

A learning curve for higher education institutions in Bangladesh: A VC's perspective

Many institutions refuse to move out of the obsolete structures and strategies of education, still enforcing and emphasizing ineffective models and syllabus. These impede the growth and development of our education systems overall, making it even more arduous for us to adapt to the changes brought about in this pandemic

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It is a hard fact that the high-risk sites for the spread of the Covid-19 are school, college and university campuses. This evolving situation will be vastly disruptive and a paradigm shift in Higher Education Institutions (HEI).

This crisis has exposed the vulnerabilities prevalent, not only amongst the governing bodies across borders but also within industry sectors and individual institutions. And the HEIs in the academic landscape are no different.

Many institutions are still rooted within traditional education systems, entrenching their curriculums in conventional theories and restricting their delivery to a one-way transfer of knowledge. This leaves them susceptible to the disability of stagnation in progress, with the unfortunate possibility of deterioration in learning development in the long run, especially in today's rapidly evolving and increasingly uncertain times.

This pandemic has forced academic communities across borders to rethink their teaching and learning approach, exploring the uncharted territories of distance learning and online education.

It is not only a daunting challenge for institutions and students alike but even more so for those who are yet to be able to adapt to this change and adopt the 'new normal'. That in itself is a challenging task for those in developing countries, given their pre-existing conditions of socio-economic constraints, slow advancement of the IT infrastructure, and the poor literacy and general apathy towards technology.

Amidst this global crisis, HEIs have been stripped to its fundamental functionalities and put to an eccentric acid test. Now, it is the survival of the fittest, amongst countries, industries, organizations, and of course, most importantly, the people.

Certainly, on paper, we should be adaptable to change, technologically advanced, and infrastructurally strong by now. But that blanket statement cannot cover every single person or organization in the country. Discrepancies prevail across the board even now.

We must evaluate our capabilities in terms of infrastructure, technology, and skills to determine the feasibility of such changes and prioritize the extents of what we can and cannot do in reality.

We must understand whether we have the technological capacity to make a move, whether our students and staff are equipped for engaging in the transition, whether we can adopt course curriculum, lectures, assessments, etc. from such a long-standing offline mode. And that is exactly what we did, or at least, we tried to.

The pandemic around us

Ultimately, progress is neither automatic nor inevitable, but it is impossible without deviating from the norm. Those who refuse to change their minds will not be able to change anything else. Ironically, that is the one thing most of us are unwilling to do – change. We keep repeating the same process over and over again, expecting a different result. Rewind even just 5 years ago, and compare that to a decade back, the world was a different place then, just the way it is now. Economically. Politically. Socially. Culturally. And of course, educationally.

Despite the apparent waves of changes made in education over the past century, the quality, impact, and value of education are yet to be realised on their own accord. The old model of an institution within the four walls of a classroom, with teachers sharing their knowledge, taking tests and assigning homework, focused on and encouraging repetition and memorization as the standard for being ranked in a pre-defined grading system – has now been contested as Pre-Pandemic Predisposition.

The institutions worldwide, especially those in developing countries like Bangladesh, have long been rooted so deeply into their conventional curriculum, course structure, lecture contents, etc. They have seemingly become a depiction of 'the glass is full'. So full to the brim, that there is no scope left for any additional concoction! The minute you try, it spills over! We are living in the 21st century. We cannot be forcing our students to learn the same way we did 10 years ago! Time has changed, and it is high time our teaching does too!

The national education policies have long been archaic, with changes brought about only 10 years ago when a new national education policy was introduced. While this did hit on some of the critical points that needed to be addressed to pave the way for our nation's development, there still have been some buffering in the impact and implementation of the policy on multiple fronts.

Many institutions refuse to move out of the obsolete structures and strategies of education, still enforcing and emphasizing ineffective models and syllabus. On the other hand, many are struggling to do so, whether that be for financial constraints, poor infrastructure, or lack of collaborative support rendering them disabled. These impede the growth and development of our education systems overall, making it even more arduous for us to adapt to the changes brought about in this pandemic.

It does not help that most institutions are exceedingly dependent on the tuition fees as the main revenue source, especially the private institutions that get little to no government support for subsidising operational costs. This undoubtedly becomes an added burden during these difficult times of Covid-19, especially given the pre existing limitations of a developing country as Bangladesh.



Catalyzed by the pandemic, we have gone from one end of the learning spectrum to another, from face-to-face to online. Photo: Independent University of Bangladesh

Multilateral collaboration has only just begun to be considered a constructive means of pursuing holistic academic development, from the curriculum, undertaking research projects, to co-curricular exchange programs that enrich students' overall experience in the long run. But with the lockdown for the pandemic, even those options have become extremely restricted. And with no idea about when this will be over, whether a vaccine will be available in the next few months if immunity is even possible, the ambiguity surrounds the reopening of establishments on a full-scale.

This raises questions on the impact this may have on learning, academic mobility, socialisation, mental and physical health on not just students, but staff as well. Disconnect and burnout are probably some of the worst-case scenarios that can result from long-term screen-time, whether working, teaching, or learning online. Not to mention the adverse side effects that the absence of physical and socio-cultural activities can have on young adults' wellbeing. Quality academic continuity, overall health and safety, and economic survival are now critical matters of concern for the outlook of 2021 and beyond.

Learning is more effective when it is made an active rather than a passive process. If we teach students today what we learnt yesterday, we rob them of tomorrow. And the same can be said for the 'how', now. Just as the content and material of learning have evolved, teaching methods must as well. And with the pandemic acting as a catalyst of change, albeit posing several challenges and constraints across the board, it has undoubtedly accelerated the pace for developing our modern-day education system to truly reflect the meaning of the term today. This is an unprecedented shift for institutions worldwide, but particularly, for those in the developing countries.

Most developed nations have long adopted e-Learning as an effective medium of delivery for quality education, ensuring higher student participation. But Bangladeshi higher education institutions (HEIs) are still an extremely early stage of adapting to such holistic applications technologies. Although there are still several financial, logistical, and technological hurdles along the way, e-Learning has been gaining prominence amidst educators and students. It provides an opportunity to stay focused, keep active, and relieve from the increasing stress of the lockdown, doubled with the uncertainty of the future in terms of their academic degrees and career prospects.

Even then, infrastructure and culture play a predominant role in this phase of transition. In a country where most students in HEIs are from middle-income households, affordability of computers, laptops, or smartphones is a pre-existing issue.

Access to internet connections using bulk data surcharges is another primary concern, as is the all-too-common disruptions in internet connectivity. Roughly 5-10 percent of students may not even have access to the internet at all, especially those residing in remote or rural areas. And in today's world, where we are aiming to go digital, the national expansion of internet access has become essential to safeguard the continuity of education for our youth. Several telecommunication companies have already rolled out their respective offers for students availing their internet packages, and although that's a start, we still have a long way to go. We have had several initiatives undertaken by educational institutions, companies, and governmental agencies in tandem.

However, there is still tremendous scope for doing more and reaching a wider berth amongst the population. Collaborations must be constructed for the greater good, between universities, corporations, and the government, so as to be able to subjugate the havoc wreaked by the pandemic on all fronts. With combined efforts, online teaching and learning can be transformed from a forced option to an informed choice.

The Future of Education

Earlier, students used to sit in a class, listened to their teacher face-to-face, took notes, did tests and exercises. But the generation of students we have today have been nurtured in the exposure of technology. They can no longer sit through a nonreciprocal lecture in monotony. They need a form of education that challenges them to bring out the best in them. Catalyzed by the pandemic, we have gone from one end of the learning spectrum to another (from face-to-face to online), but as a result, we skipped the phases in between – blended and hybrid learning.

It is already an extremely constructive concept that has been implemented in various institutions across the world. The American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB) has been considering a new approach towards its teaching-and-learning method. We have long been working with blended learning, implementing multiple layers of our teaching method, we have already gone entirely online, conducting all the classes of all four Faculties on the virtual platform of MS Teams.

Still, once we overcome this pandemic (hopefully soon), we want to be able to rein in the strengths of both formats, capitalizing on how hybrid learning can feed into each other in the long run. These two concepts are often used interchangeably, and while they share a common space on the spectrum, they have their identities.

With blended learning, a fundamental ideology was that the online materials were not intended to "replace" face-to-face class time, instead, supplement and build upon the content discussed in the classroom. But in case of hybrid learning, the online components are intended to replace a portion of face-to-face class time, which can either be synchronous. That means that students are interacting online in real-time, such as through class sessions conducted via MS Teams, or asynchronous, meaning that students interact online at different times, such as through online discussions boards. That coalesced with face-to-face interactions infuse dynamic advantages that are difficult, if not impossible to replicate otherwise, creating a compelling learning opportunity.

Creating a synergy between the different interactive, experiential collaborative means of education. At present, AIUB utilises the best online tools (most of which have been developed in-house by our students) to support teacher-led classrooms while encouraging students to explore practical approaches that combine technology-integrated learning hands-on applications of theories. But right now, we are working on a tandem of the most effective ways to deliver courses to students. We are concurrently amalgamating the best of both worlds – our expertise in blended teaching and our experience in online learning.

Just as the pandemic unmasked the numerous shortcomings of the educational system in Bangladesh, it has always revealed the actual value of empathy and transparency in our actions and the significance of inter-cultural understanding and adaptability. And as ironic it may seem in the 21st century, we were even reminded of the underestimated importance of scientific integrity and collaboration, especially in the medical field.

The consequence of inequality and disparity has already been felt widely; whether that has been in terms of the spread of the virus across borders, the anxious search for the vaccine, or even the varying impact and recovery worldwide. It took us a while, to realise that we are all in this together and that is the only way we'll get out of it – by augmenting our cooperation in pursuit of effective, innovative solutions.

The first steps towards that, particularly in higher education in Bangladesh, is reallocating resources to improve online teaching and learning. And it should focus on curriculum, co-curricular, and cultural understanding without mass mobility, and a systematic assessment of the risks and merits of e-Learning as opposed to its alternative of face-to-face teaching that can determine a hybrid path leading to holistic education.

Building the local competencies, integrating technologies like automation or augmented/virtual reality into academic capacities, while enhancing greater social responsibility as individuals and institutions alike, maybe the key towards restoring a better future for the generations to come. Challenges amidst crises often offer opportunities in disguise, the cloud's silver lining as it were. But it is up to the stakeholders to identify what to change and how.

God forbid, this pandemic may surpass 2020 and perhaps outlast us all, or we may find the miraculous cure in the developing vaccines, who knows? But the impact it has had on the global economy, people's livelihood, health, and well-being will leave its mark. And so, even in these turbulent times of risk and doubt, we must work towards equipping the youth with as much competence, agility, and grit that we possibly can. It will prepare them to be fully capable of overcoming adversity, capitalizing on their potential, and taking advantage of opportunities that the post-Covid world may have in store for them tomorrow.

The coronavirus crisis will continue to shape the way we learn, work and interact for the foreseeable future. As HEIs navigate this new normal, the health and safety of students and staff must be paramount. Universities must learn from each other and share ideas and insights on how to deliver education and reopen campuses safely and effectively.

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