areas of a subject.

Socialization, which is one of the core objectives of education, happened to be an orphan with no institution doing anything for personality grooming of students during the Covid crisis. On-campus interaction of students creates opportunities for debate/discussion on social/political issues, cultural awareness, and critical thinking. Online interaction, limited by time and cultural inhibitions, makes it difficult to acquire interpersonal skills and develop critical thinking abilities. School-going children, in particular, remained dormant with no interest in outdoor activities.

This new ‘abnormal’, however, was a blessing in disguise for many individuals and academic institutions. Private institutions, without paying salaries and other expenditure, charged full tuition from students for poor quality recorded lectures and PowerPoint slides. Those in government institutions, on the other hand, had no motivation to even try some form of online education. They offered the usual excuse of unavailability of funds and infrastructure.

The challenge for educationists has always been addressing the questions of what to teach and how to teach to produce graduates who, besides knowing more and better than those who have no chance of going through any formal education, are better citizens.

Online education, the one we observed during the Covid-19 pandemic, has fallen short on all counts and should not be allowed to become a substitute for on-campus education. It should be a stand-by option available for abnormal situations with all its essential elements in place before full-scale implementation.

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